

The Bird Box

Summer 2014 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

Blackberries and Bluebirds – The threat is Real!

Article and photo by Doug Rogers



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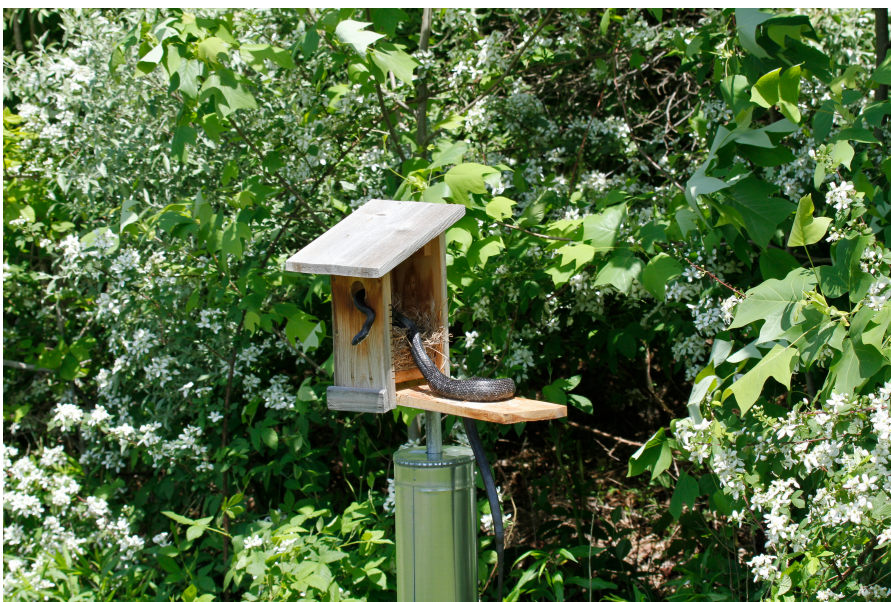
We have been monitoring bluebird boxes for the past seven years. Only once have we had a nest box attacked by a black snake and that box was mounted on a 4" wooden pole with no snake guard.

We are now monitoring boxes that are on three parcels of private land. The boxes have to be set back from the area that is mowed. To reach more sunlight, blackberry vines, maple saplings and Autumn Olive have steadily grown toward our boxes.

I did not believe that a blackberry vine would support the weight of a black snake; also it seemed unreasonable that a snake would traverse it with all of the stickers. WRONG!!

We had a box with five babies that were within a few days of fledging. To reach the box – above the snake guard - the snake had to stretch over two feet from the blackberry vine. The threat is real. During our regular monitoring round I found the snake in the box; it refused to leave. It showed no fear of me. I had to prod it out with a stick.

We have now cleared all blackberry vines and other vegetation



within a four-foot radius of all of our boxes.

Note the bulge in the snake's body: five baby bluebirds.

Note how far the blackberry vines are from the box.

Meet the Monitor*

Article and Photo BY CHRISTINA WOODSON

Monitors: Edie and Nick Banner

Trail: Meadow Farm Park, Henrico

CW: How did you begin monitoring Bluebird trails?

EB&NB: We volunteered for the Nature Conservancy in Florida, monitoring Scrub Jays and Bluebirds. When we moved to Virginia we joined the Virginia Bluebird Society and the Audubon Society and wanted to do more (than just be members). The thing that interested us about this project was that it involved a regular commitment.

CW: What is special to you about your trail?

EB&NB: We monitor the trail as a team, so we feel as though we are a family with these bird families. (Edie:) I like that we get to witness the whole cycle, it's good when you see a new life beginning, but it's bittersweet when you lose a bird to predators.



(Nick:) Plenty of people stop us when we're out monitoring the trail and ask us about Bluebirds. Of course they share stories of their backyard birds with us too!

CW: Is there something you'd like to share about Bluebirds and other cavity nesters?

EB&NB: It's such a relaxing and interesting activity; however even though Bluebirds appear very sweet, when they want to defend their nest they will really go for you when you check their box! When the cicadas came (in 2013) we saw lots of evidence they had been a popular item in the nestlings diet!

*CW note: This article is the first in a regular series profiling some of the dedicated volunteers who monitor and maintain Virginia Bluebird Society trails around the state. In June the Banners relocated to Florida for a career opportunity. Before leaving, they recruited and trained three new volunteers to take over their trails. The Virginia Bluebird Society greatly appreciates their dedication and service and hopes they will continue to enjoy similar opportunities in their new community!

Bluebird School Program Kickoff at Woolwine Elementary School

Article and photos by Christina Boran

February 28 represented kickoff of the bluebird nesting season at Patrick County's Woolwine Elementary School. The school had just received a nestcam bluebird box which had been provided by a grant from the Virginia Bluebird Society.

Working with the lead science teacher, Katie Slusher, Vickie Fuquay and I joined forces to conduct a bluebird program for the school. The program was done in two sessions for the students and their teachers in grades Kindergarten through fifth grade. There were approximately 150 students in attendance. The program had been in its planning stages since November 2013.

The grade level Standards of Learning (SOLs) were provided and studied by both of us in advance for the program. The children learned the history of the bluebird – how the species teetered on the brink of extinction in the 1970's - courtship and the full nesting cycle, food sources, preferred habitat and risk of predation. We discussed how the fledging bluebirds make their first flights into the world, the joy of watching the nesting birds and the importance of monitoring the nest boxes.



Included was education on other native cavity-nesting species that use the nest boxes. Information was shared of the continued challenge and the importance of keeping the non-native invasive house sparrow from reproducing in the nest boxes.

Bird nests and eggs cannot be legally handled or kept by anyone without federal and state salvage permits. VBS has these permits. A collection of abandoned nests and unhatched eggs of all the native cavity-nesters that use the nest boxes were displayed for the children.

The whole school—students, teachers, and staff—are observing for the first time an active nesting cycle of bluebirds from the video feed to the school's cafeteria. The first bluebird hatching took place on May 4. I went to the school the day following our program to answer questions about the



activity in the nestcam box during the children's lunch periods. Teacher Katie Slusher is using the activity in the nestcam box weekly to teach her 4th grade students how to document their observations. A VBS Weekly Monitoring form was provided as part of her science program at the school. Everyone at the school was looking forward to watching the development and fledging of 5 bluebird babies on or near May 22nd, when the chicks were 18 days old.

VBS UPDATES

Carmen Bishop

Data Entry: There must be an app for that! Our paper forms for monitoring and compiling data work just fine, but VBS is going to explore options for electronic data entry. For instance, I know of one school with bluebird boxes that has a QR code for each box. Do you have any suggestions as we move forward with this project? Please send them to Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com. In the meantime, please monitor your boxes weekly, keep good records, and then at the end of the season in August or September, add up your fledglings and fill out the Trail Annual Summary Form and send it to your County Coordinator. County Coordinators will compile the trail data and send it to the new data manager, Ann Dunn at 1717 Yorktown Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22901 or add7k@virginia.edu.

Budget: The VBS Board met in March and approved the budget for the next fiscal year (March 1 - Feb 28, 2015). We are thankful for everyone who joined or contributed to VBS. As a result, we have grant monies available (see below). Please contact us if you have a bluebird project that fits in one of the grant categories and need financial assistance.

Grants: VBS has grant funds available. We have four general categories of grants: school nestcam grants, other school grants, youth and scout grants, and new and refurbished grants.

School Nestcam Grants: Schools receive the camera, nest box and predator guards. Contact Vickie Fuquay at vickiefuquay@comcast.net.

Other School Grants: Schools receive funds to build new nest boxes or refurbish old ones, or other bird-friendly habitat improvements such as water features or native plants. Contact Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com.

Youth and Scout Grants: VBS reimburses the cost of materials and the grantee builds nest boxes with predator guards which will be placed on public lands.

Contact Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com if you are a youth or scout and would like to build nest boxes, or if you have a trail that needs some boxes.

New and Refurbished Grants: These grants are for VBS members and their trails on public lands. VBS reimburses the cost of materials.

Contact Doug Rogers at doug5996@gmail.com

Read more about grant opportunities at <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org/about-vbs/grant-programs/>

Speakers: Would you like someone to speak to your group about bluebirds? We have many people around the state who are knowledgeable about bluebirds and would be happy to present to your group. Contact Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com.

Questions? Do you have questions about bluebirds, monitoring or VBS? We are happy to help.

Please contact us! Our contact information is on the website, including County Coordinators and the State Coordinator, Christine Boran.

Newsletter of the
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www.virginiabluebirds.org

Our email address is:
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If you have a new e-mail address, or
have recently changed it, please let us
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We welcome your written items and
artwork (photos and drawings) for *The
Bird Box!*
E-mail your materials to Doug Rogers.

Bluebird Boxes at Bandy Field – A New Monitor's Experiences

Article and Photos by Stacey Harwood

I have been monitoring the Bluebird Boxes at Bandy Field since mid-April. I graduated from the Virginia Master Naturalist program this year, and decided the box monitoring would be a good way to get started on my volunteer hours. As a child, I was never one to protect young fledglings or nurse injured animals back to health. I'm definitely learning a lot about the songbirds and nature as I go!

Bandy Field's Box #4 has seen some drama. On May 4th, I came up to the box and found a putrefied house wren on top of the snake guard. I took some crime-scene photos.



On May 12th, I found a freshly-hatched chickadee with its head caught in the noel guard. When I first came up, I thought it was dead, but when I opened the box it moved its little wing slightly. I gently got it free (with very shaky hands!) and put it back in the box with its 3 siblings. Good news! On May 18th, it was thriving along with the other 3! (Photo at right). I named it Miracle and the siblings are Chick, A, and Dee :) Box #4 was empty when I checked it on May 25th. The four

chickadees must have fledged!

The dog people at Bandy are so incredibly nice and appreciative of VBS and the park in general. It usually takes me much more than an hour to monitor the boxes because there is a loving dog and owner just near the next box! For a nice report about the Richmond community's love for Bandy Field, watch this <http://wtvr.com/2014/04/24/hero-charles-price/>.



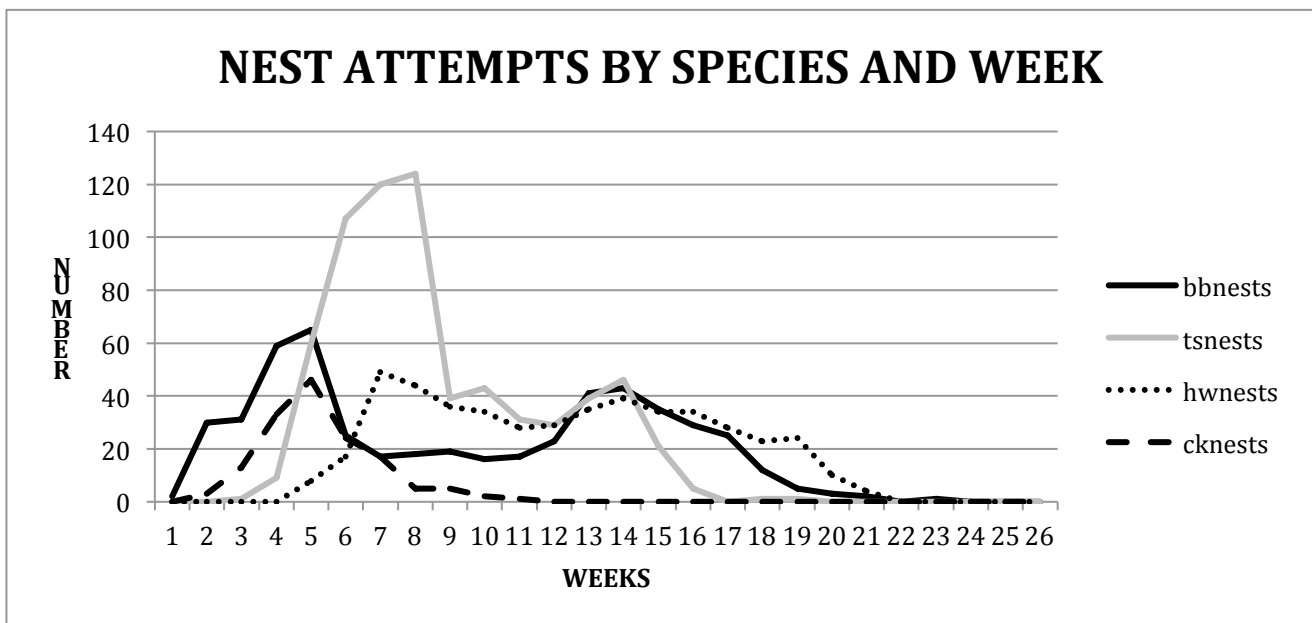
Comparisons of Nest Attempts by Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, House Wrens and Chickadees

Carl T. Hansen

The competition for resources needed for successful reproduction is a subject that has long interested me. This article will focus on nesting attempts by four species: bluebird, house wren, tree swallow and Carolina chickadee. (For purposes of this article a “nest attempt” is defined as the first observed physical attempt of a nest being formed.) This subject is difficult to explore. I seized the opportunity when I began monitoring bluebird nest box trails in 2006. This activity quickly expanded and I began to monitor 13 trails with 374 boxes. The data presented in this article represent averages of observations of those trails from 2006 to 2013.

Trails were chosen to ensure variation in habitat which ranged from groomed urban to rugged rural. The number of boxes per trail depended upon the suitability of habitat for that trail. All new trails were usually established in the previous fall to allow establishment of territory well before nesting season started. Monitoring began the nearest Sunday to St. Patrick’s Day and continued for 26 weeks. Each trail and all boxes within each trail were monitored weekly. The data recorded included whether the box was empty or occupied, the species, the status of the nest, the number of the eggs, the number and status of the young and finally if the young had fledged.

A total of 1,819 nests were recorded. The distribution by time is shown in the accompanying chart. Each of the four species has a characteristic pattern as shown. Bluebirds showed a bimodal pattern with two peaks, one about Week 5 and second one at Week 14. A single peak characterized the nesting patterns of chickadees and tree swallows; while that for house wrens tended to be more spread out. The bluebirds seemed to be most challenged of the four species. This is because Carolina chickadees and tree swallows compete with bluebirds for nest space during the first nesting; house wrens compete with them during the second nesting. The reason or reasons why these patterns occur will be discussed in a future article.



A Special Thank You to our Endowment, Sustaining and Box Sponsor Members

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Intervene or Put Me Back?

Maureen Eiger

Ok, so you rescued a bird. Yes, you will need to call someone for assistance, but first calm your bird and yourself. Find a box. Punch a few air holes in the sides. Make a cloth or tissue “nest” in the box. Then place the bird in the “nest” and close the box. Make the call.

Wild Bird Rehabilitators want bird parents to feed their own babies. After all “Mother knows best.” We also try to re-nest uninjured baby birds so we don’t interfere with a bird’s breeding cycle. Experience shows that bird parents do feed babies in makeshift nests reattached to tree branches, bushes, gutters, and even tree cavity sections duct taped to another tree.

Featherless baby birds need to be kept warm. So add a warm (microwaved) rice sock or Hot Hands pack near but not touching the bird. And yes, it is tempting to want to feed that helpless begging little bird, but resist! Bird diets are specific to each species; liquids and food fed improperly can cause a bird to aspirate, get sick or die. It is illegal to keep a wild bird. So please understand, the proper care and correct diet for a wild bird is not found on the Internet no matter what the website states. Do not fret; you will be transferring the bird to a qualified person so they can feed it correctly with the appropriate diet. If you have the desire to rescue and feed baby birds, become a volunteer with a Federally Permitted Bird Rehabber; we can always use the help!

Where do you find a Rehabilitator's phone number? Federally Permitted Bird Rehabbers are listed on the Virginia DGIF web site by City and County of residence:

<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/injured/rehabilitators.asp> or call your local Veterinarian. Look up some names now and be prepared, as baby bird season will soon be upon us.

Maureen Eiger is a State and Federally Permitted Wild Bird Rehabilitator, Board Member of Wildlife Care Alliance and The Roanoke Valley Bird Club and a very curious birder.

How To Join

Send your name, address, phone number and/or email address along with a check for \$10 for an individual with e-mailed Newsletter (\$15 for print Newsletter) or \$15 for a family with e-mailed Newsletter (\$20 for a print Newsletter) to:

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