

The Bird Box

Spring 2009

Calling All VBS Members

You have a wonderful opportunity this September 9-13 to attend a North American Bluebird Society (NABS) conference very close by. If you have never experienced a roomful of bluebirders before, this is your chance. There is nothing more stimulating or informative, or fun! And then there's the auction.

The 31st Annual NABS Conference, hosted by the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania, will be held at the Holiday Inn, Harrisburg/Hershey, in the town of Grantville, Exit 80 on Interstate 81. What could be easier? It is open to the public, so even if you are not a NABS member, you are still warmly welcomed.

You can come for any one day (\$40) or for the full five days (\$60). We hope to see many of you there. VBS has two members on the NABS board, and unless you come you won't know who they are. Good speakers, interesting and informative topics, and good field trips. There is an extra charge for the trips. The one to Hawk Mountain shouldn't be missed. There is a tour of Harrisonburg, a trip to the Gettysburg battlefields, and of course a visit to Hershey. The complete schedule and online registration can be found at: www.thebsp.org or www.nabluebirdsociety.org.

Go online to register. Anyone without Internet access can contact Barbara Chambers at 703-978-6609 for more information.

Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan

Virginia is embarking on a process to expand its powerful wildlife conservation tool - Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan - to address climate change impacts on the state's wildlife and habitats. This action plan was developed through a partnership of scientists, sportsmen, birders, and other conservationists. Because the Wildlife Action Plan is a driving force for wildlife conservation efforts in Virginia, we feel this will be the best way to help Virginia's wildlife adapt to climate change.

In 2000, the Teaming with Wildlife Coalition helped pass national legislation to create the State Wildlife Grants Program. In the years since its inception, this program has distributed over \$439.8 million federal dollars to the states. Virginia's approximately \$8.9 million portion has gone to highly successful on-the-ground conservation programs that have benefited both wildlife and people (VBS receives a grant from this program each year). For example, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries was able to purchase a piece of land (Cavalier track), important for many Species of Greatest Conservation Need, near the Great Dismal Swamp. This effort represents a multi-partner conservation effort to protect important species and provide hunting, fishing, and bird watching opportunities. To protect these conservation investments, it is imperative for Virginia to consider the effects climate change will have on the state's natural resources.

Currently, federal officials are debating how to protect wildlife and natural resources from the negative effects of climate change. Future climate change legislation will likely include funding provisions for state fish and wildlife agencies and generate millions of dollars for wildlife conservation in Virginia. Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan, a comprehensive blueprint for protecting the state's wildlife and habitats, will be a cost-effective and efficient tool for putting this money to work and dealing with the impacts of climate change on natural resources.

To take advantage of this new federal funding opportunity, the Teaming with Wildlife Coalition is kicking off a new campaign to secure this adequate, long-term funding for wildlife conservation. The Coalition also is enlisting support of Virginians for updating the Wildlife Action Plan to identify and help address climate change issues. Your continued help and support will be critically important as we enter this new phase of implementation.

Working together, we can conserve Virginia's wildlife and vital natural areas for future generations! For more information on the TWW coalition and how you can help, please visit www.teaming.com or contact Chris Burkett, Wildlife Action Plan Coordinator, Wildlife Diversity Division, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, 4010 West Broad Street, Richmond, Virginia 23230; fax: 804-367-2427; e-mail: chris.burkett@dgif.virginia.gov.

Promoting bluebirds and other cavity nesters

The Bird Box

Issue 10.3

Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society
www.virginiabluebirds.org

Our e-mail address is:
vbs@virginiabluebirds.org

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

Anne Little, President
(h) 540-373-4594
e-mail: thegate@cox.net

Beth Elkins, Vice President
(h) 540-374-5053
e-mail: beth_elkins@yahoo.com

Carmen Bishop, Vice President
(h) 703-764-9268
e-mail: cjbish@aol.com

David Mitchell, Treasurer
(h) 540-822-4553
e-mail: mitchelldf@donttaptheglass.com

Janet Locklear, Secretary
(h) 540-338-5283
e-mail: jlocklear@starmail.com

Directors

Helen Ellis, (h) 703-743-1642
e-mail: hedi143@aol.com

Julie Kutruff, (h) 703-339-5218
e-mail: JKutruff@aol.com

Nan LaRue, (h) 757-877-9415
e-mail: nan.larue@cox.net

Steve Living, (h) 757-465-6868
e-mail: Stephen.Living@dgif.virginia.gov

Earl Morris, (h) 540-776-1640
e-mail: emorris@ntelos.net

Brian Swanson, (h) 703-743-5220
e-mail: bcswanson@comcast.net

State County Coordinator

Barbara Chambers, (h) 703-978-6609
e-mail: bj.chambers@cox.net

Data Collector

Charlie Chambers, (h) 703-978-6609
e-mail: ce.chambers@cox.net

Bird Box Interim Editor

Anne Little

Bird Box Layout

Bob Sindermann

We welcome your written items and artwork
(photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box*!
E-mail your materials to Anne Little.

What's the Deal with Mealworms?

If you feed mealworms to your bluebirds, you almost certainly dealt with a good bit of frustration last summer, when live mealworms suddenly disappeared from the market.

Since I own a Wild Bird Store, I assumed that I would have no problem with helping my blue birds with supplemental meal worms. I was wrong.

In the spring of 2008; my bluebirds' first brood had just hatched. That week, I ordered 7 cases of mealworms (my normal weekly order) and received only 6 small boxes from my supplier. When I called, I was told that was all they had, and it would be a couple of weeks before they would have more. The shortage continued throughout the summer into the fall and stills no mealworms.

In the beginning, I tried to obtain some from other suppliers, but the answer was always the same - there are none. I have heard several different reasons for the shortage - some sort of parasite, a virus, a growth problem. I asked my supplier, which does grow their own, and was told that in the spring the demand was much greater than the supply, and they used some of the breeding stock to fill orders, and then were unable to replace the breeders quickly, and it just got totally out of hand. (It should be noted that some of the suppliers did get going again during the summer.)

Our store had been selling both live and freeze-dried mealworms for some time, and it seemed that blue birds who had been fed the live ones would not accept the dried ones. I discovered that, by moistening the dried worms before putting them out, the birds would take them - after all they had lots of hungry gapes to feed! Then as the summer passed and they became accustomed to dried, the birds adjusted, and soon most of them gobbled the freeze dried as readily as they did the live.

There is some stirring that perhaps we are supplementing our bluebirds too much. So I have cut down my offerings to a small feeding in the mornings and no more while the jury is still out on this one.

– Helen Ellis

Free Money

Do you know any scouts or other youth who would like to participate in a meaningful project sure to produce results? Spread the word! Tell them about the Virginia Bluebird Society grant program.

VBS has grant money available for scouts and other youth who would like to build nest boxes. This is a tried and true way for Boy Scouts to earn their Eagle and Girl Scouts their Gold award. But the grant money isn't limited to scouts. It could be a great youth group, school, home school group or other service organization project.

Here's how the program works. VBS will provide money for half of the total cost of the project. The youth will cover the other half through donations or other fund raising. Donation values are included in the total cost for grant purposes. The youth will build nest boxes (usually 10 to 25 boxes, using VBS' Carl Little design) complete with predator guards and poles. VBS will provide a mentor if needed - so no construction experience is required. The applicant usually recruits friends and family to make it a group project. The boxes are donated to VBS so the youth does not have to install them. The boxes will be placed on existing or new trails on public lands that will be monitored. The youth also is asked to help spread the word about bluebirds by making a short presentation about their project to an organization of their choice (which could be their scout troop). VBS can provide materials for the presentation.

For more information, see www.virginiabluebirds.org/pages/new_youth_scout.html, and contact Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com or 703-764-9268.

VSO's Principles of Birding Ethics

Everyone who enjoys birds and birding must always respect wildlife, its environment, and the rights of others. In any conflict of interest between birds and birders, the welfare of the birds and their environment comes first.

1. Promote the welfare of birds and their environment.

- (a) Support the protection of important bird habitat.
- (b) To avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming.

The VSO does not endorse the use of recordings or other artificial lures to attract birds for recreational birding because it has the potential to do harm. Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, especially during peak migration and breeding season, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas, or for attracting any species that is threatened, endangered, or of special concern, or is rare in your local area.

Heavily birded areas may include, but are not limited to, sites on Virginia's Birding and Wildlife Trail (see www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt) and sites listed in *A Birder's Guide to Virginia* by David W. Johnson. Species that are considered threatened, endangered, or of special concern in Virginia are listed on the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries Web site (see www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/virginiatespecies.pdf).

Keep well back from nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display areas, and important feeding sites. In such sensitive areas, if there is a need for extended observation, photography, filming, or recording, try to use a blind or take advantage of natural cover. Stay on roads, trails, and paths; otherwise keep habitat disturbance to a minimum.

- (c) If pets are permitted, be considerate by keeping your pet under control or on a leash.

2. Respect the law and the rights of others.

(a) Do not enter private property unless you have obtained the owner's explicit permission. Do not assume that permission extends beyond a specific visit unless the owner says so. Abide by all rules set forth by the land owner.

(b) Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas.

(c) Practice common courtesy in contacts with other people. Your exemplary behavior will generate goodwill with birders and non-birders alike.

3. Ensure that feeders, nest structures, and other artificial bird environments are safe. Keep dispensers, water, and food clean, and free of decay or disease. It is important to feed birds continually during harsh weather.

(a) Maintain and clean nest structures regularly.

(b) If you are attracting birds to an area, ensure the birds are not exposed to predation from cats and other domestic animals, or dangers posed by artificial hazards.

4. Group birding, whether organized or impromptu, requires special care. Each individual in the group, has responsibilities as a Group Member. Respect the interests, rights, and skills of fellow birders, as well as people participating in other legitimate outdoor activities. Freely share your knowledge and experience, except where code 1(c) applies. Be especially helpful to beginning birders.

(a) If you witness unethical birding behavior, assess the situation, and intervene if you think it prudent. When interceding, inform the person(s) of the inappropriate action, and attempt, within reason, to have it stopped. If the behavior continues, document it, and notify appropriate individuals or organizations.

Adapted from the American Birding Association's Principles of Birding Ethics. For the complete text, see americanbirding.org.

Q & A Column

Dead Male Found On Nest

Question: I had an unusual experience this season. As soon as my second brood started to hatch, when I went to monitor the nest, I found a dead male bluebird lying on top of the hatched birds, which were only about 1-2 days old. This male was not the mate of the female that had laid the eggs. The male parent was still around and trying to bring food to the chicks. Had I not monitored the box when I did I would have lost this brood of four. Do you have any idea why this dead male was in the box?

Answer: One can only guess at the cause of any bird death. How does anyone know if the dead bird is the mate of the egg-laying female, unless they are banded? That said, perhaps it died of old age. Now, say that it must be the mate of the female in that box as no other male would have gained entry! But if it was an interloper, then perhaps the male of that box killed him in the box. Did you look for any head wounds? If it was the male of that box and he died of age related or some other cause, then one of last year's brood, or this year's brood (you said it was the second brood) was taking over the feeding. However, if it was this year's male feeding the female, then it would have had a spotted back. This is not an unusual occurrence, a fledgling feeding the second brood. We just need a lot more information to be able to answer this question. And maybe not even then.

Do you have a question for the Q&A Column? Send it to Barb Chambers at bj.chambers@cox.net, or call 703-978-6609.

Vital Facts

American Kestrel (Falco sparverius)

Length: 9-12 inches (our smallest hawk)

Nest: Hawks add little or no nesting material to a cavity. If you build a box for them, you should add at least an inch of clean wood shavings to the bottom.

Number of eggs: 3-7, usually 5, laid on alternate days, or at intervals of 2-3 days.

Incubation: Mostly by female, but male has a brood patch and could incubate.

Length of incubation: 29-31 days. Begins usually with the next-to-last egg.

Age at fledging: 30-31 days. Fledglings spend a week resting on perches while adults feed them. They are very vulnerable to predators at this time.

Broods per season: one, sometimes two. Eggs as early as March 25 and as late as May 7.

Food: Their primary prey is insects. They prefer grasshoppers; they also eat mice and voles, small reptiles and amphibians, and small birds.

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



The American Kestrel

This smallest and most social of hawks is also our only cavity nesting hawk. It used to be called the Sparrow Hawk, as it will take small birds. It especially likes the House Sparrow in the winter when insects are few and far between. For this alone we should encourage it by building kestrel nest boxes!

It is a beautiful bird, a falcon, well patterned and multicolored, and adaptable enough that it is surviving the loss of its preferred open habitats of grasslands, abandoned fields, and meadows, as well as the loss of the large trees that had suitable cavities for nesting. Like other cavity nesters, kestrels use cavities abandoned by woodpeckers. Like most hawks, they suffered losses from the use of DDT and other pesticides during the mid-20th century. Now it's habitat loss.

One of the most innovative kestrel nest box ideas had its beginnings in Iowa in 1983. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources working with the Iowa Department of Transportation installed hundreds of kestrel boxes on the backs of information signs along interstate highways. The Kestrel Karetakers organization in Sperryville is making the same effort here in Virginia. Interestingly enough, the highway boxes have about a 70 percent success rate, and mortality due to collisions with cars is lower than anticipated. Kestrels can now be found in cities, even though they are birds of the open country and probably need at least an acre of land for hunting territory. Many people are putting up boxes in a more usual habitat, and the addition of these boxes has increased local populations significantly. Mary Penn and Bill Soranno, VBS members from Augusta County, have a kestrel box trail and have had many adventures rehabilitating kestrels. They have raised many a kestrel over the years. They were also the first County Coordinators for that county.

A kestrel nest box is a larger version of the bluebird box we use, mounted on a pole, with the necessary predator guards, but placed 10 to 20 feet high. There are three differences between the kestrel box and the bluebird box besides the size: it has a three-inch entrance hole, an inside perch platform, and a "ladder" of some sort inside to allow the young to reach the hole to fledge. The kestrel box will also attract Screech Owls and Northern Saw-whet Owls. And for the owls you would need to take the inside perch off. The three-inch hole will easily allow starlings and squirrels to enter, so weekly monitoring is still essential, as our usual protocol.

– Barbara Chambers

Blowflies and Wire Screens

There are several species of the blood sucking blowflies commonly found in the nests of bluebird and other cavity nesters. In the late 1970s, Ira Campbell from Timberville, Virginia, came up with a way to reduce blowfly predation in his nest boxes. He extended the bottoms of some experimental nest boxes and placed 3/8-inch hardware cloth screen one inch above the floor of the nest box. He used only the 3/8-inch hardware cloth (rabbit cage wire), not the 1/2-inch. The smaller wire lets the blowfly larvae pass through the wire platform but keeps the nesting material or small eggs from falling through.

Mr. Campbell followed up his study with tests on bluebird trails. He equipped 53 boxes with the wire platforms and again experienced no fledging loss due to blowfly parasitism. He found that the wire significantly reduced the numbers of blowflies in the nests. Many bluebirders now place a small wire shelf made of 3/8-inch wire in the bottom of their nest boxes. The wire is bent at a 90-degree angle so that it forms a shelf about an inch above the bottom of the box. This allows the blowflies to fall through the wire away from the nest and nestlings.

– Ron Kingston, Charlottesville

[Editor's note: Ira Campbell died in September 2008. See the Fall 2008 Bird Box for a remembrance.]

My Joy

For over a year, the bluebirds in my backyard have been nature's inspiration to me and have brought me more joy and relaxation that I could have imagined. I have bird feeders that draw all sorts of beautiful birds, but the bluebirds are my personal favorite. I believe the same family keeps coming back again and again. They have become my friends.

My bluebird box is attached to a post on my privacy fence. The first year no one entered, then last year a couple came and laid the first batch of five eggs. I was ecstatic! As the eggs hatched, I supplemented the adults' constant flights for food by offering them meal and wax worms in a bowl near the box. They just loved it! It was so much fun watching the young grow and grow until one day the box was empty. I had missed their flight.

I cleaned out the box and then one day later the female was back building a new nest. Within a week she had four eggs. Again I watched and waited. I was rewarded with four more babies, and I made more trips to PetSmart for mealworms. They were well fed, but again I missed their first flight! (Although I mark my calendar carefully, they always seem to leave while I'm at work.) Again I cleaned the box. Shortly before fall, the female returned to build another nest. There were three more eggs this time and another successful fledging.

Just before winter, on a day when I wasn't feeling well and the world was cold and gray, I had not seen any bluebirds for almost two weeks. I looked out into the back yard and there were eleven bluebirds sitting on my fence, the birdbath, and the roof of the shed! It was if they were saying, "Good-bye, don't fret; we'll see you in the spring!"

Last spring I bought a second box and cleaned out the original nest box, awaiting the arrival of the bluebirds. I'd been at a pretty low point in my life lately, and when the bluebird couple returned and built a new nest I believed that God had returned a bit of joy in my life. Another bluebird started building a nest in the new box but then abandoned it. The female laid five eggs this time! I watched and counted the days carefully. One day when I checked the box, four fuzzy babies perked up their heads. The box was so full, I didn't want to disturb them so I wasn't sure where the fifth one was.

A few days later, I looked out the back window to see the adults sitting on the fence. The mother kept trying to fly into the box and then flew back to the fence. When I checked with the binoculars, I saw grass hanging out of the hole and figured she couldn't get hold of the edge, so I went to rescue her. As I opened the box, I saw that all of the grass and pine needles had been thrown all over and one lone egg lay in the bottom of the box. The babies were gone! My only thought was that a snake had gotten into the nest box by climbing the fence. Since I have a privacy fence, I'd thought the nest was safe.

I was devastated! I can't begin to tell you how sad I was as I watch the mother and father sitting on the back fence with nowhere to go and not knowing what happened to their beautiful family. I took this personally and felt I had failed these beautiful birds. I was not sure what to do with the nest box. I wondered if I should I clean out the box and hope the bluebirds return, or just take down the box altogether? As I looked out the window the male kept flying to the nest and looking in as if the chicks might reappear.

I did not know where the snake had gone (or for that matter, whether there was a snake), but I did not want to encourage the birds to return and build another nest with a potential predator still in my yard. I went to the Internet and found the Virginia Bluebird Society Web site. I e-mailed them and received a great phone call. With their encouragement, I took the nest box off the fence and put it on a pole with a snake guard (following the design on the Web site). I am now hoping the bluebirds return to the nest box and safely raise another brood in my yard.

– Holly James, Mechanicsville

Adopt a Box

One of the main missions of VBS is to place bluebird nest boxes on public lands. These boxes always have the proper predator control and are monitored. By having proper nest boxes in parks and other public areas, it ensures that the public sees the proper way to erect a nest box and will follow our example.

Our Adopt a Box Program helps VBS with the cost of these boxes on public lands. The following people contributed to the VBS Adopt a Box Program in 2008: John E. Alderson Jr, Susan Appel, Terry Bennett, Debra J. Brinkley, Ed Clark, Nancy Demory, Tricia Emler, Virginia K. Fry, Marijke Gate, Linda Hammond, Rebecca & Robert Hornyak, Debbie Howe, Mary & Ray Kent, Ayuko Kimura-Faye, Dorothy Lamoureux, Marie Nales, Carol Pruner, Glenn Sellers, Robert Sindermann, Susan Smith, Cindy Snyder & A.T. Stevens, David & Karen Timer, Leslie Vandivere, Alfred Wilson III. For a complete list of contributors, visit our Web site.

Chipping Problem Solved

I like to paint my predator guards. After several years of paint chipping or scratching off of them, I came up with a solution. I now begin by spraying the guard with vinegar. It seems to pit the galvanized metal stove pipe and provides a better surface for the paint to adhere to. Using a very fine spray, I hold the gun two feet away and quickly move it up and down the length of the guard spraying vinegar. It takes about five seconds to cover one guard. The vinegar must not be allowed to run, so when you're finished it looks like a mist covering the entire guard. You then need to let it dry about 12 hours before applying two coats of metal paint. The results are excellent.

– Tom Clifton, Salem

“Thirty-six Presentations in Three Years”

That’s what Earl Morris of Roanoke told me when I asked him how many talks he has given on bluebirds for VBS. Earl became Roanoke County Coordinator in late 2005, and by the end of 2008 he had done 36 presentations on the Eastern bluebird and its habits and habitats. His program, which includes a wonderful slide show, has been quite popular in the Roanoke County area. Over 900 people from garden clubs, Kiwanis, Rotary, church groups, art clubs, Lion’s Club, and the Sierra Club, as well as corporate retirees, have been treated to Earl’s delightful narrative that accompanies his photographs. Earl demonstrated this program at last November’s VBS meeting, and it was so popular that the organization took much of his narrative and incorporated it into a VBS sponsored CD that county coordinators can use for presentations.

When not talking to groups, singing in his church choir, or volunteering at the Winston Link Museum, Earl personally monitors 3 trails with 106 boxes. 2008 saw 520 bluebirds and 26 Tree Swallows fledge from those trails. Nice going, Earl.

– Sarah McDade, Fairfax



Feeding Mealworms to Bluebirds

About seven or eight years ago, Anne Little told me how to “grow” mealworms. My friend, Joan Hamb, the trail monitor at Fawn Lake in Spotsylvania County, was feeding her flock, and I was fascinated that the bluebirds would wait for her and let her know when it was time to feed. Anne showed me how to make the box and layer it with corn meal, newspaper, and cardboard. Joan gave me about 50 mealworms to start my colony. It took longer than I had expected for the worms to turn into pupas and then become Darkling Beetles. Once they became beetles, the laying of eggs starts. The eggs are deposited among the decomposed cardboard material. It takes a long time before the eggs are even big enough to see. All the while, I harvest the larger mealworms for a constant supply to feed my blues.

Feeding bluebirds can be frustrating. The ideal time to begin feeding is during nesting season. When the adult couple is actively building their nest, I place a simple dish feeder on a two-foot section of log within 15 feet of the nest box. Joan always fed at 4 p.m., and the birds came to expect that time. I’m not consistent about feeding time. So I always whistle when I feed, and they come to my call. I believe I would have less frustration if I could feed at the same time daily. The frustration is that after fledging, the adult parents take the babies off to another location. This year they hung around and fed the fledglings for about three weeks. Then one day they didn’t come when I called. I continued to put the mealworms out only to watch phoebes and a cardinal begin to partake. My last clutch left in the middle of August.

Recently I watched a pair of blues near my feeder. I ran in the house and retrieved the mealworms from the refrigerator. (I keep a small container of large worms in the fridge so they will not mature and are handy). I was thrilled that my blues came back, and they seemed happy to hear me whistle. Now I just hope they will continue to come this spring. – Beth Elkins, King George

Wooden Perches Above the Nest Box

I’ve noticed that bluebirds and Tree Swallows like to perch on nest boxes. I thought it might help to give them a larger perch to use, and here is what I created. As recommended by VBS, I mounted the nest boxes on 1-inch EMT conduit. Rather than cut the EMT to 7-½ feet (the EMT is sold in 10-foot lengths at Home Depot and Lowes) I left it full length so that the top of the EMT is 8-½ feet above the ground when installed.

The perches are inexpensive and are quite simple to make. They cost a little more than \$1 apiece and are made of 1-inch diameter, 36-inch long dowels, which are cut to 4-inch lengths. Drill a 3/8-inch hole through the 1-inch dowel, 2 inches from each end. Center a 36-inch x 3/8-inch dowel in the hole and secure it with a ½-inch brad. The 4-inch dowel is then placed in the hole at the top of the EMT and is secured with a ¾-inch wood screw. (Drill a pilot hole about ¾-inch down from the top of the EMT.) When installed, the perch is about 3 feet above the nest box. The Tree Swallows and bluebirds love the perch.

– Jim Mason

Why Monitor?

I received an interesting letter in response to one of my articles about bluebird trail monitoring in the NABS journal, *Bluebird*. The writer was concerned about an overemphasis on monitoring and micromanaging (weekly monitoring, feeding, putting up predator guards, etc.) and a lack of science behind NABS recommendations. He felt we should just put up boxes and leave the birds alone. In reply, I pointed out the benefits of monitoring (see www.sialis.org/monitoring.htm) and gave details about an unmanaged trail with which I had had some experience. I also noted that it is hard to conduct a scientific study of the value of monitoring if you don't monitor.

Last year I looked at 17 boxes on a beautiful golf course in town. The boxes had been installed about five years ago and had never been monitored. The wooden boxes (slot and round entrance) were located *near* great bluebird habitat, but almost all were placed in overgrown brambles on metal poles without baffles. Most were wet inside due to poor design and cracking roofs.

When we cleaned them out, we made forensic guesses on the occupants. It looked like there had been bluebird nests in two or three boxes. The rest appeared to have been used by mice or flying squirrels, ants, paper wasps, and House Wrens. Because of the spread and number of other boxes we are managing, we decided not to modify or manage this trail until 2009. This also enabled us to establish a baseline and show the differences between the unmanaged and managed trail results.

This winter, we skied cross-country along the course (a *fun* way to monitor, but it did involve some falling down) and cleaned out the boxes. We found that 11 of the 17 boxes were used by mice and flying squirrels (with live mice jumping out of some of them), four boxes had House Wren or mouse nests, and one nest I could not identify. I had spot-checked them last April and found two bluebird nests; both had failed.

In contrast, we managed nine boxes across the street in a park. That trail had four bluebird nestings (18 eggs and 16 fledged), plus one Black-capped Chickadee nest (two fledged) and four House Wren nests (with about 14 fledged).

I would say the four biggest reasons the golf course trail was so unproductive were:

- T Improper placement of boxes
- T Failure to clean out boxes (making many unusable)
- T Failure to put up predator guards (to prevent use by mice)
- T Failure to control paper wasps

If you need to convince someone else to monitor their trail and need help, please visit www.sialis.org/pleasemonitor.htm.

– *Bet Zimmerman*



Why Build Bluebird Trails?

People have been enthralled by bluebirds for centuries. North American Indians used to hang gourds near their villages, hoping that bluebirds would nest there. Bluebirds have been celebrated in writing by John Burroughs, Henry David Thoreau, and Robert Frost, and in song by Judy Garland and Jan Peerce. By the early 1900s, however, bluebird populations were dwindling. This was almost entirely due to competition for nesting spaces from House Sparrows, cavity-nesters that had been imported from Europe in 1851.

In 1934, Thomas E. Mussleman began writing articles encouraging bluebird conservation and the building of bluebird trails. Across the country other bluebird enthusiasts were helping the efforts to restore bluebird populations. In 1969, Mussleman turned over his monthly column in *Nature Society News* to Dr. Lawrence Zeleny, who wrote it for the next twelve years. Dr. Zeleny also published *The Bluebird: How You Can Help Its Fight For Survival* in 1975. This book brought the struggle of the bluebird to a much larger audience.

Enthusiastic responses from other bluebirders encouraged Zeleny to call a meeting in 1978 to plan for a continental organization dedicated to the conservation and restoration of the bluebird population. He produced sacks of letters expressing a passionate joy found in observing bluebirds, and the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) was formed. For more information about NABS, visit www.nabluebirdsociety.org.

Correction

In the Fall 2008 *Bird Box*, we misspelled the name of Carol Sottili. We regret the error.

How to Join

Send your name, address, phone number, and/or e-mail address along with a check for \$10 for an individual or \$15 for a family to:

Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

Membership forms can be downloaded from the VBS Web site:
www.virginiabluebirds.org.

Visit Our Web Site

The VBS Web site offers nest box plans, trail monitoring protocol, trail data forms, news, and links to other useful sites:

www.virginiabluebirds.org.

Calendar

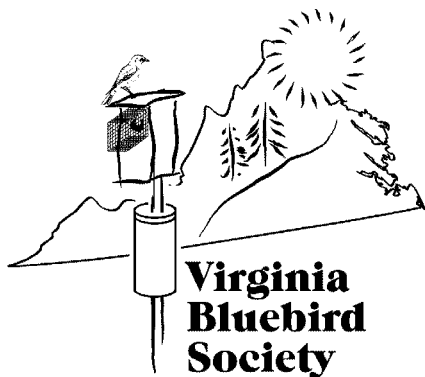
April 25. Mason Neck Earth Day Celebration, Lorton.

April 25. Fredericksburg Earth Day, Alumn Springs Park.

May 7 - 9. Great Dismal Swamp Birding Festival, Suffolks.

May 29 - 31. Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Festival, Giles County.

November 7. VBS Annual Meeting, Claytor Nature Study Center, Lynchburg College, Bedford. (www.lynchburg.edu/claytor)



Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

**DATED
MATERIAL**