

The Bird Box Bird Box

Spring 2022 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org



SAVE THE DATE

Virginia Bluebird Society Biennial Conference

Celebrating Twenty-Five + One

Friday & Saturday, November 11th & 12th

Registration Opens Early September

NVCC'S Workforce Center, Woodbridge, VA

Keynote Speaker: Julie Zickafoose, well-known writer, artist, and naturalist, author of *Saving Jemima: Life and Love with a Hard-luck Jay*

Be sure to mark your calendars and save the dates.

First Virginia Bluebird Society Recognized Bluebird Trail in Norfolk

By Mary Lohman, Virginia Beach

Just in case you thought that the Norfolk Botanical Garden (NBG) is only about flowers, you would be wrong. It is so much more. Their environmental and educational efforts encompass butterfly and honeybee conservation, and protection of the Eastern Bluebird and other native cavity nesters.

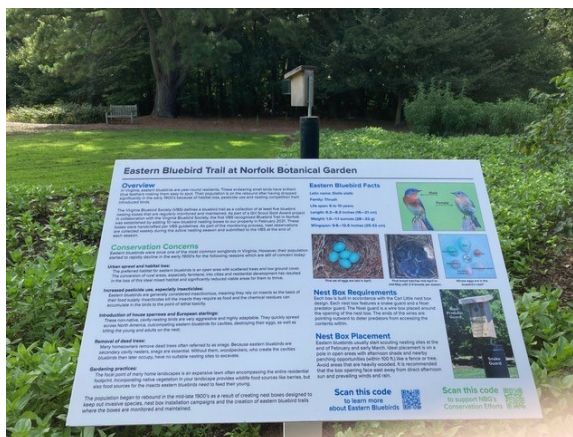
The new bluebird trail at NBG was the Gold Star project of Sydney Sheffield from Chesapeake, Virginia. Sydney approached NBG with her proposal and they responded enthusiastically.

Sydney then turned to Virginia Bluebird Society. We gave her a Youth/Scout Grant to build ten complete boxes.

NBG already had six unmonitored boxes scattered about the gardens. Sydney's project added ten. VBS advised NBG how to monitor and maintain the entire 16 box trail.

The staff at NBG developed educational signage to assist visitors to understand the importance of bluebirds and other native cavity nesters in our environment.

The trail was installed in February 2021 in time for the 2021 nesting season. The results exceeded our expectations. Bluebirds nested seven times, yielding 30 hatchlings. Chickadees nested three times yielding eight hatchlings, and House Wrens nested once, yielding three hatchlings. We were delighted to include the numbers from Sydney's project in our statewide data.



Informational sign at Norfolk Botanical Garden.
Photo by Mary Lohman

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Mom's Bluebird Box

By Peggy Cotta, Danville VA

A new bluebird box was placed on the Riverwalk Trail in Danville, VA this past summer. A box that had been inhabited by tree swallows for the past few years was suddenly and unexpectedly inhabited a family of bluebirds, but there were tree swallows still flying nearby. This was a great opportunity to put up a companion box.

I contacted Vickie Fuquay, VBS VP of Education and Patrick County Coordinator, and asked if I could get a companion box erected. After the box was secured, David Torborg helped me put it up on a day when we attached Noel guards to several other boxes. We already had two snake attacks last spring and are hoping to divert these big black snakes to other areas.

After the box was erected, it sat empty for several weeks. No one had asked to donate the box in anyone's memory and Vickie offered me the opportunity to adopt the box myself. After a few weeks, I came up with the idea of adopting the box in honor of someone living.

This person has spent her life raising birds, rescuing and rehabilitating animals, and pointing out signs of bird life to others. She raised pigeons as a young girl and taught me how to feed a bird in captivity when I was young. I was even present as she released some of them back into the wild. The pigeon she named "Flaps" had the hardest time saying goodbye. He just kept flying back on her head as she walked away that day in the park. Eventually, Flaps joined the other pigeons, and we all said our goodbyes.

This woman is not afraid to grab a black snake by the neck, put it in a pillow case, and take it somewhere far from her yard to protect baby birds in her yard. When she is not too busy volunteering at church or working in her own yard, she will sometimes accompany me to do my weekly checks on the 14 boxes I monitor along the Dan River.

As you may have guessed, this person is my mother. For her birthday last year, a plaque was placed on Box 23B that reads "In honor of Peggy Cotta: Forever Amazed at God's Creation." It will be a safe place for birds to nest for years to come, which just seems like the perfect way to honor such a bird lover as her.



Peggy Cotta at the September 2021 dedication of a new bluebird box in her honor, on the Riverwalk Trail in Danville VA.

Photo by Karen Cotta

27th Annual Purple Martin Field Day

Date: Saturday, June 25, 2022

Time: Presentations begin at 11:00 a.m. ET. Events end by 3:00 p.m.

Location: A private farm in Louisa County, VA (central VA, about 60 miles NW of Richmond)

How do you attract Purple Martins? At this event on the farm of Mrs. Merle Wood and her son, Purple Martin expert Lance Wood, you will learn the habitat martins require, and how to protect birds from predators. You'll see a spectacular martin colony of more than 70 breeding pairs! Buy gourd seeds and learn to modify them to create Purple Martin homes. Come and join the fun!

No registration. Event is FREE, but donations are appreciated to help cover expenses.

Bring lawn chairs, shoes for wet grass, binoculars, notepad, bag lunch/drink, and camera.

NO PETS, PLEASE.

DIRECTIONS, PHOTOS, COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS, & MORE INFORMATION: www.purplemartinfieldday.org

Questions? Call Kathy Laine at (434) 222-1831 and leave your name and phone number.



Participants view Purple Martin supercolony

Photo

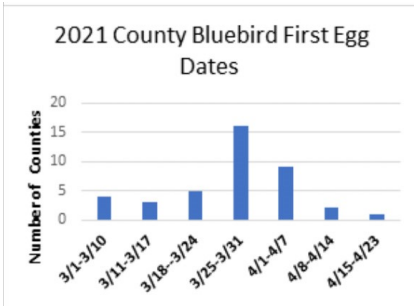
by Kathy Laine

Virginia Bluebird Society Nest Box Activity 2021

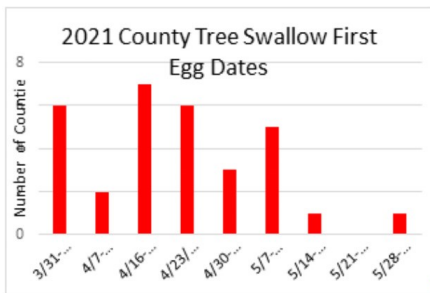
By Ann D. Dunn, Virginia Bluebird Society Data Manager

We began the 2021 breeding season hoping for a return of trails lost to COVID-19 the previous year and we were not disappointed. Trail participation, at 443 sites, was identical to that of pre-COVID year 2019. The current 4979 boxes monitored represents 98% of the 2019 figure, with productivity actually exceeding year 2019 with 26,628 fledgling birds. Species distribution was as follows: bluebirds 74%, tree swallows 18%, house wrens 5%, Carolina chickadees 2%, other 1% (a combination of Carolina wrens, Titmice, brown-headed nuthatches). The annual table summary is on the following page.

The nesting process opened with a bang, bluebirds “First Eggs” appearing early in March, peaking at month’s end, and extending into much of April.



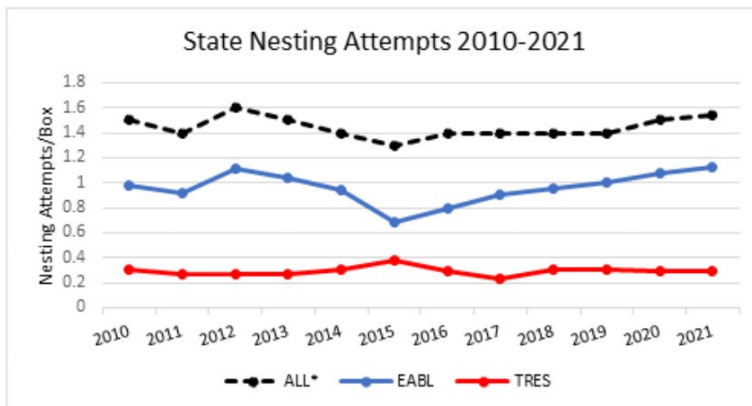
The average Eastern Bluebird first egg date for counties was March 28, and the average last fledge was August 24 giving a 151-day duration for the season, compared respectively to 143 days in 2019 and 147 days in 2020.



Tree Swallow first eggs began appearing at the end of March, continuing throughout April and into May. The average statewide first date for TRES was April 20 and average last fledging date was July 27, a 92-day duration.

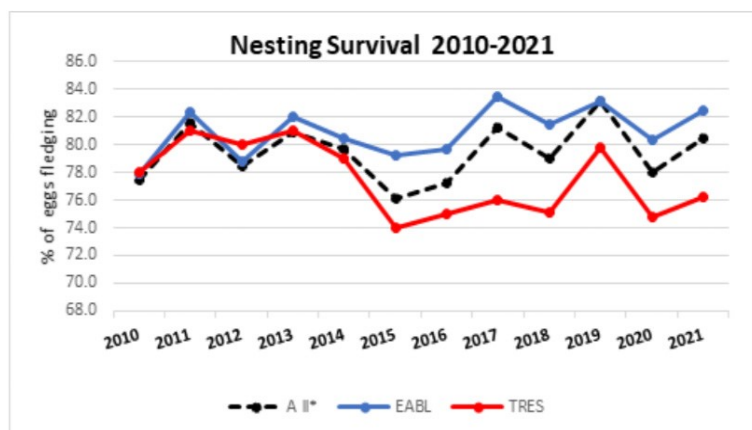
We have twelve-year records on three parameters of nesting activity from our trails. They are 1) Nest Box Usage as measured by number of nesting attempts for each species using our boxes. 2) Nesting survival as the percent of eggs that develop into fledgling birds and 3) Nest Box Productivity as the average number of fledglings per box. The 2021 trail records stand up there well with each.

The following three charts trace the activity of each parameter over that period.



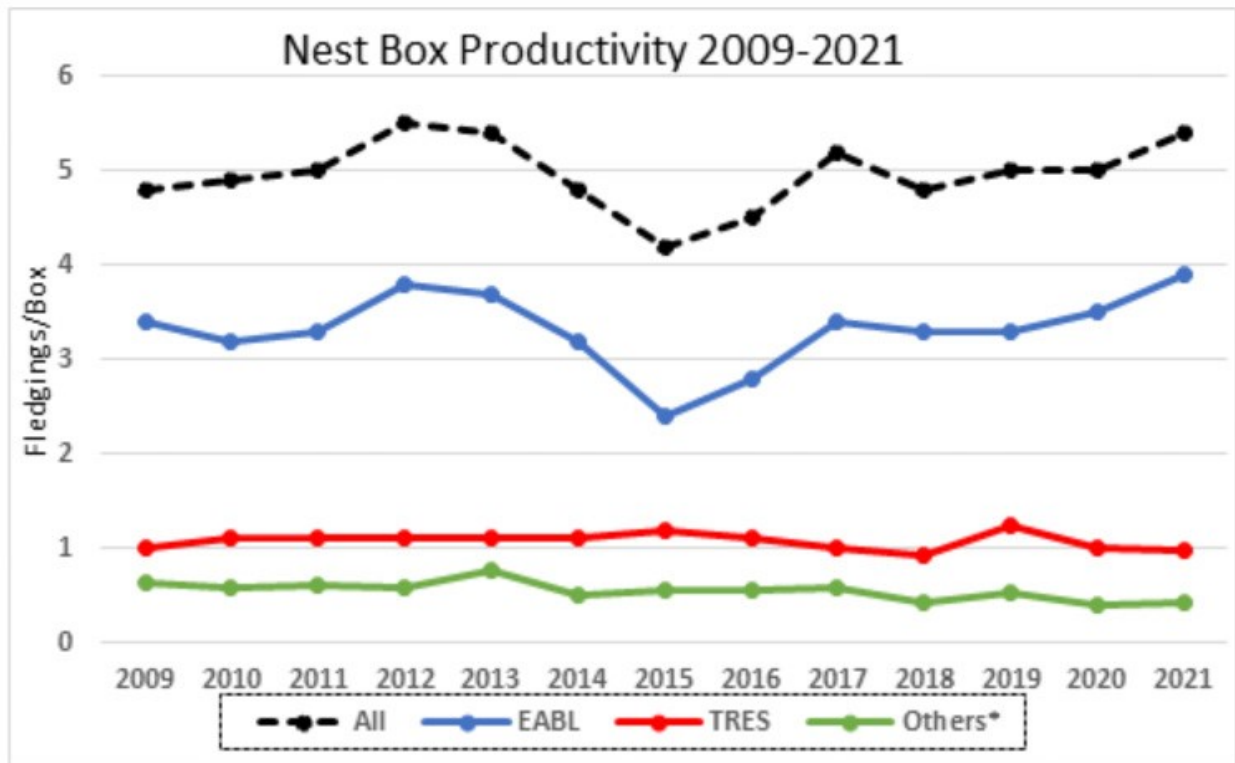
All-species nesting usage has a 12-year average of 1.4 nesting attempts per box. 2021 activity at 1.5 was slightly above this. The increase can be attributed to bluebird activity which rose above its 12-year average of 1.4 to 1.5, while Tree Swallow nesting attempts remained steady at 0.3 per box.

In 2021, All-species nesting survival (81%) was one percentage point higher than its 12-year average. EABL survival rate (83%) was two percentage points above average. Although TRES survival rate rose slightly from 2020, it was two percentage points lower than the 78% average.



We can certainly consider the 2021 breeding season as very satisfactory; bolstered by the unusual number of trails reporting to have been “best ever.” By all parameters Eastern Bluebirds had an above average year, while Tree Swallows lagged behind. In looking for a source of such outcomes, we always seem to be looking at weather events. Temperature extremes of both cold and heat can have disruptive effects on the breeding process, the severity of each depending on timing relative to the vulnerability stages of developing nestlings. In 2021 we had two cold snaps

Continued on Page 4



in April and another in mid-May. Heat waves beginning in June and rising throughout all of July and August characterized our summer. We can consider that although first clutch bluebirds would have avoided the summer heat, most developing Tree Swallows were exposed to it all.

We are always interested in finding unusual cavity nesters using our nest boxes. In addition to our regular species, we often find: CARW, TUTI, BHNU, BHCO, and, rarely, HOFI, GCFL, and PRWA. We now can add another rarity to the list, the Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*, AKA RHWO). The nest was spotted in mid-July by Kaycee Lichliter and her crew on the Shenandoah Valley Audubon Society Blandy Bluebird trail in Clarke County. Her story will be told in the summer edition of *The Bird Box*.

The 2021 data forms included a section concerning this year’s Cicada Brood X emergence. The question was posed: “Did cicadas contribute to the local avian food supply and thereby increase breeding activity?” Bluebirds, using a “perch and pounce” approach to hunting, would be likely cicada consumers, while Tree Swallows as aerial hunters would not. We did receive reports of cicada activity in several counties in north, northwest, and southwest areas of the state. One of these, the afore-mentioned trail in Clarke County, contributed enough data to address the question. This year the number of bluebirds fledging on the trail was significantly higher than previous years, while that of tree swallows declined. This is tantalizing data that suggests a possible cicada connection but will require long waits for confirmation provided by these 13– or 17-year breeder insects in the future.

Many thanks to our trail monitors for careful watch and record-keeping on our trails. Thanks also to Charlene Talcott, our State Coordinator, for gathering those reports, a long and sometimes frustrating process.

Data Table on page 5



Bluebird Art

By Cathi Morrison, Front Royal, Virginia

Stamped, embossed, and colored with alcohol ink

Virginia Bluebird Society Nest Box Activity 2021

County	Trail Leader/County Coordinator	Number of trails	Number of Boxes	Bluebirds				Chickadees			Tree Swallows			House Wrens			Other* (Please Specify)				All									
				Nest Attempts	Eggs	Hatched	BB Fledged	Nest Attempts	Eggs	Hatched	Fledged	Nest Attempts	Eggs	Hatched	Fledged	Nest Attempts	Eggs	Hatched	Fledged	Nest Attempts	Eggs	Hatched	Fledged	Birds Fledged per Box						
1	Albemarle	Dunn, A.	35	384	525	2062	1699	1587	6	30	20	20	132	546	429	393	11	38	29	29	674	2676	2177	2029	5.3					
2	Bedford	Boran, C.	2	26	31	136	120	114	3	19	19	12	4	19	18	18	1	5	0	0	39	179	157	144	5.5					
3	Buchanan	Mayhorn, R.	3	62	52	235	183	168	5	23	16	15	18	86	81	81					75	344	280	264	4.3					
4	Chesterfield	Kejll, P.	2	68	83	377	316	310	1	7	7	6	3	15	14	13					87	399	337	329	4.8					
5	Clarke Co	Lichter, K	1	132	96	441	387	362	3	18	18	18	28	121	113	95	1	4	4	0	77	339	314	278	5.5					
6	Culpepper	Dennee, B.	6	51	45	196	179	165	3	18	87	61	53	165	782	666	645	98	474	436	418	7	26	21	16	628	2751	2420	2343	5.6
7	Fairfax	Wester, M.	38	422	330	1382	1236	1211	28	87	61	53	60	316	218	207	7	42	35	30	6	25	5	5	157	758	576	548	5.7	
8	Fauquier	Boran, C.	2	13	11	48	42	32					5	25	22	14	4	21	21	21	20	94	85	67	5.2					
9	Floyd	Dunn, A.	2	59	69	300	249	249	1	6	4	4	36	174	170	161	2	13	13	12	1	1	0	0	109	494	436	426	7.2	
10	Fluvanna	Booker, Judi	1	10	2	9	4	4									4	22	22	17	1	5	5	5	7	36	31	26	2.6	
11	Frederick	Boran, C.	2	20	23	98	93	87													2	8	7	7	25	106	100	94	4.7	
12	Franklin	Walker, W.	1	8	6	29	29	29													8	41	41	41	8	41	41	41	5.1	
13	Gloucester	Wallace, E.	1	9	10	36	34	34					8	44	27	24					18	80	61	58	6.4					
14	Goochland	Kerns, D. & L.	2	18	12	49	42	42					5	30	30	24	3	18	17	16	20	97	89	82	4.6					
15	Grayson Co.	Wilczek, P.	4	65	91	399	374	360	1	5	5	5	16	79	77	76					108	483	456	441	6.8					
16	Greene	Richardson, R. & D.	1	8	14	59	59	59													14	59	59	59	7.4					
17	Hanover	Davis, C.	4	59	57	161	136	135	9	36	35	35	1	5	5	5	16	32	15	13	3	21	12	12	86	255	203	200	3.4	
18	Henrico	Haley, D.	8	241	405	1700	1673	1642	0	0	0	0	2	8	8	8	2	10	10	10	0	0	0	0	409	1718	1691	1660	6.9	
19	Henry	Bell, S.	3	31	20	83	60	51					20	110	101	93	7	40	34	29	47	233	195	173	5.6					
20	Highland	Langdon, L.	6	100	172	758	622	606	5	26	14	12	10	52	50	43	0	0	0	0	3	13	13	13	190	849	699	674	6.7	
21	Isle of Wright	Jones, J.	14	246	295	1274	1038	964	13	61	53	50	12	62	51	41	2	8	8	5	7	41	35	30	329	1446	1185	1090	4.4	
22	James City	Bounty, P.	2	54	102	456	390	373	1	4	4	4									1	5	0	0	104	465	394	377	7.0	
23	Lancaster	Shissler, N.	1	11	4	18	6	5					4	22	12	7					8	40	18	12	1.1					
24	Lynchburg City	McKew, L.	51	578	426	1739	1480	1412	12	66	46	38	180	861	770	728	78	310	262	258	2	11	11	11	698	2987	2569	2447	4.2	
25	Loudoun	Temples, P.	2	22	34	138	121	118					11	56	53	48					45	194	174	166	7.5					
26	Madison	Haze, M.	1	4	3	15	15	15													5	19	15	15	8	34	30	30	7.5	
27	Mathews Co	Weber, S.	8	93	69	258	199	171					66	329	266	218	13	62	53	47	148	649	518	436	4.7					
28	Montgomery	Williams, L.	9	122	120	519	446	413	1	1	0	0	40	180	145	118	5	19	18	18	0	0	0	0	166	719	609	549	4.5	
29	Nelson Co	Mullins, J.	1	20	48	195	161	153													48	195	161	153	7.7					
30	Northumberland	Browning, C.	5	44	56	250	224	208	1	6	6	6	1	5	5	5	1	6	3	3	59	267	238	222	5.0					
31	Orange	Boran, C.	3	64	119	474	401	385	3	22	13	12	7	16	16	16	9	44	30	30	138	556	460	443	6.9					
32	Patrick	Fuquay, V.	141	647	877	3907	3530	3428	24	119	114	109	135	669	580	551	11	55	50	50	1052	4766	4288	4148	6.4					
33	Pittsylvania	Cottingham/McCullough	2	18	30	123	104	104	1	6	6	6	7	34	25	25					38	163	135	135	7.5					
34	Powhatan	Valerie Gaffney	15	219	229	958	843	807	6	20	15	10	89	438	338	290	13	57	45	34	344	1508	1269	1164	5.3					
35	Prince William	Patterson, B.	11	114	115	517	421	380	3	18	18	12	18	74	62	58	2	9	9	9	139	623	515	459	4.0					
36	Rappahannock	Narney, P.	1	17	19	79	73	72					1	5	5	5					20	84	78	77	4.5					
37	Richmond Co	Narney, P.	1	17	19	79	73	72					1	5	5	5					20	84	78	77	4.5					
38	Richmond City	Bernstein, B.	3	33	26	106	99	87	1	6	6	6	2	10	10	10	2	10	10	10	29	122	115	103	3.1					
39	Rockbridge Co	Sokolski, C.	2	26	12	47	39	30	8	12	5	0	2	7	4	4	15	83	59	44	39	161	113	84	3.2					
40	Rockingham Co	Whiteside/Logan/Repass	1	8	1	3	3	3					5	27	18	17					6	30	21	20	2.5					
41	Roanoke	Lichter, K.	5	112	184	750	581	579	3	17	12	9	18	86	74	62	5	29	23	11	210	882	690	661	5.9					
42	Shenandoah	Risseuw, D.	1	20	11	51	44	44					14	74	59	59					25	125	103	103	5.2					
43	Spotsylvania	Little, A.	3	49	66	257	221	213	4	19	19	16	19	37	27	27	9	44	37	36	98	357	304	292	6.0					
44	Stafford_Fred'burg City	Carlson, J.	16	170	163	661	579	554	5	23	23	18	53	229	176	165	32	94	80	77	266	1046	889	844	5.0					
45	Stafford	Morrison, C.	3	34	59	250	241	231	3	16	15	13	1	5	0	0					63	271	256	244	7.2					
46	Stafford	Morrison, C.	4	172	163	712	523	472	2	12	7	7	101	492	372	306	22	123	81	72	292	1359	999	866	5.0					
47	Warren	Narney, J.	3	73	114	477	477	397	1	5	5	5	3	14	14	14					118	496	442	416	5.7					
48	Westmoreland	Reitz, C.	10	127	155	559	453	388	23	58	41	26	0	0	0	0	9	52	40	40	191	690	550	470	3.7					
49	York																													

What's Happening With New and Refurbished Trail Grants

By Doug Rogers, VBS Vice President, Trails

This fund began the fiscal year with \$2,821.00. This included newly budgeted money of \$2,500 plus \$321.00 in carry-over from the previous year.

We approved 14 grants totaling \$2,652.40. Of those 14 grants, the materials for eight of them came from VBS inventory and re-purposed materials taken from trails that are no longer being monitored. Included in the total above, we provided funds (limited to \$250.00) to a private Continuing Care Retirement Community to refurbish a large trail.

The balance in this fund, as of January 12, 2022, was \$168.60. However, there is one additional grant that is pending for six complete setups.

Bluebirds at Bluestone Elementary

By Courtney Sokolowski, VBS Director and Bluestone Elementary I-STEM/Advanced Learner Specialist

Ask many of the students at Harrisonburg's Bluestone Elementary, especially current second graders and they will say bluebirds make them feel happy! Last year, despite starting off a virtual school year, Bluestone Elementary took on the task of installing a bluebird trail. Peter Norment, an avid birder and the principal of Bluestone Elementary, had a vision for students monitoring the trail and becoming ambassadors for bluebirds in the community, and ambassadors they became! After a chilly installation with the help of Valerie Gaffney, VBS President, in February 2021, Bluestone was up and running with six boxes.

Once spring rolled around, Ms. Jen Kettelkamp's first grade class took on the role of monitoring the boxes each week. Students waited with gleeful anticipation for each Tuesday when they would walk the trail and record their findings. Acting as scientists, they were eager to know if they would find an empty box, eggs, those "bad brown birds" (House Sparrows), tree swallows, or yes, even some bluebirds! As Rosalinda, one of the current second graders who helped with monitoring, shared, "We took care of them by looking to see if they're okay. We looked into the bluebird boxes and checked for eggs. We learned that bluebirds are really good because they give us eggs and babies to see. They're cute chicks!" When spring turned to summer, students participating in summer school became the trail monitors. This allowed for even more students to get to interact with the trail and learn more about special native bird species.

Since its opening in 2017, Bluestone has focused on connecting students with nature and learning. This project, led by a first-grade class, embodied tenets of hands-on learning, problem-solving, and community connection that are important for students at Bluestone Elementary. The bluebird trail provides an authentic opportunity for students to make observations, collect and share data, and connect to the mission of improving the bluebird population in Virginia.

When surveyed, many students felt like all elementary schools should have bluebird trails. Here are some of our second graders' other thoughts:

"I liked to see the bluebirds and they're cute and my favorite color is blue and they're blue. When I looked at them, they made me smile." Hasha

"When we saw the baby birds, I felt good cause I was excited!" Asia

"Well. I liked when they hatch out of their egg. Well. I felt kind of excited. Well, I learned about helping them." Sammy

"By helping the bluebirds and taking care of them, I learned about nature. Take care of the bluebirds and look out for when they hatch because they're really cute!" Natty

Bluestone was delighted to have success with our first year having a trail. We were able to see three bluebirds and seventeen Tree Swallows make their way into the world. Bluestone is looking forward to another even more abundant year of facilitating bluebird activity and growth in our community.

From Rosalinda Ziata:

Why do we have the bluebird boxes? To protect bluebirds and so they can have a home or a nest.

How did we take care of them? We put up bluebird boxes. We also put on a baffle so snakes couldn't come up. We didn't want the other brown birds (House Sparrows) to hurt them.



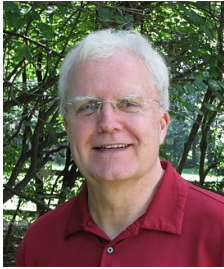
Students at Bluestone Elementary checking a bluebird box on the school's trail.

Photo by Bob Adamek, Harrisonburg City Public Schools

Changes in VBS Board of Directors

Thank you to retiring VBS directors, **Mike Bishop, Jane Hesler, and Ron Kingston**. For your unstinting willingness to share your knowledge and your experience, for stepping up and helping—regardless of the task, for countless presentations to all manner of community groups, for your constant support and your boundless enthusiasm, our deepest gratitude. We wish you nothing but blue skies, filled with bluebirds and for Mike, Purple Martins!

And now please welcome to the VBS Board our newly elected directors:



Mark Murphy and his wife Donna live in Fairfax County. Mark is retired from a career in the IT industry where he worked with several nonprofits and fundraising organizations. He is board member and IT administrator for the Virginia Native Plant Society and volunteers with the Northern Virginia Science Center Foundation. Mark is grateful to his wife Donna who introduced to him a love for bluebirds.



Tony Daniel and his wife Rebecca live in Chesterfield County. After completing the Virginia Master Naturalist program at Pocahontas State Park in spring 2019, Tony joined the Pocahontas Bluebird Project where the group monitors 51 nest boxes. Tony is one of three VBS County Coordinators in Chesterfield and enjoys volunteering at Hopewell and Chesterfield public schools by sharing his knowledge of bluebirds and nature with the students.



Courtney Sokolowski and her husband Mark live in Augusta County. Courtney is the I-STEM/Advanced Learner Specialist at Bluestone Elementary School in Harrisonburg City. She connected with VBS when, with funding from a VBS New Trail Grant, her school installed a bluebird nest box trail last spring. Courtney enjoys being outside, gardening, and spending time with her two boys. She is looking forward to learning more about bluebirds and ways to connect students to the wonders of the outdoors.

What's Happening With Youth and Scout Grants

By **Carmen Bishop, Fairfax**

Hello, my name is Alex Kim, a Boy Scout of Troop 55 and I recently completed an Eagle Project where I built bluebird boxes. I chose such a project because I have always enjoyed bluebirds. For a while, we've had a box at our house and have been able to have one to two nests per season, and it's always nice to see their bright blue feathers in contrast to the rest of the forest colors. To be honest, they're my favorite local birds so when a bluebird-related Eagle Project became available, I didn't hesitate.

For the project itself, I built ten identical boxes for Fairfax County and delivered them to my beneficiary, Ms. Bishop. In my opinion, the most challenging part of the project was the measurements, which had to be precise and uniform for all ten boxes. This was probably my first big woodworking experience, and it was interesting collecting all of the different materials from Lowe's and Home Depot. Overall, however, I think the project went well, and we knocked out all ten boxes in around three hours with around 20 people (we cut the wood ahead of time)



Left: Workers at the drilling station



Below: Workers put the finishing touches on the last box



Above: Finished project, all ten boxes

What's Happening With Nestcam Grants: Nestcam and New Trail at Willow Springs Elementary in Fairfax

By Vickie Fuquay, Danville, VA

VBS is still actively installing Camera Nest Boxes through our Educational Nestcam Grant Program for schools, park visitor centers, libraries, and similar public arenas.

One school I would like to highlight is Willow Springs Elementary School in Fairfax, VA. In September VBS received a grant request for the nest cam as well as four boxes to start a bluebird trail at the school. The lead person in this project is Carley Fisher-Maltese who is a STEAM teacher for Fairfax County Public Schools and is also the after-school garden club leader at Willow Springs. After much debate over location and placement of houses for a trail, the grant was approved.

Mike Bishop, VBS Director, was willing to scout out the property, help with placement of boxes and install boxes with the help of those involved at the school. Sadly, in the delay of getting everything worked out, VBS was able to fulfill the nest cam grant but was out of grant money in New and Refurbished Trail Grants to provide the 4 boxes to start the trail. On hearing our dilemma Mike who also heads up the Northern Virginia Purple Martin Initiative here in VA said, "Tell me where to send the check, The NOVA Purple Martin Initiative will pay for the needed houses, poles, and predator guards!" He ended with "Merry Christmas!!!" Thank you Santa Mike!!! So you see how we work together to help each other and care for our birds! A grateful thank you goes out to all who made this trail and nest cam come together for Willow Springs.

We at VBS, NOVA Purple Martin Initiative, students, and staff at Willow Springs all eagerly await breeding season and baby blues to fill our boxes.

To learn more about our grant programs visit us at [Grant Programs — Virginia Bluebird Society](#)



Carly Fisher-Maltese, STEAM teacher for Fairfax County Public Schools

County Coordinator Highlights

By Charlene Talcott, VBS County Coordinator

This month's highlight is about Greene County Coordinators Patricia Wilczek and Sandra Morris.

Pat and Sandra began working together in 2009 when Sandra began accompanying Pat on the Greene County Park trail. Sandra enjoys taking pictures, and says Pat has "a wealth of information about birds, their calls, invasive plants, and many other areas."

When the Greene County Park was closed recently, they talked to the sheriff who gave them permission to complete this important work. The only hitch was they could no longer drive their vehicles in the park as the gate had to be locked behind them. They chalked it up to "extra exercise." We love their enthusiasm, determination, and sense of humor.



*Left: Pat Wilczek and Sandra Morris
Photo by*

*Right: Pat Wilczek and Roger
Temples installing a nest box
Photo by*



Continued on Page 9

County Coordinator Spotlight, continued from Page 8

Welcome New County Coordinators

We have some new coordinators!

Northumberland—Joyce Mullins

Greene—Jill Meyer

Shenandoah—Kaylee Lichliter

Kaylee is the coordinator for Frederick and Clark Counties also.

Thank you to all three for stepping up to this important position.

Fledged County Coordinators

We have a few coordinators that have flown the nest box on to other endeavors. We appreciate all that you have done over the years for VBS and the bluebirds.

Fairfax—Mike Bishop

Greene—Pat Wilczek

Northumberland—Doug and Linda Williams

Drawing Winners

In 2021, we began a new program of randomly drawing names from those that had submitted their end of season reports. The lucky winners:

September—Linda Williams of Nelson County was awarded a \$50 gift certificate to Wild Birds Unlimited.

October—Linda Langsdon of Isle of Wight County was awarded a \$25 gift certificate to Amazon.

November—Thomas Witt of Powhatan was awarded a one-year membership.

A big thank you to everyone who submitted reports.

Exciting New Publication from NABS

By Mike DeBruhl, 1st Vice President for Affiliate Relations, North American Bluebird Society

I am pleased to announce that your North American Bluebird Society (NABS) has just released a GREAT new publication *Get To Know Bluebirds, A Guide for Young Nature Lovers*, by Myrna Pearman.

It is currently in digital format, located on the NABS web site, and will be there for about a year as we gather comments, etc. Then we plan to print it as another NABS offering/resource. In the meantime, please add it to your quiver for educational and information presentations and briefings.

Check it out at www.nabluebirdsociety.org It is on the front page. Click on it, review it, and let me know what you think.

Be sure to pass it along to your members and the young ones. The kids and grandkids should enjoy it.



Announcing VBS 2nd Annual Photo Contest



Featuring First Place Winner of the 2021 First Annual Photo Contest Mark Guill, Danville, Virginia

Bluebird Portrait

Mark won 5,000 live mealworms donated by **Nature's Way** (<http://www.thenaturesway.com>).

Seeking photos of our beloved bluebirds -- in flight or perched, at your feeder or feeding their fledglings, taking a bath, even in the snow.

For contest rules and to enter, visit our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/viriniabluebirdsociety>

Attracting (and Feeding) Birds with Native Plants - American Elderberry

American Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) is another one of the many plants that attract bluebirds. A deciduous shrub, bluebirds particularly love the blue-black berries produced by this plant, and it's another one that you can easily add to your yard.



Elderberry flowers
Photo from Lady Bird Johnson
Wildflower Center, R. W. Smith

A member of the adoxaceae family, which includes Viburnum, this plant was used by Native Americans for many medicinal purposes. It is high in Vitamin C and antioxidants and is often referred to as 'nature's medicine chest. The flowers can be batter-fried and the fruit makes tasty jelly and wine. The flowers add an aromatic flavor and lightness to pancakes or fritters.

The genus name, sambucus comes from Greek sambuce, an ancient musical instrument, and refers to the soft pith, easily removed from the twigs and used to make flutes and whistles.

It is considered outstanding as nesting cover for small birds, and according to Capital Naturalist Alonso Abugattas, 'This genus is known to host 42 species of Lepidoptera. Some 120 bird species have been seen feeding on its fruits. The broken stems provide homes for mason bees at times also.'

According to 'Growing Elderberries,' a University of Vermont Center for Sustainable Agriculture publication, 'Elderberry flowers appear to be primarily wind pollinated. The flowers lack nectaries and are not considered to be attractive to nectar-seeking insects (Robertson in Charlebois, et al., 2010). While bushes in the wild seem to have no problem bearing fruit, the conventional recommendation is to plant at least two different cultivars within 20-60

feet of one another to ensure cross-pollination and adequate fruit set (Charlebois, et al., 2010).

Light requirement: Full sun to part shade

Soil moisture/description: Tolerates a wide range of soils, but prefers moist, humusy ones.

Insects, diseases, and other plant problems: No serious insect or disease problems. Some susceptibility to canker, powdery mildew, leaf spot, borers, spider mites and aphids. Branches are susceptible to damage from high winds or from heavy snow/ice in winter.

Bloom Time: June to July

Bloom Description: White; Showy, Fragrant

Maintenance: Spreads by root suckers to form colonies. Prune suckers as they appear unless naturalizing. Several late winter pruning options include (a) pruning out dead or weakened stems, (b) shortening one-year stems or (c) cutting back to the ground to rejuvenate. Some horticulturists recommend a hard spring pruning for maintaining best foliage and habit.

This plant goes by a few different names: the American elderberry, common elderberry, black elderberry, or simple "elderberry." If you are shopping around for this plant, look for its Latin name, *Sambucus canadensis*, to be sure you've got the right one. Available from native plant nurseries in Virginia, including Hill House Farm & Nursery, Castleton (<http://hillhousenativeplants.com>); Earth Sangha, Springfield (<https://www.earthsangha>); Watermark Woods, Hamilton (<https://www.watermarkwoods.com>) among others.

References: Abugattas, A. (2015, January 8). *Wildlife Shrubs*. Capital Naturalist. <http://capitalnaturalist.blogspot>; Elpel, T.J. (2018). *Botany in a Day*. HOPS Press., LLC.; Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center; Missouri Botanical Garden; North Carolina State Extension; USDA, NRCS. 2022. The PLANTS Database (<http://plants.usda.gov>, 02/06/2022). National Plant Data Team, Greensboro, NC USA.; University of Vermont, Extension Center for Sustainable Agriculture.



Elderberries

Photo from Lady Bird Johnson
Wildflower Center, Sally and Andy
Wasowski

VBS Board Member Ron Kingston Featured in an August 3 Boars' Head Facebook Article

The bluebirds and boxes that line the entrance road leading to Birdwood Golf Course have a 35-year history here at the resort. The trail currently consists of nine boxes. This photo shows a picture of Ron Kingston, the man responsible for the management of these boxes. This is his newest box, and we were pleasantly surprised to find a nest inside less than a week after this particular box was erected.

<https://www.facebook.com/Boars-Head-Resort-107000041323904>

Ron observes, "She and her mate have been here many years. It probably helps that I feed them every day, all year long. By observing my in-feeder camera, I noticed the female likes the currants very much more than the live mealworms, whenever it gets in the 20s."



Ron Kingston at his newest nest box.
Photo by Joe Hanning

Improved Conditions Lead to a Significant Increase in Bluebird Population at Langley Fork Park

By Stephen Tzikas

In 2021 I volunteered to be a bluebird monitor at Langley Fork Park in McLean, Virginia. It is one of many citizen science programs promoted by the Virginia Master Naturalists and managed by the Virginia Bluebird Society (VBS). As a Chemical Engineer I have various interests in the physical sciences and engineering. As I get older, I am interested in getting more exercise, and one way to do that is to combine it with a life science that requires outdoor exposure. Since I am partial to birds because of a childhood pet parakeet, I decided to monitor bluebirds. Monitoring a bluebird trail and entering the data into Cornell University's NestWatch was a rewarding new personal experience. At the end of the season, about August 2021, I finally reviewed the NestWatch data and correlated it to my experience of monitoring the trail. It was an extraordinary successful season. I decided to speculate as to why the season's success was extraordinary.

The Site and the Monitoring Team

Langley Fork Park is 52 acres with a latitude of 38.9 degrees and a longitude of -77.2 degrees. The 10 bluebird nest boxes in the park are evenly distributed along the perimeter of the tree/field boundary. They all have stovepipe baffles and Noel guards. I monitored this trail with Naveen Abraham (trail leader) and Cindy Morrow. We shared our findings every week and had plenty of interactive time with the nests and birds. Our trail leader started monitoring the trail in 2016, the year that data collection for the trail began in NestWatch. However, the trail had been monitored for 10+ years prior to that.

The Results

In the 2021 season, we had 3 types of nesting birds. Apart for one late but successful nesting attempt by house wrens, the season was dominated by eastern bluebirds and tree swallows. Since 2016, the only other species making use of the nesting boxes was the Carolina wren. The count of 63 fledglings was quite a successful number compared to that of prior years. The NestWatch site sums a total egg count, as well as the total fledgling count. Although we counted eggs and fledglings as best as we could, it was not always possible to count all eggs as the view was obstructed, nor could we always count fledglings accurately as they could be piled on each other. The total number of fledglings, therefore, is a minimum counted number. It could be slightly higher, as indeed it was evident from the bluebird egg count, which was 29 eggs compared to the 26 recorded fledglings. Although we lost a bluebird egg due to predation, one can see a remaining discrepancy of 2, which I believe favors 2 additional fledglings. Likewise, the count of tree swallow eggs (16) were obviously undercounted because of obstructions like large nest feathers. Although we lost 4 eggs due to predation, the total number of fledglings was 33. This leads to small inconsistencies in the NestWatch data and the automated calculations. For this reason, I would recommend that nest monitors make a good effort to count precisely, as well as document in the NestWatch comments the perceived situation for the benefit of other researchers. Nonetheless, the small discrepancies did not prevent an analysis. Finally, together with the accurate count of 4 house wren eggs and a corresponding 4 fledglings, one arrives at the sum of 63 fledglings. We had 17 nesting attempts at the 10 boxes.

For context, the six seasons of monitoring (2016 through 2021) saw 77 nest attempts for the 10 boxes, with a sum of fledged at 208 for all species. Of these fledged species, bluebirds accounted for 48, tree swallows for 127, and the balance between house wrens and Carolina wrens. Consequently the 26 bluebird fledglings in 2021 represents 54% of all 48 bluebird fledglings since 2016. This was indeed an outstanding success.

Analysis

Bird populations have been decreasing worldwide, and along with it important ecosystem processes such as pollination and seed dispersal. To date, the number of birds is estimated to have been reduced by up to 25 percent in overall numbers. It is encouraging then when organizations like the VBS help boost those populations. The VBS trains and organizes volunteers to monitor nest boxes. I was fortunate to be able to experience the success of the 2021 bluebird season at Langley Fork Park. As I speculated on the reasons for the success, my investigation consisted of the following areas of review: trail leader management; weather; and food availability.

Last year (2020) was a very disappointing year at Langley Fork Park as there were no successful bluebird nests. Almost every box had tree swallows to start, and later in the season there were a couple of house wren nests. There was only one bluebird attempt, but that attempt was ended by a house wren which poked holes in the bluebird eggs and removed them from the nest. In 2021 we moved a few boxes by a little bit in the beginning of the season. This made all the difference in helping to create a more favorable nest site habitat for the bluebirds. We discussed some possible standard types of actions that could improve the locations for nesting. We decided to move boxes #3, #6, #7, #8, #9 and #10. Afterwards, it was these boxes that the bluebirds embraced, i.e., boxes #3, #6, and #8. Bluebirds also nested in box #7 initially, before a tree swallow evicted the bluebird with the loss of an egg.

Continued on Page 12

Improved Conditions Lead to Significant Increases continued from Page 11

When I started monitoring the bluebird trail, I noted everything I saw, including other nearby wildlife, such as foxes. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was documenting potential predators. But the noticeable issues of predation came from other bird species instead. We lost a male bluebird in Box #8, though we were not sure how it was killed when we found its body in the nest box. Nor did we know what species of bird was responsible for it. We don't know if the bluebird was attacked in the nest box, or sought refuge in it after a struggle outside the box. As noted, we also lost a bluebird nest box with 1 egg when it was taken over by a tree swallow family. Finally, one tree swallow nest was abandoned when its eggs were attacked and damaged. Other than that, we did not have much predation except for some assertive house sparrow attempts at competition in the beginning of the season. To frighten the sparrows away, we successfully used a spooker. Finally, the last aspect of this season's trail management was the quick elimination of an ant infestation in a couple boxes.

Photo 1 by Author: Box 9 Sparrow Spooker. May 5, 2021.



Weather in the form of temperature, precipitation, and snow can clearly play a role in the health and number of birds. With Langley Fork Park being about 3 miles from the Washington DC boundary line, I reviewed historical weather data from Washington, DC from the NOAA and National Weather Service. A precipitation link offers monthly, seasonal, and annual average data back to 1871, plus a comparison to the norm. It shows a significantly wetter season in 2021, and the data can be accessed here: <https://www.weather.gov/media/lwx/climate/dcaprecip.pdf>. A temperature link likewise offers monthly, annual, and seasonal data at <https://www.weather.gov/media/lwx/climate/dcatemps.pdf>. A review of the annual data shows that Washington's seasonal temperatures had not been significantly different than prior years or the norm. For those who live here, the finding may be a surprise as it seemed to be a more mild winter in 2021.

However, when the snow fall data is reviewed, the trend is different. Many news articles can be found on the internet focusing on how little snow precipitated in the 2021 season, and the general trend of less snowfall over the past few years. Indeed, the lack of snowfall in the 2021 winter was quite noticeable and extraordinary for local residents. I did not have to check the records on this to validate the observation, but I did so anyway. The Washington Post edition of 1/14/2021 reported that as of 1/14/2021, it had been 694 days in a row without at least a half inch of snow in Washington (and the season was still ongoing). This is a record. Apart from the next highest records in 1999 and 1973 at 693 and 617 days respectively, the next 7 longest streaks varied from 428 to 357 days. The Washington DC snowfall norm is 13.7 inches for the season. The 2020-2021 (Jul-Jun) was only 5.4 inches. The data may be reviewed at <https://www.weather.gov/media/lwx/climate/dcasnow.pdf>.

Photograph 2 Courtesy of Ako Tzikas: The Author Getting Ready to Check Box 9. May 30, 2021.



A robust bird population will be dependent on an abundant food supply. Food supply too can be correlated to adequate rainfall and soil fertility. While there were no negative determinants on the food supply in 2021, there was a bounty with the 17 year cicada life cycle emergence, en masse, of the cicadas. Consequently, birds had a new and plentiful food source in the environment. Growth rates of the nestlings were healthy and many of the nest boxes were used twice.

Photograph 3 Courtesy of Cindy Morrow: Hungry Bluebird Mouths Wide Open at Box 3. June 21, 2021.

Conclusions

The Virginia Bluebird Society's Langley Fork Park Bluebird Trail had a successful season in 2021, in great part due to a mild winter, active management, and a once in 17 year cicada ample food source. A total of 63 birds (33 Tree Swallows, 26 Bluebirds and 4 House Wrens) fledged at Langley Fork Park Bluebird trail.

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We welcome your written items and artwork (photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box*.

Email your materials to Judy Hall. Please include identifications and photographer for all photos.

The Bluebird Advisor

By Christine Boran and Anne Little



Question: Bluebirds are building a nest in my mailbox (or newspaper tube). It's very inconvenient. What should I do?

Answer: Your bluebirds are probably desperate for a place to raise their young. You can help them!

- Put up a proper nestbox (designed for bluebirds) for them with a baffle to protect the contents from predators.
- Place it as near as possible to the mailbox, with the hole facing east or south.
- Carefully move the nest into the box (preferably with the bluebirds watching you.) They should go into the box and proceed from there.
- Then cover your mailbox/newspaper tube with a door or screen to prevent it from being used for nesting in the future.

NOTE: It is ILLEGAL to destroy the nest of a **native** bird, or to interfere with babies or adults. You ARE allowed to remove the nests of House Sparrows and Starlings, which are not native, and are not protected by federal law.

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President's Box

Greetings fellow Bluebirders!

This 'President's Box' is a first for me. Although I have served as your President since November 2019, I never thought it necessary to take up space with my own thoughts in this truly informative newsletter. (Thank you, Judy Hall for your incredibly hard work putting The Bird Box together!) Indeed, there are many more interesting things to read about within these pages than what I may be thinking.

Except, this time around there have been a couple of important changes to VBS, and an upcoming event that I feel compelled to share with you:

The Bird Box. Since very early in our founding, *The Bird Box* has been a print newsletter. And after many years of offering both a print and a digital copy of the newsletter, your board of directors made the difficult decision to go all digital with this edition – Spring 2022. Increasing print costs and increasing postage costs as well as increasingly unreliable USPS mail service made a compelling argument to discontinue the print copy. The money spent printing and mailing newsletters could more responsibly go toward the various VBS grants we award each year. And besides, the many wonderful color photos Judy squeezes into each issue are so much more enjoyable when viewed online.



President's Box, continued from Page 13

Membership Fees. Since the founding of VBS twenty-six years ago, membership fees have remained static. Increasing costs for the equipment we provide through our several grants meant we would need to either reduce our funding or increase revenue. Your membership fees account for all but a very small portion of monies budgeted for new and refurbished trails, education nest camera boxes, youth and scout grants, and our Your Birder Scholarship. After 26 years, it seemed reasonable to increase the fee structure, which we did effective March 1, 2022. Elsewhere in this newsletter you will find the new structure. You can also access it at <https://www.viriniabluebirds.org/support-vbs>.

Membership Management. After a close look, it became obvious that continuing to rely on snail mail for membership renewals and the annual appeal just wasn't working. It required too much manual labor to try to manage the system, and the response rate was increasingly disappointing. In December, your board of directors decided to implement software made available from a company called Neon One. This software automates all the membership tasks that our administrative assistant previously spent countless hours managing. You will now be able to renew your membership, check the status of your membership, and make donations online. This system brings VBS into the 21st century and I'm confident you'll find it truly user friendly.

Finally, after postponing what would have been the November 2021 celebration of the 25th anniversary of the founding of VBS, I am excited to share with you that we will have a *Twenty-Five Years + One* conference this November. We're planning on hosting it in Woodbridge, and keynote speaker will be Julie Zickefoose, who as it happens was the keynote speaker at the 2004 VBS conference, also held in northern Virginia. Mark your calendars: November 11 & 12. Check the VBS website or follow us on Facebook to get details as they become available.

I want to close by thanking every one of you for your continued support of VBS. The work we do and the environmental education we provide is critically important. We couldn't do what we do without you, our members, and our volunteers. Thank you!

Happy bluebirding,

- vkg

Virginia Bluebird Society's Young Birder Scholarship

We're all hopeful summer 2022 will see things return to some kind of normal, including resumed opportunities for young birders of Virginia to get outdoors, discover more about birds, and go birding with others in their age group. To help in that endeavor, Virginia Bluebird Society offers a scholarship up to a maximum of \$500 to a young person interested in attending a summer camp, workshop, training program, or another birding related activity.

Do you know a young person for whom such an experience might be the perfect antidote to too much time spent in COVID shutdown the past couple of years?

Wondering where to search for the antidote? Here are three resources to get them started:

- American Birding Association <http://www.aba.org/camps>
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology <https://ebird.org/about/resources/for-young-birders/young-birders-event>
- Hog Island Audobon Camp <https://hogisland.audobon.org/programs>

Looking for help paying for the antidote? Information and an application are available [here](#).



Virginia Rail, photographed by Baxter Beamer, a recipient of the Young Birder Scholarship, in 2018 at Camp Chiricahua in Arizona.

Mark Your Calendars

- March 26** VBS Board meeting via Zoom. Email Valerie Gaffney for information.
- April 1** Begin monitoring bluebird nest boxes.
- April 15** Remove ventilation plugs from nest boxes.
- May 1** Summer 2021 Young Birder Scholarship applications due. Details at <https://www.virginiabluebirds.org>
- May 30** Deadline for submitting articles, photos, ideas, and artwork for Summer newsletter
- June 25** Annual Purple Martin Field Day, Louisa County; see page 2 for information.
- November 12-13** VBS Biennial Conference. See page 1.

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: Join online at [Virginia Bluebird Society \(neoncrm.com\)](http://www.virginiabluebirds.org) or you can still use snail mail; send your name, address, phone number and email address along with a check, to:

Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg VA 22401

1 Year Individual or Family	\$25
3 Years Individual or Family	\$70
1 Year Sustaining	\$60
1 Year Endowment	\$25
Sponsor a nesting box	\$50

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 May 30 to be considered for the Summer newsletter.

Please include:

- ◆ *your contact information,*
- ◆ *your location, and*
- ◆ *original photos.*

Please send photos separately, in jpeg format if at all possible, with identification of people and birds in photos, and name of photographer.



The Virginia Bluebird Society is an affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society. Supporting [NABS](http://www.virginiabluebirds.org) provides support for Bluebirds everywhere.