



The Bird Box

Summer 2010

An Appeal

Dear VBS Members,

This is your newsletter, and we really could use your input. If you have stories or incidents that you want to share with other members, please send a short paragraph or two and we will help you write your article or help you edit it. This edition of *The Bird Box* is only four pages long because we've had a drought in article submissions this season. Won't you please help by e-mailing your ideas and stories to our Editor, **Pallav Das**, at dpallav@gmail.com?

Thanks,
Anne Little, President

Do You Need Boxes?

Are you in need of nest boxes for your VBS trail? VBS occasionally has an inventory of box units from Scouts or other sources available for use on monitored trails on public lands. We plan to keep a list of people requesting boxes. If you will need new boxes, let us know, and we can add you to the list. Please e-mail **Carmen Bishop** at cjbish@aol.com and note the number of boxes and where they will be installed. They are complete units on poles with predator guards. There is no charge for the boxes, but delivery is not provided.

Strange Goings-on in Danville

Some curious incidents were reported this past spring in Pittsylvania County. For instance, **Vickie Fuquay**, the County Coordinator, says she has had monitors bringing in nests from their trails that they thought were House Sparrows' nests but proved to be, in fact, those of bluebirds. She had them put the nests back into the boxes, and thankfully the bluebirds laid their eggs.

For nesting material, some bluebirds used silk flowers from the graves nearby. Consistent with the quirky nature of things this year, some of the nests even sported purple Easter basket grass. Feathers showed up in the nests -- just a few, though, not like a Tree Swallow nest. This keeps the eggs warm in what these birds know will be fairly cold weather. Vickie never imagined that there would be trash in a bluebird nest, but that too was found this past spring. One female bluebird even had a cigarette butt in her nest along with her six beautiful blue eggs.

Bluebirds are known to use chickadees' nests, and that was a common observation. In fact, in Fairfax one bluebird laid four eggs in such a nest, added a bit of grass, and that was that. What shocked Vickie and her monitors was something else. One day a bewildered teacher called her about brown speckled eggs in one of the bluebird nests. Vickie went to see the box after work and could hardly believe what she saw. It was a typical bluebird nest made with pine needles. But a chickadee had taken over the nest and sat on top of six eggs, with no fine grass to finish and just two gray feathers to give it some semblance of comfort. Vickie saw the adult female leave the nest, and it continued fussing at them the whole time the box was being checked. There was no trace of the typical moss or fur that a chickadee would use, and the eggs were lined up two by two in two straight rows. Now that's what I call a fair exchange!

Vickie is now telling her monitors to expect the unexpected and to call her before they pull any nests out of any of the Danville nest boxes! As she said, "I have had three training sessions, and this spring has gone against everything I taught them!"

– *Barbara Chambers*

The Bird Box

Issue 12.1

Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society
www.virginiabluebirds.org

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vbs@virginiabluebirds.org

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

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

Youth and Scout Grants

Spread the Word!

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. The project involves building the complete nest box unit with both predator guards and pole for VBS to use on trails on public lands. The youth would not need to install the boxes, and VBS will provide a mentor if needed. Consequently, no construction experience is required.

Why is building bluebird boxes for VBS a great project for youth?

* It is a hands-on, interesting project that any youth (usually ages 13 to 18) can do with appropriate assistance.

* Organizing and leading a workday provides great leadership experience.

* The project is in-depth enough to provide a sense of accomplishment, but short enough to have a reasonable, finite time frame.

* The finished product is physical and "permanent."

* The youth learn about the fascinating life of bluebirds.

* Bluebirds and other cavity nesters will be grateful!

E-Newsletter

Over half of the membership of VBS now receives *The Bird Box* electronically instead of a hard copy in the mail.

The advantages are:

* Save money and resources (the printed newsletter costs almost \$5 per member per year).

* Saves time and work (Our newsletter is mailed by volunteers).

* If you have a color printer, you can print your own copy in color.

* You can access the newsletter anytime via our website.

* You can share our newsletter with others in your organization or with friends.

* It eliminates problem of newsletters getting lost or mutilated in the mail.

If you would like to switch to receiving your newsletter electronically, please e-mail vbs@virginiabluebirds.org. You can try it for an issue, and you can always switch back to hard-copy if you want.

Prevent Tick-borne Diseases

As we monitor bluebird boxes for the health and safety of our feathered friends, we need to be mindful of our own health and take precautions against tick-borne diseases. Ticks are often found in tall grass that we may walk through to get to nest boxes. In Virginia we need to be careful about two tricky diseases: Lyme disease from the deer tick and Rocky Mountain Spotted-Fever from the dog tick.

To keep yourself safe, follow these precautions:

- * Check yourself, children and pets for ticks because the ticks need to be attached for several hours to days to transmit disease. Also, check your clothing before you put it in the laundry hamper.
- * Wear light-colored clothing so it is easier to see ticks, and check immediately after walking through vegetation.
- * Try to avoid brushing against vegetation.
- * Use insect repellent with a high level (about 40 percent) of DEET, and reapply as necessary.
- * Tuck your pants legs into tall socks.
- * Mow a path to nest boxes if necessary. I have even relocated nest boxes so that it wasn't necessary to cross an unmowed hayfield.

You can find more information in a brochure you can download from the Virginia Department of Health brochure at www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/DEE/vectorborne/documents/Tick%20Brochure.pdf.

– Carmen Bishop

Owl Story

Wesley *The Owl* is endearing, much like *Charlotte's Web*, but Wesley was alive, studied, and loved for almost 20 years by Stacy O'Brian, a biologist. She had volunteered to adopt Wesley when he was four days old. O'Brian recounts his life with love, humor, respect, and detail. Animal lovers, teenagers, and oldsters alike will be enthralled by the commitment and communication between a human being and an owl.

Wesley The Owl is the most informative and easy-reading animal-insight work I have reviewed for *The Bird Box*. It provides numerous instances of "scientific methods" and innovative research in animal sciences, specifically behavior. Who would think of performing microscopic surgery to determine the sex of finches and the need for mouth-to-beak resuscitation? And who would know that one Barn Owl, in captivity, would consume 28,000 mice? Fascinating reading!

The book ends with a section titled, "Some Things You Might Not Know About Barn Owls," a treasure trove for owl lovers and others. The paperback sells for \$15.00, and it's cheaper online.

– Kay Fry

Chicks With Different Fathers?

Question: Will a female bluebird mate with another male while she is laying eggs? Could the chicks in one nest have different fathers?

Answer: We think of the bluebirds on our trails and in our backyards almost as our special summer children, but they are not innocents. The idea behind nesting and egg laying is to raise nestlings who can survive and pass on the parents' genes. So the female looks around for a male who is the best provider, the most colorful, and the most available! And the males, who are hard wired to pass on their genes, are very available. This makes it easy to "fool around." The female will mate with any available male, and the male will mate with multiple females, in order to accomplish this all-important gene transfer.

So, yes, there will often be multiple fathers represented in any nest of eggs. It all depends on whether the dominant, first male can stay with his mate at all times, in order to keep her from accepting another male!

Nature interprets life and the notion of survival in various ways. We should not judge birds using our moral codes; that's called anthropomorphizing.

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.

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.

Fall Board Meeting and Workshop

The Fall Board Meeting will be held Saturday, November 6, 11 a.m. - 1 p.m., in Fredericksburg at the home of Anne and Carl Little, 726 William St., 22401. All are invited.

Afterward we will hold a box-building workshop, 1 p.m. - 3 p.m. We will assemble 40 to 50 cedar nest boxes on poles with two predator guards. VBS sells these boxes for \$60 as a fundraiser. If you would like to help, or to learn how to do a box-building workshop, please join us.

For further information, please call Anne Little at 540-207-4298.

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



Meetings and Training Sessions

County Coordinators' Meeting. Saturday, July 24, 10 a.m.
Culpeper County. Contact Barbara Chambers - 703 978-6609.

County Coordinators' Meeting. Saturday, September 18, 10 a.m.
Grayson County. Contact Barbara Chambers - 703 978-6609.

Occoquan NWR Friend's Festival. Saturday, October 9, 10 - 4.
Woodbridge. VBS table for bluebirds. 13950 Dawson Beach Road.

VBS Fall Board Meeting. Saturday, November 6, 11 a.m.
726 William St, Fredericksburg, VA 22401.

Box Building Workshop. Saturday, November 6, 1 p.m.
726 William St, Fredericksburg, VA 22401. Contact 540 207-4298.

Blue Bird Lecture by Anne Little. Saturday, November 13, 9:30 a.m.
Ginter Botanical Gardens, Richmond.

Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

**DATED
MATERIAL**