

# The Bird Box

Summer 2016 Newsletter of the  
Virginia Bluebird Society [www.virginiabluebirds.org](http://www.virginiabluebirds.org)



## Why We Get Goopy Over Bluebirds

By Bet Zimmerman Smith – Webmaster for this outstanding web site about bluebirds: <http://www.sialis.org>

Submitted by Christine Boran, State Coordinator. Reprinted with permission

My husband and sister have both asked me, “Why do people get so goopy over bluebirds?” I think there are a number of reasons why we become fascinated and even addicted to this charming creature.

Bluebirds are beautiful. Their leisurely and buoyant flight pattern offers a slow-motion view of cerulean blue feathers, making it seem as though the male “carries the sky on his back.” (Henry David Thoreau)

Bluebirds are considered harbingers of spring. As WL Dawson penned in 1903, “How the waiting countryside thrills with joy when Bluebird brings us the first word of returning spring.” John Burroughs wrote in 1880, “The bluebird enjoys the preeminence of being the first bit of color that cheers our

northern landscape.” Although they may overwinter in colder climates, they actively begin house hunting in February and March, signaling better weather ahead.

Bluebirds are associated with hope, happiness and things we love. W. L. Dawson wrote “Reflecting heaven from his back and the ground from his breast, he floats between sky and earth like the winged voice of hope.” They have probably appeared in more songs, poems and literature than any other bird. In 1909, Maurice Maeterlinck published *The Blue Bird*, a fairy tale about the bluebird of happiness. In 1934, tenor Jan Peerce made the Bluebird of Happiness a nationwide hit. It’s hard not to smile when hearing about “Mr. Bluebird on My Shoulder” from the song Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah in the Disney film, *Song of the South*. In 1939, in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland sang plaintively that “Somewhere over the rainbow, bluebirds fly.” One of the most famous WWII-era pop classics was a song by Nat Burton: “There’ll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover, Tomorrow, just you wait and see, There’ll be love and laughter and peace ever after, Tomorrow when the world is free.”

Bluebirds are unique to North America. Despite the reference to England in Nat Burton’s song, bluebirds are only found on our continent - thus we can call them our own.

*Continued page 2*

The Bird Box	
Inside this issue	
Item	Page
Designer Bluebirds	3
Feeding Bluebirds	3
School News	4
First Egg Dates	6
Bluebird Advisor	7
How to Join	8
Send an Article	8

Bluebirds remind us of simpler times. They were not only abundant in the tunes of our youth, but also in the countryside in the days before suburban sprawl. Most of us can clearly remember our first view of that flash of blue. Because they have become less common, it is even more thrilling to see one now.

Bluebirds are family oriented. The courting male dotes on the female, waving his wings, enticing her to select a nest site, and offering her treats. He courageously guards the box during nest construction. He delivers food to the incubating female, and participates equally in feeding nestlings and fledglings. Both parents will die defending their young from House Sparrows. After fledging, young birds tend to stay with their parents, begging for food, and sometimes altruistically helping tend to siblings in a second brood.

Their song is enchanting. The velvety undertones are "...so soft and gentle; they sing to no one save themselves. Not loud and boastful like the mocker; not full of chatter like the purple martin. The bluebird song is a kind and personal 'I love you' that one must be close and quiet to hear" (Kenny Kleinpeter). Clyde Todd (1940) said their song, "...like the gentle murmur of a flowing brook in soothing cadence, awakens a sense of well-being and content in each responsive listener."

Bluebirds are friendly. They seem to almost enjoy human company. They display no fear of nesting near human habitation. They tolerate monitoring of their nests as we peek in to see their fuzzy-headed hatchlings. They quickly learn an association, whether it be a whistle or a banging door, with a mealworm feeder being filled, and instantly show up to investigate. If we do not fill the feeder in a timely manner, they may follow us around the yard, warbling away.

Bluebirds do no harm. In the days before pesticides, farmers put up nestboxes around their fields, as they were aware that bluebirds eat many insects, and the fruit they eat during the winter is not of the cultivated variety. While bluebirds will compete for nesting sites and defend their own abode, they do not maliciously attack other birds, eggs or nests.

Attracting bluebirds is a challenging hobby. Since the number of natural cavities has dwindled and competition from exotic species like House Sparrows and starlings is severe, bluebirds depend on humans to survive and thrive. Because of this, we feel an almost parental sense of ownership and satisfaction when we enable successful nesting. Bluebirding taps into problem solving skills and creativity, scientific curiosity, and a love of nature and the outdoors.

Bluebirds remind us of both the bad and good humans are capable of. Almost all impacts to bluebird populations, both negative and positive, have been directly associated with human activity. On the negative side, there is the introduction of House Sparrows and starlings, pesticide use, and loss of open space. But on the positive side, grass roots conservation efforts by individuals and groups across the continent are a shining example of the power we all have to make a difference.

# Designer Bluebirds

Patricia O'Brien

I am a monitor for Highland Burial Park in Danville Virginia. I tell people that my social life leaves a lot to be desired since my favorite thing to do is hang out in the cemetery with my bluebirds. Highland trail was established in 2006, one of the first trails to be installed on public cemetery land in Danville, and now has thirteen bluebird nest boxes.

Over the years our bluebirds have adapted to cemetery life, evolving from traditional nesting material to including some silk flower petals and an occasional strand of ribbon. To my surprise, when checking nest box #4, I found the nest cup lined with colorful silk flower petals, with five little blue eggs nestled in the petals. It was so beautiful that I want to share the photograph with all of you. As of May 8th, Mother's Day, I have activity in all thirteen boxes, all bluebirds and if all fledged there will be 53 baby blues from the first round of nesting!

Happy Bluebird Day!



# Feeding Bluebirds

Vickie Fuquay, VBS Vice President, and Pittsylvania County Trail Coordinator

Many of us bluebird enthusiasts put up our bluebird house, make sure it is protected with predator guards and even provide water for our beautiful blues. Some of us even keep a supply of mealworms in our fridge for our backyard blues. This is the case at my house, and I have even had success feeding the bluebirds from my hand. Don't stop there! Bluebirds eat a variety of seed, nuts, berries and suet as well. I have found they enjoy any food source high in fat and protein that they do not have to shell. With beaks made to hunt for and eat insects and berries, their beaks are not built to crack seed like cardinals, finches, titmice and chickadees.

To teach bluebirds they can eat other types of food you need to be a little crafty at first until they get the knack. First try the mealworms - they are like candy to the eastern bluebirds that they simply cannot resist. Once you have them coming to a dish for mealworms near their house, try adding a few sunflower kernels or even shelled sunflower minis to the mealworms you leave. You can also try a little chopped up suet. They will go for the mealworms of course and gobble them up first. As they return to the familiar dish and the mealworms are gone, they will taste and find out your other offerings are delicious as well.



*Continued page 4*



Once they learn what they can eat, they will be visiting your other feeders right alongside the rest of your common songbirds.

At my house, they are feeding regularly from my suet plug feeder, my tail prop woodpecker suet feeder, my feeders with shelled sunflower seeds, and my platform feeder where they pick the pecans out of a mixture. They love my suet nuggets in a peanut feeder and even peanuts. I have observed them feeding their nestlings suet, shelled

sunflower as well as the mealworms. I buy hot-pepper no melt suet by the case all summer long and go through much more of it in the summer than winter, as all the birds are feeding their babies from Vickie's baby food buffet. (The advantage of the hot pepper suet is birds love it, and I am not bothered by squirrels or raccoons.)



**Bluebird parents feeding babies**

**Photos by Lexi Meadows**



## School News

From Kate Sydney, North Arlington:

Glebe Elementary School in North Arlington is excited to have its own Bluebird Trail! Our campus hosts a total of 5 nest boxes, 4 our which were provided by the Virginia Bluebird Society, and the fifth provided by Glebe's PTA. While we were still waiting for the appearance of the Eastern Bluebirds, the boxes provided nesting spaces for two families of Carolina Chickadees.

The box provided by our PTA contains a video camera which has allowed the Glebe community a close look at the nest of a Carolina Chickadee. Students watched as 6 eggs were incubated, and unfortunately, as a wren entered the nest and removed one of the 6 eggs! The remaining 5 eggs hatched on April 23. Even though the hatching occurred on a Saturday, students were able to watch from their devices at home as the hatchlings had their first feeding and as the mother ate the shells of the hatchlings.

Kate Sydney, the fifth grade teacher at Glebe who has been helping with this project, was able to tweet the hatching on Twitter and share the video on Facebook as it happened, allowing the whole school community to be in on the action.



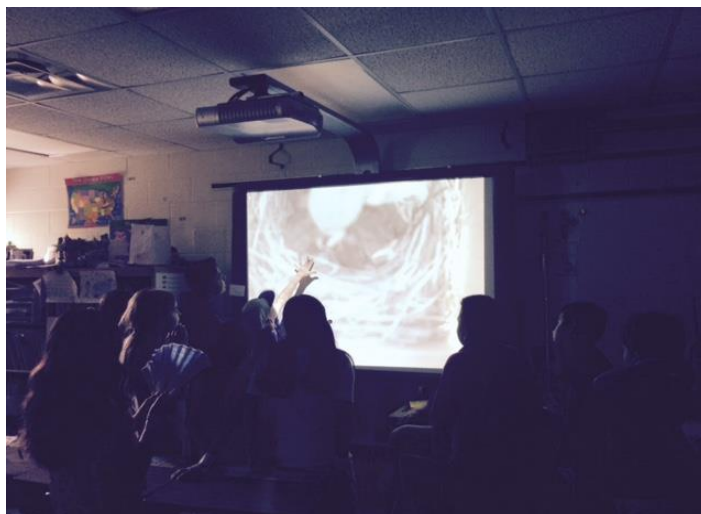
From Lee and Jane Hesler, Chesterfield County:

In 2014, Dotty Rilee, an ESOL teacher at A. M. Davis Elementary School in Chesterfield County received a grant from the Virginia Bluebird Society to install a nest box cam. Dotty is a member of the Pocahontas Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists. Several members of the chapter helped Dotty and her students install the box. It was very exciting when a chickadee built a nest in the box that first season and began laying eggs, but ended in tragedy when a house sparrow moved in. Only a few staff were watching at the time and we quickly took the box down for the rest of the season.

In 2015, it was with concern that we decided to reinstall the box. Some repairs were needed and the box did not get installed until very late spring. We were cautiously optimistic when Dotty called to tell us a bluebird pair had found the box and were building a nest. We worried that the house sparrows might return but there were soon 5 eggs laid and the bluebirds successfully raised 5 hatchlings to fledging. Mrs. Davis, a second grade teacher, was excited that her class saw the fledglings and watched as the parents hung around to see their children practice flying. It was an amazing educational opportunity which we think the students will long remember.



Mrs. Davis with the school's Nature Buddies club



Students watching the bluebirds feeding the hatchlings

*Information on VBS school nest cam grants can be found on our web site [www.virginiabluebirds.org](http://www.virginiabluebirds.org) under About VBS - Grant Programs.*

# First Egg Dates Vary Across Virginia

Christine Boran, State Coordinator

Thank you to those County Coordinators who sent in the first laid egg dates this year. I asked for any species that was the first in egg laying, but all were bluebirds. Soon after, the other species followed, including the Brown-headed Nuthatch! I was not able to list every single county, but this is a good representation across the state. Many told me they were surprised at some of the earlier dates while opening boxes for the first time and finding completed nests with eggs. Many could only give estimates. I included the confirmed first egg dates. Though we don't do this every year, it's helpful to see the

differences across the counties from time to time. It helps us understand how the birds rely on variables such as temperature, food availability, mountain elevation, and climate change.

County	1st Egg	Coordinator
Pittsylvania	3/13	Fuquay
Chesterfield	3/14	Hesler
Mecklenburg	3/16	Keim
James City	3/16	Lockwood
Spotsylvania	3/17	Finegan
Patrick	3/19	Boran
Fredericksburg City	3/19	Little
Henrico	3/20	Woodson
Gloucester	3/20	Walker
Westmoreland	3/21	Narney
Henry	3/22	Haley
Grayson	3/23	Kerns
Nelson	3/23	Colgate
Culpeper	3/23	Kitts
Fairfax	3/27	Johnson
Albemarle	3/27	Dunn
Orange	3/27	Browning
Buchanan	3/29	Mayhorn
Hanover	3/30	Dorgan
Floyd	3/30	Boran
Prince William	3/31	Hindman
Pulaski	3/31	Hansen
Shenandoah	4/5	Harrison
Highland	4/6	Bell



*For complete data on monitored bluebird trails, go to our web site, and look under About Bluebirds - Nest Box Trail Statistics.*

Our email address is:  
[vbs@virginiabluebirds.org](mailto:vbs@virginiabluebirds.org)

If you have a new email address, or have  
Recently changed it, please let us know.

**Board of Directors**

**Cathy Hindman, President**

(h) 703-590-0715  
email: [samhindman@verizon.net](mailto:samhindman@verizon.net)

**Vickie Fuquay, Vice President**

(h) 434-822-0930  
email: [vickiefuquay@comcast.net](mailto:vickiefuquay@comcast.net)

**Lexi Meadows, Vice President**

(h) 434-251-4407  
email: [meadows9@fairpoint.net](mailto:meadows9@fairpoint.net)

**Mary Lohman, Treasurer**

(h) 703-280-1081  
email: [lmlohman@yahoo.com](mailto:lmlohman@yahoo.com)

**Anne Little, Secretary**

(h) 540-207-4298  
email: [thegate@cox.net](mailto:thegate@cox.net)

**Ann Dunn, Data Manager**

(h) 434-296-3496  
email: [add7k@virginia.edu](mailto:add7k@virginia.edu)

**Paul Davis**

(h) 434-361-0141  
email: [davis0138@aol.com](mailto:davis0138@aol.com)

**Earl Morris**

(h) 540-776-1640  
email: [emorris@ntelos.net](mailto:emorris@ntelos.net)

**Doug Rogers**

(h) 434-973-7634  
email: [doug5996@gmail.com](mailto:doug5996@gmail.com)

**Carmen Bishop, Past President**

(h) 703-764-9628  
email: [cjbish@aol.com](mailto:cjbish@aol.com)

**Christine Boran, State Coordinator**

(h) 276-930-9963  
email: [woolwinehouse@gmail.com](mailto:woolwinehouse@gmail.com)

**Judy Hall, The Bird Box Editor**

(h) 804-790-0437  
email: [carijuwa@hotmail.com](mailto:carijuwa@hotmail.com)

We welcome your written items and artwork  
(photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box!*  
Email your materials to Judy Hall.

---

## The Bluebird Advisor

*by Anne Little*

---

### Dear Bluebird Advisor,

Some of the donated wood we're using to build our houses is fresh-cut pine. It's been stored for a while, and mold has gotten into all the boards. In your opinion, is this wood safe to use? Will the mold repel/injure the adult birds or the nestlings? What if we wash the wood with bleach to kill the mold?

### John

### Dear John,

I would not use this wood. You are right - the mold is a problem for the tiny chicks breathing in the box. If you wash the wood with chlorine bleach you will still have chlorine in the wood and chlorine fumes will come off of the wood for a long time. Remember - these chicks are fragile and inside a box that gets a lot of heat. Toxic fumes coming off of the wood are trapped inside the box and could make breathing difficult for the chicks. The first rule of birding is "do no harm." If you are putting out nest boxes to attract nesting birds, they should be of the highest quality that you can make, or don't make them. Better none than poor quality that harms the birds. Thank you for your question.

### The Bluebird Advisor

Send your questions to [vbs@virginiabluebirds.org](mailto:vbs@virginiabluebirds.org)

## How To Join

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

**Virginia Bluebird Society**  
**726 William Street**  
**Fredericksburg, VA 22401**

Membership forms are available on the VBS web site: <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org>

## Send an Article to The Bird Box

Send original articles, photos, or artwork or suggest a topic for a future newsletter. Submit materials to Judy Hall, Editor, at [carjuwa@hotmail.com](mailto:carjuwa@hotmail.com), by August 30 to be considered for the fall newsletter, or January 31 for the winter newsletter.



**Virginia Bluebird Society**  
**726 William Street**  
**Fredericksburg VA 22401**