

The Bird Box Bird Box

Fall 2019 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org



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2019 Biennial Meeting & Conference November 16, 2019 Dorothy Hart Community Center Fredericksburg, VA.

Members of the Virginia Bluebird Society are looking forward to hosting our 2019 Biennial Meeting on Saturday, November 16, 2019, at the Dorothy Hart Community Center, 408 Canal St, Fredericksburg, VA.

Keynote speaker will be **Bet Zimmerman Smith**, a North American Bluebird Society Board Member and Life Member of NABS. Her highly regarded and hugely popular website, sialis.org was “developed as a resource for people interested in helping bluebirds and other native cavity-nesters survive and thrive.”

Breakout sessions include *Bluebird Photography with David Kinneer*, *Bluebirds... Put Out the Welcome Mat!* and *Pest & Predator Management*.

A limited number of VBS-approved nest boxes, Noel guards and stove pipe predator guards will be available for sale.

The registration fee (\$40 VBS-members, \$50 non-members) includes continental breakfast, lunch, programs and door prizes.

Space is limited. Register today!

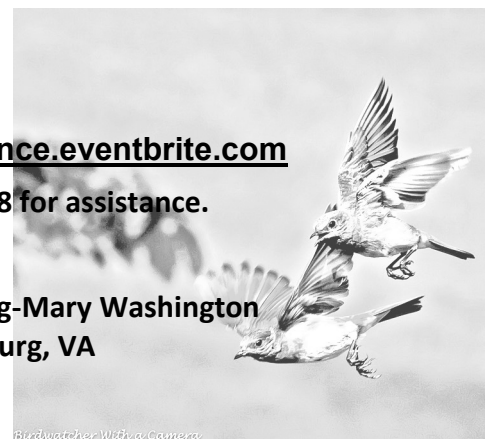
Register online at: <https://2019-vbs-biennial-conference.eventbrite.com>

No internet access? Call Anne Little at 540-207-4298 for assistance.

Email: vbs@virginiabluebirds.org

Hotel Accommodations with Hyatt Place Fredericksburg-Mary Washington
1241 Jefferson Davis Highway, Fredericksburg, VA

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Birdwatcher With a Camera

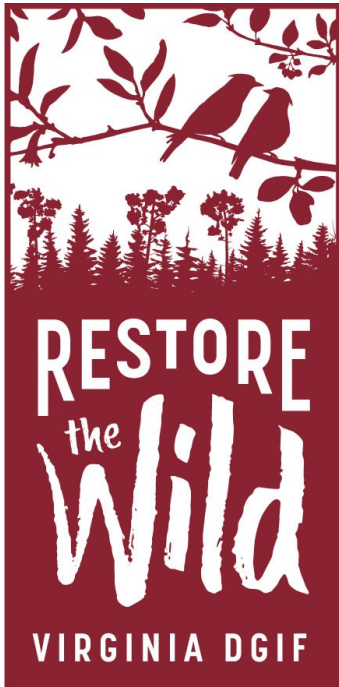
Bluebird Happenings from the Virginia DGIF

By Jessica Ruthenberg, DGIF Watchable Wildlife Biologist

The Virginia DGIF has long been fond of the Eastern Bluebird and this year is no exception. An Eastern Bluebird photo won the cover of our [Virginia Wildlife Magazine](#) 2019 photography showcase, we continue to provide annual funding support to the Virginia Bluebird Society (since 2003), and our bluebird “Wildlife Conservationist” license plate is still going strong as our third most popular plate that we offer (out of 8 designs). However, our most exciting bluebird news is that this past spring, the DGIF launched a new membership initiative, called [Restore the Wild](#), which prominently features the bluebird.

Restore the Wild Memberships will support the DGIF’s work to restore and create healthy bird and wildlife habitats across the Commonwealth. DGIF offers three levels of membership: hummingbird, bluebird, and golden eagle. All members will receive one year of access to state Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) and Lakes, plus additional benefits and gifts depending on the level of membership purchased.

Proceeds from the memberships will help support the DGIF’s on-going habitat restoration projects, including:



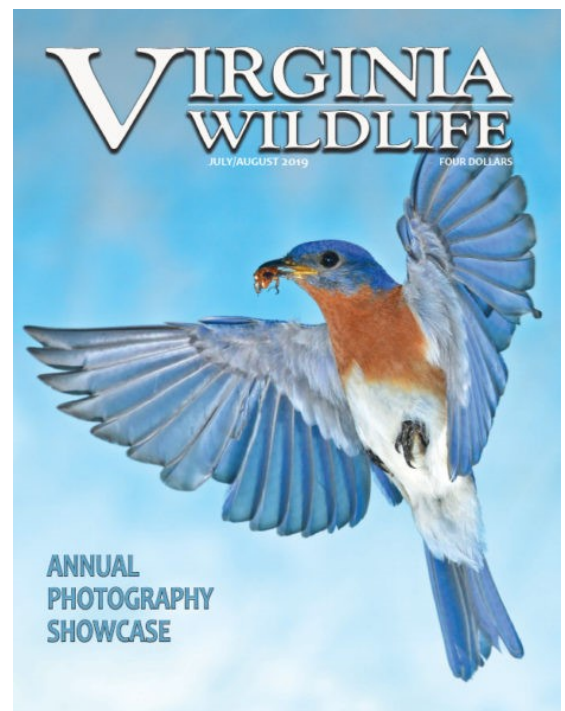
- Establish and maintain meadows containing native wildflowers and grasses at the DGIF’s [Goshen WMA](#), [Lake Shenandoah](#), and [Crooked Creek WMA](#). These meadows will support grassland birds, like Eastern Bluebirds, as well as pollinators.
- Restore open pine woodlands through prescribed burns and planting longleaf pines at [Big Woods WMA](#) to benefit the endangered [Red-cockaded Woodpecker](#), as well as grassland songbirds, like Eastern Bluebirds and Indigo Bunting; Northern Bobwhite; and Wild Turkey.
- Improve open shrubland habitats along a ridgeline of DGIF’s [Highland WMA](#) by connecting two existing openings, facilitating shrub growth, and cutting back forest edges. This project will benefit the [Golden-winged Warbler](#), an imperiled songbird, and many other bird species, including Eastern Towhees, Brown Thrashers, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat.

[The DGIF invites you to join us and help keep Virginia’s wild places wild!](#)

Thank you for all that you do to support Eastern Bluebirds! We look forward to seeing everyone at VBS’s bi-annual conference this fall!

Above: The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has launched a new membership initiative, [Restore the Wild](#).

Right: An Eastern Bluebird photo on the cover of Virginia Wildlife Magazine photography showcase cover.



Four Broods in One Summer

By Christine Boran, Patrick County, Southwest Virginia

I keep seeing hints of perseverance by the bluebirds and climate change effects each year on the Woolwine House Bluebird Trail. In spite of my bluebirds this year building their first nests exactly one month later than average on my trail due to cold weather in March, they showed grit, determination, and strength nesting later in the season. This year, I monitored my first fourth brood! Both Mom and Pop Bluebird were present at this nest box the whole season. The first egg in Brood 1 appeared (finally) on March 31. The bluebird pair successfully fledged three young during the first week of May. Brood 2 first egg was laid mid-May. Sadly, those nestlings perished in June due to starvation because of the unrelenting heavy rains we had here for several days right after hatching took place. The first several days of their new lives after Hatch Day are critical to their survival. Then on June 17 the parent bluebirds tried again with Brood 3 with another nest and laid that first egg in late June; they fledged five young in late July. I figured they were done for the season. On August 8, however, I found a new nest started. On August 12, one egg was laid, making this Brood 4. Three of four eggs hatched on August 29. I was watching this nest with bated breath. They successfully fledged three young September 15! Truly, it is forever embedded in my brain and heart to continue celebrating the reason to be grateful for these marvelous birds having more than one brood each season. Perhaps they instinctively know their history and plight in their past and how to survive the numerous challenges, to keep on plugging away at keeping their species alive as best as they can. Kudos to them. Pure joy for us. I hope these late fledglings have time this autumn to learn the ropes about survival for finding all those food sources and dodging the many predators, and can molt from their juvenile plumage to the stronger adult feathers and develop the down feathers needed before the winter months kick in.



Right: Three bluebird nestlings in Brood 4 on September 8.

Photo by Christine Boran

Below Left: Eastern Bluebird Fledging

Below right: Feeding

Photos by Doug Rogers



Bluebirds, Predators and Tree Swallows – Our Journey

By Doug Rogers, VBS Board Member

We maintain a nest box trail on Pantops Mountain in Albemarle County. The “trail” has been composed of three pieces of private property in past years and was increased to four for the 2019 nesting season. When we started this trail seven years ago, we immediately had almost 100% occupancy with Bluebirds and fledged 87 Bluebirds that year. We had virtually no predation and very few Tree Swallows. Here is how our trail has evolved:

Nest Year	Number of Boxes	Bluebirds Fledged	Tree Swallows Fledged	Other Species Fledged
2013	12	87	6	0
2014	12	36	5	0
2015	12	41	14	22
2016	14	37	21	18
2017	14	32	22	23
2018	14	48	25	0
2019	15	56	36	0

Beginning in 2014, we started to encounter predation from all sources: Black Rat Snakes, House Sparrows, Blow Flies, and babies and eggs just missing with no obvious predator. Thanks to the advice of Christine Boran, we started using pronged out Noel Guards and Diatomaceous Earth (DE) in the bottom of the boxes shortly thereafter. I made a false bottom for the boxes out of hardware cloth and put the DE under that.

The other species mentioned above, beginning in 2015, were Chickadees and House Wrens. After three seasons of battling them, we relocated those boxes and eliminated that problem.

And, in 2016 the House Sparrows became a larger problem. A friend suggested hanging shiny metal nuts or washers in front of the boxes to deter them. (This works great for him.) It was 100% effective in 2017. And after me telling everyone how well it worked, it didn't work at all in 2018.

Beginning in 2016 we set up four sets of paired boxes spaced about 15' to 20' apart to deter the Tree Swallows. As you can see, the number of Tree Swallows fledged increased by 50%! Tree Swallows don't seem to mind having other Tree Swallows as close neighbors;



Birdwatcher With a Camera

at least this is true on our trail.

This past nesting season we had to relocate four of five boxes due to construction activities. The fifth box was retired. In addition, I switched out one nest box and put a feeder in its place. Then we added three new boxes on the condo property where we live. (All three were dominated by Tree Swallows – and produced the highest number of Tree Swallows fledged to date.)

Above right: Male Eastern Bluebird bringing food.

Left: Tree swallow couple

Photos by Doug Rogers



Birdwatcher With a Camera

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We have made progress. We have eliminated Blow Fly infestation with the use of DE; we have thwarted the Black Rat Snakes with the pronged out Noel Guards and, in some cases, 8" baffles; and in spite of me feeling very bad about killing any small bird, this season I have trapped and killed three male House Sparrows who stubbornly insisted on building and re-building their nests in our boxes. (I killed them only after two tries of removing their nests failed to deter them.) The pronged out Noel Guards also put an end to babies and eggs missing for no discernable reason.

This season we fledged the highest number of Bluebird babies since we started in 2013. On the suggestion of a friend who does avian research we are going to try a radical approach to deterring the Tree Swallows next season. We are going to put two boxes back-to-back on the same poles in the areas that are now being dominated by Tree Swallows. I am aware that NABS has stated that this is not a

good idea. It has worked well up in The Valley and I am willing to give it a try. I will report my results at the end of the season. If anyone has a better idea, I will be happy to give that a try too. My goal for next season is 87 Bluebird babies fledged!

Editor's note: For information about recommended nest boxes and guards, as well as suppliers, visit www.virginiabluebirds.org/nest-boxes-guards-signs/



Birdwatcher With a Camera



Birdwatcher With a Camera

Above right: Eastern Bluebird delivering food while perched on pronged out Noel guard.

Left: Tree Swallow

Right: Tree Swallow fledglings

Photos by Doug Rogers



Birdwatcher With a Camera

2020 North American Bluebird Conference

Hosted by Bluebirds Across Nebraska

March 11 –15

Holiday Inn, Kearney, Nebraska

Sandhill Crane Blind Trips

Birding Field Trips

Nationally Known Speakers and Entertainers

Prairie Culture Field Trip

Workshops

Raffle, Live & Silent Auctions

<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/events/>

September, 2019

Dear Bluebird Lover,

That very special time of the year for me once again approaches. This fall I will happily build bluebird nest boxes for the cost of materials. I contribute my time as volunteer service to Virginia Master Naturalists and the Virginia Bluebird Society. Your cost covers the cost for materials.



As many of you know, this bluebird nest box enterprise has exponentially exploded over the years into a mini not-for-profit bluebird empire and I love every minute. Please use the attached order form and send it with your check to me as soon as possible. I will have limited access to e-mail September 11-20 and cannot accept e-mail orders.

Last year I imposed a limit to build 200 boxes on the heels of my bicycle accident recovery. Now that it no longer takes two of me to add up to one, I am increasing the limit this year to 300 boxes, poles & baffles. I will accept orders first come-first served based on the postmark date. I will confirm your order status after orders total 300 nest boxes. I will return checks if necessary beyond that total.

Please note that I will only be making boxes this year using the Virginia Bluebird Society recommended Carl Little design. Poles and predator baffle guards are available with 6" and 8" baffles. Material costs have remained stable for nest boxes, but have increased for poles and baffles.

I will confirm the status of your order by e-mail later in September. I expect to have nest boxes built by the end of November and will confirm by e-mail when your order is ready for pickup.

I am looking forward to making sawdust and filling your bluebird box needs. Ready, set, go!!!

Sincerely,

Clark Walter

2019 NEST BOX ORDER FORM

	NUMBER	SUBTOTAL
CARL LITTLE NEST BOXES	_____ X \$11 each =	\$ _____
POLES WITH 6" BAFFLE PREDATOR GUARDS	_____ X \$24 each =	\$ _____
POLES WITH 8" BAFFLE PREDATOR GUARDS	_____ X \$28 each =	\$ _____
	\$ TOTAL:	\$ _____

NAME _____

EMAIL ADDRESS _____

SPECIAL REQUESTS: _____

PLEASE MAKE YOUR CHECK PAYABLE TO CLARK WALTER
and mail to:

1878 OWENFIELD DRIVE
CHARLOTTESVILLE VA 22901

Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society
www.virginiabluebirds.org

Our email address is:
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If you have a new email address, or have recently changed it, please let us know.

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We welcome your written items and artwork (photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box*. Email your materials to Judy Hall.

The Bluebird Advisor

By Christine Boran and Anne Little



Cleaning Out Nest Boxes

Q: What is your advice for the best way to clean nest boxes for the season? Also, my nest box has a nest built by bluebirds that never was used by the birds. Should I remove it or leave it?

A: Great question, especially for the new nest box managers! Following are some tips for end-of-season cleaning and winterizing nest boxes:

If the nest is clean and never used for laying eggs, it is probably not inundated with dead bugs, leftover fecal sacs, and parasites; therefore, at the end of the season, you can leave it for winter roosting by bluebirds and other native birds to keep warm during frigid nights and winter storms. If the nest is a very tall one, just remove about half of the nest and leave the rest. Then winterize the nest box for roosting birds.

CLEANING NEST BOXES: Of course, we know that all used, soiled nests should be removed after each fledging event. If you have a nest box that still has the last fledged nest or several nests from the whole season, please remove them now. These are not good bedding for winter roosting birds and may have larvae from blow flies still in it. Use a metal paint scraper to peel off any remaining dried fecal matter from the walls, and then use a clean paintbrush to brush out the rest of dust and dirt. Then, if you want a cleaner nest box for next season, get a spray bottle and create a mixture of 10% vinegar to the measurement of 90% water, shake it up, then spray the walls and floor with the spray thoroughly. Let soak for a minute, and then use paper towels to wipe all walls and floor down well (wear garden or rubber gloves). Then spray again lightly with the vinegar/water solution and leave the box open for 24 hours to dry out. Close up the box and winterize it.

WINTERIZING NEST BOXES: Most bluebirds in Virginia do not migrate. They stay here for the winter. They will huddle in the nest boxes together to keep warm on winter nights. This is why leaving the nest boxes up year-round is so beneficial. The birds will thank you for it! Winterize them using a supply of clean dried grasses or pine needles void of leaves and sticks and place in the nest box about three inches thick. Pound it down with your fist to flatten it somewhat. Add some foam insulation to plug up the ventilation holes and slots at the top by the roof. Remove your manmade bedding on March 1. Remove the ventilation plugs on April 15 (don't forget this part!). We can get cold snaps and storms in early April with eggs and hatchlings present. You can read about winterizing nest boxes, including a printable color PDF with photos, on the VBS website: <https://www.virginiabluebirds.org/about-bluebirds/winterizing-nest-boxes/>

Do you have a question for the next newsletter's Bluebird Advisor? Send it to

woolwinehouse@gmail.com

Mark Your Calendars

- September** Clean and winterize boxes, add clean grasses or pine straw, install ventilation plugs
- November 16** VBS Bi-Annual Meeting/Conference at the Dorothy Hart Community Center, Fredericksburg.
- January 30** Deadline for submitting articles, photos, ideas, and artwork for Spring newsletter
- March 11-15** NABS Conference in Kearney, Nebraska. Information and registration form at www.nabluebirdsociety.org/.
- March 1** Clean out nesting materials added in the fall
- April 1** Begin monitoring bluebird boxes
- April 15** Remove ventilation plugs from nest boxes

Check out our *Facebook* page <https://www.facebook.com/Virginia-Bluebird-Society-133048243442687/> for photos and videos throughout the year, and follow us on *Twitter* at https://twitter.com/VA_Bluebirds.

How To Join

Send your name, address, phone number and/or email address along with a check for \$10 for an individual with emailed newsletter (\$15 if you prefer a mailed print newsletter) or \$15 for a family with emailed newsletter (\$20 for a print newsletter) to:

**Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg VA 22401**

Membership forms are available on the VBS web site: <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org>

Send An Article to The Bird Box

We welcome articles and photos from our active VBS members. We want to share our success stories from your home and your trails. Send your original articles, photos, or artwork, or suggest a topic for a future newsletter. Submit materials to Judy Hall, Editor, at birdboxeditor@gmail.com by January 30 to be considered for the spring newsletter. Please include your location, identification of people and birds in photos, and name of photographer.



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