



**Virginia
Bluebird
Society**

The Bird Box

March 2005

President's Box

Getting Past the Winter

It hasn't been a very "bluebird" winter around these parts. I helped with the Fort Belvoir Christmas Bird Count and was assigned to Gunston Hall Plantation. It is ideal bluebird habitat, but we didn't hear or see a single one! I am also not seeing them at the usual places along Gunston Road. My Uncle Jim has roosting bluebirds in boxes at his new house near Culpeper, but here on Mason Neck, it's as if we are having a bluebird "drought" over the winter.

Even though I have not been seeing bluebirds lately, I still get to talk about them! I gave a slide program about bluebirds at the Fredericksburg Library for a program sponsored by the Wild Bird Center on Route 3. A good group ventured out on the eve of a big snowstorm to learn about bluebirds. Carl Little and I displayed our props and gave out information to everyone hoping to attract bluebirds to their yards in the spring.

I spent quite a bit of time this winter day watching birds from my window as cotton-ball sized snowflakes poured from the sky. The yard was a frenzy of activity, so it was natural to be focused on all of the action! Goldfinches were all over the thistle feeder and an occasional junco came along. The apple tree was full of very red looking cardinals (at times more than a dozen!), and a steady stream of birds large and small came and went from the platform feeder on the deck. The Tufted Titmice were the first to find the mealworms. The chickadees were quick and very adept at plunging into the pile of seeds and bringing out a fat sunflower seed. One female cardinal sat politely on the pole until her side of the feeder was clear, and then she'd hop down, take a seed, and go back to the pole until her next turn. A banded titmouse held my attention for a while because we don't often see banded birds at our feeders.

It's been a while since a bluebird perched on top of the clothes line pole or the poles of my garden fence, but I watch and hope for them. Be sure to note the dates in the Calendar (left) for preparing and monitoring your trails. Before we know it, spring will be here and we will be back on the bluebird trail circuit!

— Julie Kutruff



Photo: Helen Ellis

Calendar

March 1: Time to renew your VBS membership if you haven't.

March 1 - 31: Check your trails! Are they ready for the birds? See our Spring Trail Checklist, page 3.

March 12: VBS Board meets, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Fredericksburg City Library. Contact Anne Little for details.

April 1: All bluebird trail monitoring should begin this week.

April 14: Bluebird Seminar, 10 a.m. to 12 noon, Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens, Richmond, with Anne Little.

April 22: Mid-Atlantic Garden Faire, Abingdon, Virginia.

May 2 - 7: New River Birding and Nature Festival, Oak Hill, West Virginia. A sponsor: *Bird Watcher's Digest* staff. VBS will be there on the 7th.

May 7 - 9: Birds & Blooms Festival at the Botanical Gardens, Norfolk, Virginia. VBS will be there.

May 8: International Migratory Bird Day. Watch for activities in your area!

May 15: Deadline for your articles for the July *Bird Box*.

May 19 - 22: NABS 28th Annual Convention, Asheville, North Carolina. For information, visit the North Carolina Bluebird Society Web site: www.ncbluebird.com.

May 20 - 22: Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Festival, Mountain Lake Hotel and Conference Center, Pembroke, Virginia. Contact Peggy Spiegel at gramby@pemtel.net.

June 10 - 12: Celebrate Fairfax, Fairfax County. Contact the Swansons: mbswan@starpower.net

September 24: Potluck Picnic / VBS Annual Membership Meeting, Beth Elkins's home, Dogue, Virginia, Northern Neck.

Promoting bluebirds and other cavity nesters

The Bird Box

Issue 6.3

Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society
www.virginiabluebirds.org

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If you have a new e-mail address, or have recently changed it, please let us know.

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VBS News

2004 Annual Meeting

This year's Annual Meeting was held on October 2 at the Northern Virginia Community College's Annandale Campus and was attended by about 45 people from around the Commonwealth. **Becky Wajda** of Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries discussed Virginia's Birding Trail with a focus on the recently unveiled Piedmont section. She gave away guides and note cards that were part of the publicity campaign for the new trail. **Barbara Chambers** and **Julie Kutruff** gave a presentation on "Managing Your Bluebird Trail."

Annual awards were given at the Annual Meeting to the Bluebirder of the Year and the County Coordinator of the Year. Sometimes VBS also gives a Heritage Award to a bluebirder who has contributed greatly to the bluebird recovery in Virginia. See page 3 to find out who won these honors in 2004.

Our keynote speaker, **Julie Zickefoose**, gave a presentation about how she and her family transformed the farm they bought in Ohio into "home" and habitat for a variety of wildlife. She is an engaging storyteller who can be heard on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." Julie's new book, *Natural Gardening for Birds*, contains many of her drawings as well as great information for turning your yard into a haven for birds.

As usual, the Annual Meeting was a complete success, thanks to the work of many great volunteers. **Ann Little** organized the room rental, catering, and guest speakers. **Mary Penn-Soranno** created the advance publicity flier. **Julie Kutruff** assisted with publicity and logistical support. **Beth Elkins** and **Marci and Brian Swanson** set up the exhibits for the meeting, staffed the sales tables, and supervised the raffle. **Charlie Chambers** made sure everyone had a nametag and the proper lunch. Several other folks helped out that day moving furniture, setting up, and cleaning up, who are not listed but very much appreciated!

Afterward, the VBS officers and board held a short meeting to discuss some ongoing programs and items for spring. The board's spring meeting will be held in Fredericksburg on March 12 (see Calendar, page 1) and is open to all VBS members.

You are *all* invited to our next Annual Meeting on September 24. It will be a VBS picnic at Beth Elkins's new home on the Northern Neck. Come meet each other and brag about what your trail produced in 2005. — **Julie Kutruff**

What Did Your Bluebirds Eat?

Some of our VBS monitors observed that the bluebirds and other cavity nesters were filling up on Cicadas and feeding the nestlings with them. They commented on it and wondered if it would increase the number of fledglings this year. Our data is not all in as yet, but so far it is showing a 25 percent increase over last year's numbers, and last year scored the lowest numbers fledged since 1999. We were down 50 percent in many locations, Northern Virginia being one of them. Perhaps the 17-year cicada, where it showed up in numbers, made some difference.

Robert C. Simpson, Professor of Natural Resources Curriculum, wrote to Kurt Gaskill this summer about his experience observing and photographing the breeding birds: "During the end of May to mid-June I did quite a bit of nesting bluebird photography. Their main prey food item was Periodical Cicadas. The parents rarely went out of sight to get food, the feeding was very constant and frequently both parents were at the nest with multiple cicadas. They must have fledged more young faster than in most non-cicada years. I also noted Northern Mockingbird, Brown Thrasher, Gray Catbird, Northern Cardinal, Blue Jay, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Common Grackle and European Starling feeding heavily on the Cicadas."

What was your experience? Let us know and we will publish it in the July *Bird Box*.

VBS Annual Awards

Every year at our Annual Meeting we award special recognition to a few members of the Virginia Bluebird Society (VBS) for outstanding achievements and dedication to our cause. This year three awards were given to outstanding bluebirders at our meeting in October.

The **County Coordinator of the Year Award** was presented to **Klytia Salcedo-Roper**. Klytia is the county coordinator for Fairfax County and helps manage over 40 trails there. Every spring she trains the new trail monitor volunteers for the county, and then in the fall she compiles all this data and submits it to VBS – on time, too!

In addition to helping manage the trails, Klytia writes articles for the local paper in order to spread the word about bluebirds. She also organized an annual picnic for all the Fairfax volunteers, and it was a huge success. Klytia has served on the VBS board of directors twice and is always there to help at workshops for box building or trail installation.

Klytia has been bluebirding longer than most of us. She has taught us all about bluebirds and has ignited the love of bluebirds in many, many people. She is a gentle soul but can be fierce when it comes to protecting bluebirds.

The **VBS Heritage Award** is not presented every year. This award recognizes an individual who has been a long-time bluebirder – a special person who lives and breathes bluebirds. **Donald Wiesnet** is such a person.

Don monitored a bluebird trail of over 50 boxes in Stafford County for many years. Ed McKnight had established the trail, and Don helped with it until Ed passed away. Then a truly amazing thing happened: Ed left the bluebird trail to Don in his will, and it became the Ed McKnight Memorial Trail.

Don continued to manage the trail by himself for many years, driving from his home in Vienna to Stafford every week. Recently, Don retired from the trail and turned it over to Frank Dashnow to manage. Though he will be spared that long drive to Stafford every week, Don will never retire from birding, his lifelong love. He is an inspiration to all of us who love bluebirds.

The **Bluebirder of the Year Award** went to **Tom Clifton** from Salem. Tom has been a supporter of VBS for many years and has been tireless in building nest boxes and setting up trails. Tom built some 130 boxes just for Greenfield Park, his first trail, and he monitors half of them every week in the summer. He has also built the boxes for a total of 11 trails in the Roanoke and Botetourt County areas, installed them all, and found the monitors for them.

Tom spreads the word about bluebirds to every one he meets and has given

nest boxes free of charge to anyone that requests one. His offer of free Peterson Boxes to anyone who will come to Salem to pick them up still stands. It is often difficult to get nest boxes for a trail, but Tom has helped us out time and time again. He also gives programs for groups in his bi-county area thus finding the prospective bluebirders he needs to increase the trails in his area.

Without the help of people like Tom, Klytia, and Don, VBS would never survive. We rely on our great volunteers to give us the support that it takes to run a statewide organization. We may not be in physical contact with each other very often, but our love of bluebirds ties all of us together in so many ways. Congratulations to all of our award recipients. – **Anne Little**



Tom Clifton, VBS Bluebirder of the Year
(Photo: Earl Morris)

Winter Membership Renewal Drive

'Round the first of the year we sent out 221 membership renewal notices. The good news is that, as of the end of January, we had 85 responses. The bad news is of course that we have 136 to go. So please, while you're thinking about it, right now, nip on over to your desk and renew. Thanks!

– **Charlie Chambers**

Spring Trail Checklist

The bluebirds are in a nesting mood! The week of April 1st is when to begin monitoring that trail. Contact us at VBS. We are here to help. Here are some reminders to get you started.

- T Have you walked your trail and checked each box? Leave the winterized materials in place until the weather gets really warm.
- T Have you repaired any boxes that needed it or adjusted their locations?
- T Have you reviewed your VBS trail protocols? (See the VBS Web site.)
- T Are your monitors contacted, scheduled, and trained? We can help!
- T Are your bucket and notebook ready? The forms are all on the VBS Web site.

The bluebirds are ready! Are you?

Join NABS

Join the North American Bluebird Society (NABS), and you'll receive:

- T *Bluebird*, the NABS quarterly journal with informative articles, readers' exchange, and scientific data.
- T Nesting boxes, literature, bluebird art, available for purchase; access to expert advice for bluebird trail problems; opportunities to participate in field research and nest box design tests.

See the NABS Web site for more details: www.nabluebirdsociety.org

VBS County Coordinators

Thirty of Virginia's 95 counties have Coordinators for bluebird trails. Our 27 volunteers are listed below, and VBS wants to thank them in print for all they do to help VBS be the best it can be. Their contact numbers and e-mail addresses can be found on the VBS Web site.

Without them there would be no organization, because the V in VBS stands for *all* of Virginia. Thank you all! If you don't see your county listed here, e-mail or call Barbara Chambers and volunteer. It is an effort that you can tailor to your available time.



Photo: Roger Mayhorn

Bluebirds Come For Mealworms

These bluebirds show up every day for their feeding of mealworms. As soon as they see me come outside with the feeding tray they come fluttering overhead, calling. Sometimes there is a third bird with them. It's probably one of their offspring that was hatched in one of the boxes here on our property on Compton Mountain. Except for these two, I think the flock has gone down into the valley, where the wind and cold are not quite so harsh. Since we started our two bluebird trails (nearly 50 boxes) here in the county, we have seen a great increase in the number of bluebirds. This is the first year I have had a flock of 17 bluebirds in my yard. They stayed around for several weeks. — **Roger Mayhorn**

[Editor's note: Roger is also adding two new trails this year by taking advantage of the VBS offer to pay for all the materials for 6 new trails in the state in 2005.]

Ron Kingston	<i>Albemarle</i>	Beth Elkins	<i>King George and Stafford</i>
Campbell Chambliss	<i>Brunswick</i>	Nicole Hamilton	<i>Loudoun</i>
Roger Mayhorn	<i>Buchanan</i>	Bill Opengari	<i>Montgomery</i>
Kaycee Lichliter and Greg Barrufi	<i>Clarke and Frederick</i>	Dot Silsby and Nan LaRue	<i>Newport News</i>
Klytia Salcedo-Roper	<i>Fairfax</i>	Linda and Doug Adams	<i>Northumberland</i>
Ed Robertson	<i>Franklin</i>	Tom Witt	<i>Poehatan</i>
Helen Ellis	<i>Fauquier</i>	Marci and Brian Swanson	<i>Prince William, north</i>
Peggy Spiegel	<i>Giles</i>	Kevin Parker	<i>Prince William, south</i>
Vickie Rapalee	<i>Goochland</i>	Alyce Quinn	<i>Roanoke</i>
John Shipstedt	<i>Henrico</i>	Anne Little	<i>Spotsylvania</i>
Jimmy Doyle	<i>Henry</i>	Greg and Pam Millsagle	<i>York</i>

An Electronic Newsletter?

The VBS Board is considering the feasibility of an electronic version of *The Bird Box*. We would appreciate everyone's input and opinions. The newsletter is the largest item in our budget. It is expensive to print and even more expensive to mail!

We are also considering putting the newsletter on our VBS Web site and e-mailing a link to the members in lieu of mailing a hard copy. At first, in addition to mailing a hard copy, this Web site link would give members a chance to see if this option would work for them. This would potentially save money that could be better used to build boxes, and help bluebirds more directly. Another nice advantage of both the "e-newsletter" and the Web site method is that the photos will all be in color and not just black and white!

In any case, we would continue to mail a hard copy newsletter to those of you who don't have e-mail and to those who would prefer the hard copy.

Please let us know, by e-mail, at philkenny1@cox.net or bj.chambers@verizon.net, if you would be interested in receiving your newsletter (1) via e-mail, or (2) via a link to our Web site. If you would still prefer to stay with the standard hard copy version, you do not need to contact us. Thanks. — **Phil Kenny**

Bluebird Productivity Rebounding Slowly

Here are some results from the data that you sent in from the 2004 nesting season. They are based on about 75 percent of the data we hope to receive ultimately. Here is a summary of the numbers of birds fledged in 2002 through 2004.

Year	Number of nest boxes reported	Bluebirds fledged	Chickadees	Tree Swallows	House Wrens
2002	2440	8757	630	1689	778
2003	2441	4449	568	2904	908
2004	1832	4308	312	2073	680

Since the number of nest boxes represented in the data is smaller in the 2004 data than in previous years, comparing results over the years is tricky. We have to look at the results in terms of the number of fledglings per nest box. If we look at the results that way, we find that bluebird fledglings in 2004 are up from the low in 2003 by about one-third, and that's good! But there's still a way to go to reach the 2002 high. I estimate that the present rate of improvement will get us back to the 2002 level by the end of the 2006 nesting season. Let us hope that the present rate of improvement continues!

– Charlie Chambers

Bird Survival Rates

Not every egg that is laid will hatch, and not every bird that fledges will survive. The fact that VBS raises cavity nesting birds and offers two predator guards probably adds to the survival rate of the birds from egg to breeding adult. We thank Diane Barbin of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania Bluebird Society for the following information, which came from the Cornell Bluebird List and ornithology.com.

A successful nest is one in which some young are fledged. The percentage of young fledging varies widely within and between species. Among songbirds in temperate areas, the proportion of eggs that eventually become flying young varies between 30 and 80 percent. M. Nice (1957) analyzed data from 7,788 open nests of altricial birds [*Editor*: born blind and helpless] and found that the success rate ranged from 38 to 77 percent (average 49 percent), and among cavity nesters, 66 percent. For asynchronous-hatching species [*Editor*: not all hatching the same day], the chief cause of mortality is starvation. For synchronous hatchers, it's starvation and climate and especially predation.

Once the young leave their nesting areas, their chances of surviving to breed the next year are about 60 percent – the same as for adults. For a typical songbird, these are the chances of survival . . .

- ! To fledging: 50 percent
- ! To juvenile from fledging: 50 percent
- ! To breeding from fledging: 60 percent
- ! From egg to breeding adult: 15 percent.

The age at which a bird first reproduces is important to the growth rate of the population. Virtually all terrestrial species breed in the first year after hatching except swifts (2 years), many parrots (2-3 years), and raptors (3-5 years) and a few males of some passerines (Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds).

Heavy mortality is associated with migration. Mortality is mainly due to the weather, food shortage, and predation. Weather can be particularly disastrous at times. In Song Sparrows and titmice, over 70 percent of the adults die each year. Thus an average individual can expect to live one year. In most songbirds the figure is 40-60 percent mortality.

But mortality is independent of age after maturity in birds. Birds generally do not die of old age but succumb to environmental factors.

The Ghost and The Squirrel

Tuesday, November 9, 2004 –
5:30 a.m. – 19 degrees – Very dark.

I find myself climbing up to the top of a ridge in the Locust Spring area of Highland County, Virginia. I find a comfy tree hidden behind a stand of small pines and sit and wait. Soon the sun begins to appear above the ridge across the valley from where I had just come.

A deer mouse scurries in front of me almost on my feet. Ravens are calling. I hear the familiar sound of a squirrel searching for food in the dry leaves.

I spot the squirrel at about 75 yards. It makes its way almost to my feet. It continues probing the leaves for hidden food. The squirrel works its way to my right and behind me. I follow the squirrel with my eyes, not turning my head. I only know it is there by the sound.

I move my eyes to the front again and out of nowhere appears a speed demon, a gray ghost.

I was not the only thing watching the squirrel this morning.

This gray predator maneuvered through the stand of pines like a fighter pilot. I could feel the airstream it created as it sped past me. It flew only three feet off the ground.

It was close enough to reach out and touch. I turned my head but could not see where it went. I did hear that familiar sound of a squirrel running through dry leaves.

I heard a final crash. I am not sure who won.

The gray ghost was a most beautiful adult goshawk, like gray velvet in the crisp morning sun. I read later that goshawks eat medium-sized birds. I am guessing they don't mind eating average-sized squirrels, too.

– Suzanne Malone



Tree Swallows
(Photo: George W. Hartwell © California Academy of Sciences)

Vital Facts

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

Length: 5 - 6 inches (tip of bill to tip of tail).

Nest construction: By female, but male supplies the white contour feathers!

Housing: In cavities; nest boxes the same dimensions as for bluebirds; accepting boxes paired on bluebird trails, protecting both theirs and their neighbor's!

Eggs: Pure white, 2-8, but usually 4-7.

Incubation: By female for 11-19 days, usually 2 weeks.

Fledging: Between 15 and 25 days, average 18-22 days.

Broods: Usually one, but in their southern range they may attempt two.

Food: Insects; plus seeds and berries in winter, primarily bayberries.

Habitat: Open areas, preferably near water.

[From *The Backyard Birdhouse Book* by René and Christyna M. Laubach]

Cavity Nesters' Corner The Tree Swallow

This swallow is appropriately named *bicolor* in Latin. Metallic blue-green above and stark white below, it is a gorgeous, graceful, and garrulous bird! It will circle above and dive on any intruder, chittering away the whole time. Wear your hats (though it's mainly bluff)!

The Tree Swallow, just like its western cousin, the Violet-green Swallow, uses a natural cavity, an abandoned woodpecker hole, or a nest box to build her nest in. Its nest is unique. The swallows use many white feathers, gathered by the male from as far as five miles away. The female tucks them carefully into the nest material to arch over the cavity depression itself, and often arches them over the entire nest inside a box. These white feathers also serve as entertainment for these agile flyers. They have been observed carrying them aloft, dropping them and then following them down, darting in to retrieve and drop them again and again. Maybe it's a game, or a training exercise, or a ritual. Some ornithologists think it does in fact serve some unknown social purpose.

Because of the extensive use of nest boxes in appropriate habitat in Northern Virginia, we are seeing an increase in the number of Tree Swallows. Roger B. Clapp, of the bird division of the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution, has noted in his book, *Egg Dates for Virginia Birds*, that a higher proportion of these birds seem to be double-brooding now, and since 1994 there have been large numbers of late recorded dates for eggs. Other researchers find that the Tree Swallow does lay two clutches in the very southern regions of its territory. Have any of you noticed two broods on any of your trails?

These birds forage for insects over both land and water, feeding, and even drinking, on the wing. When insects are scarce, unlike other swallows, these birds can survive for long periods on seeds and berries, especially bayberries. This enables some Tree Swallows to spend their whole year in North America, along the Gulf Coast and even farther north into Maryland along the Atlantic coast. And they are thriving!

Howard Youth, of the Washington area, documented over 100 Tree Swallows on Assateague Island on the Eastern Shore on January 1, 1998, feeding on bayberries and seeds in pony dung! But most Tree Swallows migrate. Going only as far as the Caribbean or Mexico or Belize, they return to our area by March and sometimes even as early as February. This may be because cavity sites are limited and the competition for them is increasing. This could even be one of the driving forces behind its aggressive behavior at the nest box.

VBS member Yulee Lerner, of Staunton, tells us about a study by the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, which was publicized by *Bird Watcher's Digest* in 1997. The study showed that the pairing of boxes in Wisconsin reduced bluebird productivity significantly. It included more than 4,600 nest boxes, both paired and single, and it showed that the nesting success for bluebirds from the paired boxes was about half that of the single ones. It also showed an increase in Tree Swallows of about 25 percent in the paired boxes.

Here in Virginia, VBS recommends that you pair the boxes on your trails **only after** the Tree Swallows show up and **take** the box that a bluebird has used or might use. Only then should you put up the second box 5 to 25 feet away to accommodate the displaced bluebird. That way, you can enjoy both species without handicapping the bluebird. Remember, what might work in one state or area may not be the solution for another. Try pairing only after the Tree Swallows have shown up to nest. That will also mean that your trail conformation will change yearly! [see page 7]

Proposal to Establish New Trails

The VBS Board has expressed its intention to fund the building of six new bluebird trails in Virginia, on public lands, in time for the 2005 nesting season. We are looking for members who will take the initiative to get a new trail started. VBS will provide the funds to build the boxes, with mounting poles, and two predator guards. We will also help the process in every way we can – for instance, in training monitors. The trails just have to be located in good habitat on public lands and monitored weekly.

This offer is good for the birds, VBS, and you. If you cannot take advantage of it, would you please pass this information along to someone who might be interested? If you need assistance with this effort, don't hesitate to let us know how we can help. Here are a few pointers for establishing a new trail; you can adapt them to your situation:

1. Look for good habitat on public lands. This might be in a town or county park, on school property, on a golf course, or in a wildlife management area.
2. Talk to the local park or golf course manager and tell him or her about VBS and what we are offering. They get the benefit, and the volunteers do all the work. The trail would be ongoing with monitors we train. The data would come both to the managers and VBS. Refer them to our Web site for some background on our protocol.
3. Find monitors by making a presentation at a meeting of the local Audubon Society, bird club or garden club. Explain the commitment and our VBS protocol. If you need help training monitors, contact me or any board member.
4. You could also write an article for your local paper; give a program about your current trail to a civic organization; or ask one of the board members to come to your area and give a program. VBS also has a general request for volunteer bluebird monitors that you can submit to your local paper. It has been quite successful.

Remember that even if you have only five boxes, that is considered a bluebird trail! You can have more; and if you decide to add boxes later, VBS will pay for the materials for those, too. Start small and grow.

Our next Annual Meeting will be on the Northern Neck in late September. It will be a potluck picnic and we hope that all of you that have established a new trail will come and tell us all about those efforts. And how much money you spent! (Charlie Chambers is the one to contact about the money.)

Note: This proposal went out to members by e-mail after our October Board meeting, where it was approved by a unanimous vote. However, it did not reach many of you because VBS does not have "good" email address for most of you. Please! If you have changed your e-mail address in the past year, please send your new e-mail address to Charlie Chambers, our VBS membership chair. It will help us all, and you certainly don't want to miss these great announcements that come out between editions of *The Bird Box*! – *Barbara Chambers*

The Tree Swallow (from page 6)

Swallows begin gathering in large, spectacular flocks by late August. These masses of birds can comprise Tree, Barn, Rough-winged, and Bank Swallows and can be found along the shores of our bays, rivers, lakes, and marshes. They will migrate in flocks of thousands by day and settle over marshes at night. Tree Swallows are usually the last to leave for warmer climes. These mixed flocks are an impressive sight every fall.

During January 2005, Charlie and I visited a wildlife wetlands in Palm Beach County and saw hundreds of Tree and Rough-winged Swallows swooping and feeding over the marsh waters. They flew so rapidly that it took time to sort out who was who! It occurred to them to wonder if any of those Tree Swallows had been nesters from Virginia boxes. No way to tell of course. Might they have been yours? – *Barbara Chambers*

Walter Smith, A Great Birder

Walter Smith was instrumental in starting the Kiptopeke banding station on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and worked for over 50 years, along with his wife Doris and other members of the Hampton Roads Bird Club, to promote birding in Virginia. He passed away on December, 21, 2004. Walter's death is a great loss to the entire Virginia birding community. It is on the shoulders of pioneers like Walter Smith that we all build our knowledge of birding habitats and numbers. He will be greatly missed.

Bluebird Incubation Rhythms Project

If you monitor bluebird nest boxes, you can help Cornell with a very interesting study. Dr. Caren Cooper, a research associate at Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is collecting data on the incubation temperature of nesting Eastern Bluebirds. The study utilizes dime-sized recorders (data loggers) that measure temperature fluctuations in the nest cup inside the bluebird box. Dr. Cooper has participants from Pennsylvania, New York, and other eastern states and is looking for box monitors from Virginia who can give her more input.

Having a computer available and joining Cornell's Bird House Network (\$15) are two requirements for participation. For more information, visit www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse and click "Eastern Bluebird Incubation Rhythms." To learn even more or to sign up for data loggers, call the Lab at 800-843-2473, and ask for Dr. Cooper, or contact her directly at: cbc25@cornell.edu. You can also contact Marci or Brian Swanson at 703-743-5220 or at mbswan@starpower.net.

Join Us!

Become a member of VBS and receive:

- T All the information you need to start and maintain a successful bluebird trail.
- T Access to working trails, workshops, and educational programs.
- T Our newsletter, *The Bird Box*, in July, October, and March.

Annual membership is \$10 Individual, \$15 Family.

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What Bird Was It?

On November 9, 2004, at 3:30 p.m., I saw a different bluebird at my farm, about four miles east of Chase City, Virginia, and 17 miles west of South Hill off Route 47. It was gray where the Eastern shows a rust color. The gray extended to the head. The blue was more like a Tree Swallow blue with finely defined white tips on the wings when folded and a very prominent white eye-ring. It seemed larger than the Eastern Bluebird.

The places where the red should be weren't all totally white, because the feathers involved had other pigments as well as the missing red. It was quite startling to see and distracted me from counting other birds for awhile until I figured out what it was.

There was no streaking such as you would find in an immature. It looked very much like the female Western Bluebird pictured in the National Geographic Field Guide except there was no rust. Or the Mountain Bluebird female, except the gray was very gray and smooth.

Mountain Bluebirds are a distinctly different color of blue. They do have eye-rings and do show up in the East occasionally. Their posture is a bit different also; they tend to sit up a bit straighter. If you see one with other bluebirds, it is noticeable. I don't know if it would be if it was alone. I don't think the white wing tips were characteristic of a Mountain Bluebird, though. I can't recall ever seeing any kind of bluebird with noticeably white wingtips.

– *Katrina Knight, Reading, Virginia* [kknight@epix.net]

[Editor: A Mountain Bluebird was identified on the Eastern Shore in early December but was only seen one afternoon and early the next morning. The sighting was posted on the VA-BIRD e-mail discussion list.]

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