

**Virginia
Bluebird
Society**

The Bird Box

Fall 2009

Join Us At Our State Conference In November

The 2009 Virginia Bluebird Society State Conference will be held on **Saturday, November 7**, at the **Claytor Nature Study Center in Bedford** (near Lynchburg) and will run from **9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.** The \$20 registration fee includes breakfast, lunch, and all programs for the day.

Join us for a great day of education and camaraderie with other bluebirders. All are welcome! You don't have to be a VBS member. Visit our Web site, virginiabluebirds.org, for details and a registration form.

An Amazing Rescue

Brion Patterson, our county coordinator in Rappahannock County, pulled off a real coup last May. Brion and Cecile are high school teachers who have a bluebird house in their yard. Earlier in the spring they found five eggs in their nest. Two eggs hatched on a rainy day. While Brion and Cecile were excited about that, the weather made them a little anxious about the other three. Sure enough, when they checked the next afternoon, the nestlings were gone.

On closer investigation, the couple found what looked to be the dead bodies of the five nestlings on the ground below. Cecile looked more closely and exclaimed, "They're alive!" She breathed on a couple of them, and they moved slightly. So they put them all back into the nest and moved away. Within minutes, both parents checked the nest but did not stay. Perhaps the babies appeared to be dead to them. We can only speculate.

Brion and Cecile immediately got in touch with Amo Merritt, a local rehabilitator they knew. Amo asked them to bring all the chicks over to her home. Who would have believed that day-old chicks could be saved? But they were! Amo fed them every 20 minutes using a timer and kept them warm through that first night. By the next morning three had been placed in adoptive nests that had chicks of the same age!

VBS State County Coordinators tried to help find other folks with bluebird boxes in counties close by, and all the chicks were eventually placed. The last two nestlings went to people at the Nature Conservancy/National Zoo facility near Front Royal. This outcome was possible only by working with the local experienced rehabilitators. They work tirelessly to

save any injured or needy animal and are licensed to do so. They do it all out of their own purse and on their own time. They are the unsung heroes. In case you ever need a rehabilitator, contact the Wildlife Center of Virginia, 540-942-9453, or wildlife@wildlifecenter.org. They are a large, professionally staffed hospital for all wildlife, and they will have contacts for your region.

*- Barbara Chambers
(with thanks to Brion Patterson)*



Rescued bluebird nestlings
(Photo: Amo Merritt)

Promoting bluebirds and other cavity nesters

The Bird Box

Issue 11.2

Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society
www.virginiabluebirds.org

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Directors

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

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

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

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

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

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

State County Coordinator

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

Data Collector

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

Bird Box Editor

Pallav Das
e-mail: dpallav@gmail.com

Bird Box Layout

Bob Sindermann

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

Virginia's 'Important Bird Areas'

Virginia is immensely important for bird conservation. Its habitat ranges from the marshes of the tidewater region to the steep slopes of the Appalachians, all of which provide homes for hundreds of bird species including the Eastern Bluebird. Unfortunately, due to habitat destruction, invasive species and other anthropogenic causes, much of this prime habitat is at a risk of being lost in the decades to come, a loss which will come to the detriment of our native populations of birds and other wildlife. Conservation is thus at a premium.

BirdLife International, the global leader in avian conservation, has promoted a worldwide initiative called Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program in order to identify and protect the areas that provide the most essential habitat for nesting, migrating or wintering birds. In 2002, Virginia, too, became a part of this program by way of a partnership among the Virginia Audubon Council, Virginia Society of Ornithology, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and the National Audubon Society.

Since its inception the Virginia IBA Program has worked to identify 19 IBAs that cover over 10.5 percent of the Commonwealth's lands. IBAs may encompass just a few acres or many thousands, but are usually ecologically distinct from their surroundings. Some of the IBAs have been delineated based on elevation or landscape borders, while others are outlined by political boundaries. For example, the Radford Army Ammunition Plant IBA near Roanoke was selected because it supports Virginia's last known breeding population of Henslow's Sparrows. The lands included in Virginia's IBAs may be public or private, protected or unprotected.

While the program continues to work on IBA delineation, especially in the Central Piedmont, most of its resources are now being devoted to conservation and outreach. In particular, it's utilizing a grassroots and partnership-driven approach that involves working with private conservation-minded organizations, federal and state agencies, local communities and their planners, and local Audubon chapters and bird clubs. Additionally, the Virginia IBA Program has a passionate volunteer base involved in its successful habitat protection efforts.

If you are interested in learning more about the Virginia IBA Program and how to get involved, you can e-mail David Bryan at dbryan.audubon@gmail.com or visit their Web site, www.audubon.org/bird/iba/virginia/index.html.



Male Eastern Bluebird
(Photo: Bob Schamerhorn)

Winterizing Your Trail Boxes

Fall is upon us and winter will be here soon. What are we going to do with our loyal little nest boxes standing vigil out in the cold? Here is a way you could improvise to furnish foul-weather lodging for your backyard and trail birds during the cold seasons.

Here's what you will need:

- A sheet or roll of flexible foam weather stripping used to insulate window air conditioners.
- A coil of flexible gray caulking-putty strips
- Dry grasses collected earlier or in the vicinity of the boxes.
- Your usual trail bucket with equipment and tools

The most important consideration for winter is to seal the ventilation holes in the nest boxes. While they're extremely important in the hot summer days, in winter we need to make the box cozier! It's not necessary to winterize all the boxes – only the ones that have been the most popular for nesting.

For the wide spaces, use the foam weather stripping to close off the winds. For the areas of ventilation, use the flexible putty-like cord of weather stripping to press into the holes with your fingers. Focus only on the ventilation holes, and don't block the drainage holes in the bottom of your boxes. The putty is easily removed after the warm weather arrives again next summer. In the meantime, it will help prevent heat loss at night, stop drafts, and help keep rain and blowing snow out of the box. Come spring, it will help keep the chill and damp from the eggs and the young until the weather becomes reliably warm. So, don't remove the weather stripping too soon. When you do remove it, save it in a Ziploc bag to be used again next fall.

Also, collect dry grasses in the vicinity of your boxes. Birds have been observed preparing a winter roosting space for themselves using grass. You could also collect the grass separately in a bag throughout the season for using now. Make a nice pad of dry grasses, about an inch thick, and place it in the bottom of the clean, draft-free box. Grass padding prevents guano from collecting on the bottom even if a bird uses a box that has not been winterized. This way, the bottom of the box stays dry and clean, and the removal of any residual excrement also becomes easier later in spring.

The boxes need a little care on the outside, too. We recommend that every other year you treat them with sealant, and fall is a good time to do that. But you need to be careful about one thing: the nest boxes are usually up over your head and the sealant could run back down on your arm while painting. Take a margarine or cottage cheese tub and punch a hole in the plastic lid. Then affix it to the paintbrush handle with duct tape. This makes a flange that will catch the sealant.

A well-looked-after box could lead to some great observations in winter. But keep a lookout for other animals, which may also come looking for warmth and shelter. If it's mice, evict them at once. Their urine can ruin the box quickly.

All the best with your boxes! We hope they're a great draw for the winter birds. And don't forget to share your experiences in the next *Bird Box*! – *Barbara Chambers (with thanks to Julie Zickefoose)*

Q & A Column

Nesting Ending Early?

Question: I have noticed zero nesting activity since the last week in July. Is anyone else seeing an early end to nesting this year?

Answer: I have no answers, but this appears to be a widespread situation. Our observations are the only thing we can go by. Nesting activity stopped on my trail on Mason Neck by July 25, i.e., no new nests were built after that date. This seemed early to me, and then I began receiving e-mails from others wondering about the same early close down in their nest boxes. I heard from Chantilly, Martinsville, Danville, and Clarke County. I know it happened in Massachusetts and Indiana, too. How about where you are?

Are there any explanations? Perhaps the heavy rains kept the insects down. However, we fledged 18 more Tree Swallows on our trail this year than last. So that's a suspect idea. It was not hot in July; as a matter of fact, it was a glorious month. How could the bluebirds know that August would be a scorcher? So weather seems suspect as a reason, too. I guess I can't suggest anything else to consider!

Let's hear from our members on this question. Send your data observations to our *Bird Box* editor, and we will try and include a summary of your findings in the Spring edition.

These birds know what they are doing. I have read that flock numbers stay pretty static year to year. It stays at a size that the habitat can sustain. When the numbers are down, breeding is up. When the numbers are up, breeding stops. That knowledge must be in the egg! Perhaps this is the answer. Let's see!

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.

Interesting Chickadee Behavior

We saw a new bird behavior in our yard one spring in Roanoke County. We have two nest boxes that the Eastern Bluebirds and Carolina Chickadees had been fighting over for several weeks. The chickadees had built a moss nest in one box, but the bluebirds then built their own nest on top. So the chickadees moved to Box #2 and built another nest complete with a lining of cat fur I'd been putting out for them.

Both nests sat for a week with no eggs being laid. The chickadees then decided to take back Box #1. They worked all day and managed to dismantle the bluebird nest. They would fly to the box, look all around, slip in quietly, and come out a few seconds later with a mouthful of pine needles. They'd fly to the nearest shrub, drop the nesting material they'd confiscated, and fly back for more. I'd love to know what the bluebirds thought the next time they looked into that box. — *Alyce Quinn*

To Remember

Peggy Spiegel Opengari, the VBS Giles County Coordinator, died after a brief but courageous battle with pancreatic cancer this past July. She was an avid birder and a great supporter of VBS, and she gave many bluebird presentations all over Virginia, including one at our general meeting two years ago in Roanoke. Peggy had friends all over the state. In fact, to have met her was to have become one of her friends. Peggy was an active and longtime member of the Virginia Society of Ornithology and the founder of the Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Festival held every year in May. She will always be remembered for her great contribution to bird research and conservation in Virginia. We send our sympathies to her children and to Bill, her husband, for their great loss.

Shadow and the Mockingbird

Just so you know: mockingbirds are not my favorite birds. I love their song, but I hate their ego! They chase my bluebirds away from their feeder and all the other birds away from the birdbath. In the spring, I actually chased them all over my yard just so the bluebirds could have some mealworms.

As you can imagine, I wasn't very happy when they decided to call my yard home and raise three broods. One hot evening in mid-July, our air conditioner quit, and one mockingbird sang outside my bedroom window all night. When I rolled over at 2:30 a.m., I think I heard him laughing. I know he was doing it on purpose.

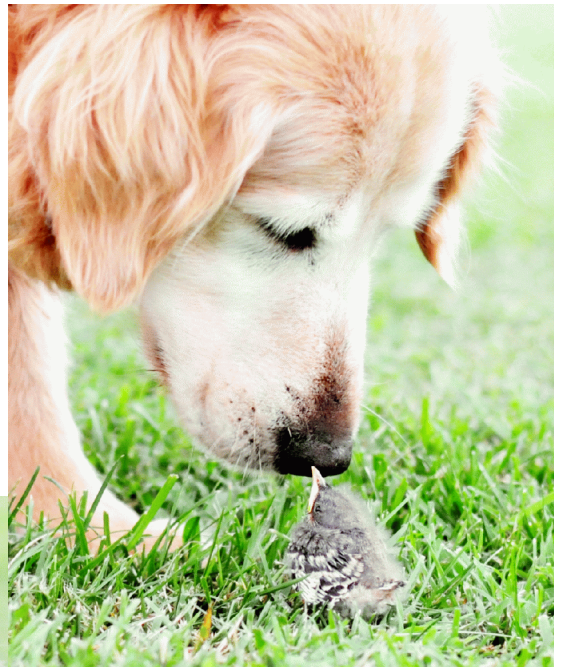
Anyway, one evening my family and I saw a baby bird (which was too young to fledge) hopping on the ground, following Shadow, our dog, around with its mouth open. If Shadow lay down, the bird would come right up to him, not at all scared. If he moved, the bird followed. Shadow was very easy with the bird; it was amazing to watch! I was lucky enough to get a few good photographs.

The night before, we'd had a really bad storm, and probably the birds fell from the nest. I have to admit, I felt a little guilty. I had complained throughout the spring about those "hateful mockingbirds." Lesson learned: we really should appreciate every creature.

— *Lexi Meadows*



Shadow the Golden Retriever, keeping an eye on a mockingbird chick
(Photos: Lexi Meadows)



Monitoring and Grant-getting

This is my first year as a bluebird monitor, and what a fun year it has been. I was greatly inspired by an enthusiastic presentation on bluebirds by Earl Morris, the Roanoke County Coordinator, last year, and I immediately signed up to get my own bluebird box. My husband and I were lucky this year to have two nests. I still can't believe the energy and dedication it takes the bluebird parents to feed those young. I've spent many an entertaining afternoon just watching our hardworking parents.

Earl also asked me to help supervise the Blue Hills golf course. I accompanied him on trail inspections and cleaned and prepped boxes for the spring. Earl also instructed me on various types of nests and on how to deal with predators. In April, Jenna Conner, a fellow garden club member, and I started monitoring the 21 boxes at Blue Hills on our own. Earl was quick to offer assistance when we encountered problems like a snake hanging out of box. We also received great support from Kim Craighead, one of the grounds staff at the club. Kim is a true bluebird enthusiast with her own boxes. She has a substantial collection of relevant articles from several bird magazines, which she shares with us. The golf course has been a great place to exercise and monitor. We are fortunate to see other wildlife, as well as local ducks and horses begging for treats! It was a thrill to see the many bluebird nests, eggs, and fledglings.

Another interesting aspect of my involvement is an ExxonMobil grant that I've worked to get for VBS. The company encourages employees, retirees, and their families to volunteer in the community on an individual basis. The ExxonMobil Volunteer Involvement Program awards \$500 grants to charitable, nonprofit organizations for which eligible participants volunteer at least 20 hours of their time during a calendar year. VBS should soon be receiving that grant. This will mark a great end for my first year of bluebirding.

– *Barbara Fargarson*

Bacteria and Bright-colored Birds

Brightly colored birds can become infected with bacteria that eat their feathers. That in turn can affect the health of the birds and dull their plumage. This discovery comes from a study that found that 99 percent of all Eastern Bluebirds surveyed in Virginia were infected with feather-degrading bacteria. Such bacteria were first discovered a decade ago, but the latest research is the best evidence yet that the bugs affect the color and health of birds.

The study was done by Alex Gunderson, Mark Forsyth, and John Swaddle at the Department of Biology, College of William and Mary, in Williamsburg. The complete study is at: jpswad.people.wm.edu/Gunderson%20et%20al%202009.pdf

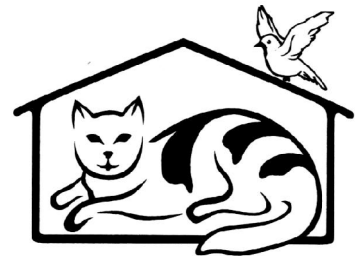
Cats Indoors!

Free-roaming cats take a terrible toll on wildlife, as they never lose their predatory instinct. Since many of us are cat lovers and owners and have an outdoor cat (or two or three!), consider moving them indoors this spring and making them indoor cats. It will save them from injury and disease and will reduce wildlife deaths. There is reliable data to indicate that the free-roaming and feral cats in this country kill over a million birds each day! Not to mention all the small rodents they kill that could be some hawk's meal.

The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has developed a program called Cats Indoors! It's designed to make us cat lovers aware of the very real problems free-roaming cats cause. ABC, along with the Humane Society of the U.S. and the American Humane Association, has produced a brochure on being a responsible pet owner. It's available at www.abcbirds.org. Go to "Bird Conservation Issues in the Americas" and click on "cats." Be sure to watch the YouTube Channel in the upper left for more.

Many states are getting on the bandwagon; it's not too late for Virginia. VBS advocates two predator guards on each pole-mounted box. The Noel guard, at the entrance hole, is there to discourage cats as well as raccoons! If you just can't get that outdoor cat of yours to stay indoors all day, every day, at least resolve that your next cat will be an indoor cat. And in the meantime, carry your share of the guilt!

– *Barbara Chambers*



CATS INDOORS!

The Fight

The following true story should convince you that our sweet, gentle bluebird of happiness can be anything but sweet as well as none too gentle. It can, in fact, take care of itself!

It happened one beautiful morning in early May, at the beginning of the bluebird trail at Temple Hall Farm in Leesburg. The VBS monitors were, as usual, observing the adult bluebird activity as they began their rounds for the week. Movement caught their eye and they then witnessed this absolutely stunning display of courage.

There was a male Tree Swallow perched inside the Noel guard on a nest box! A male bluebird flew up, landed beside the swallow inside the wire mesh, and proceeded to attack it. Within seconds the Tree Swallow was lying on his back with the male bluebird atop him, apparently pecking vigorously. Then the female bluebird arrived. She landed on top of the Noel guard and climbed inside to join her mate in the attack. After a minute or so the male Tree Swallow managed to escape from the Noel guard. The male bluebird and Tree Swallow, still entangled, fluttered and tumbled to the ground. They continued to mix it up for a couple of seconds more when finally the Tree Swallow managed to escape and fly off.

The bluebird pair then checked out the nest box, and at least one of them went inside. After they had settled down and flown off, the monitors checked the box, too! Inside they discovered four baby bluebirds and one blue egg.

The moral of the story: Never mess with that bluebird's family!

Through the Lens, 'A Treat!'

Recently, I spent a beautiful morning observing and photographing a pair of bluebirds on my trail. One of the nests had been infested with blowflies, and I had just conducted a switchout to a clean nest. After making certain that the chicks were safe and comfortable, I ran back behind the pine trees to my stool and camera on the tripod. After a switchout, I like to stay back and observe from a distance, to make sure that my intervention didn't disturb the parents' continued care of their chicks. Moreover, it was a perfect day for photography, and I was prepared and hoping for something special.

I was rewarded within five minutes. The female returned to the box with grub. She perched on the top of the box, hopped over to the top of the Noel guard, then flew into the box to feed her chicks. She exited the box, perched inside the center of Noel guard, and stayed there. As I focused in with the camera and waited another two minutes or so, the male arrived with grub in his beak. The female, however, didn't move from the guard. It appeared the female and the male may have a tight squeeze as she stayed inside and he was about to land on the end of the guard. I thought to myself, "What will happen next? Will they both fit inside the guard as he enters?" At that moment, the female perched at the end of the guard and opened her mouth to receive food from the male while he was in flight. Then she stayed and watched him enter the box with what remaining grub he had to feed their chicks. The female flew to the top of the box, and the male exited with a fecal sac.

This was a joyful event for me to see and document with photos. These activities happen so fast – in a blink of an eye, when we turn our heads or walk away. It's as if my nest intervention had never occurred. I received an additional treat since I had retrofitted all my boxes from front openings to side openings to install the Noel guards. Had I not stayed to watch and had I not had my camera, I would not have this event in pictures. The whole series is available on my bluebird Web site and blog: virtualprojectpoint.wordpress.com/predators/.

– Christine Boran



Male bluebird feeding female perched inside Noel guard
(Photo: Christine Boran)

Greetings!

I hope you like this issue of *The Bird Box*. It's my first attempt at editing this wonderful newsletter, and I've gone through the process with my fair share of trepidation. I'm a Master Naturalist with the Arlington Chapter and volunteer my time as a bluebird monitor at the Thrifton Park Trail. A couple of months ago, I came across an announcement looking for a volunteer editor for *The Bird Box*. I like all pursuits of language and wondered whether I could take my involvement with bluebirds to another level. I immediately got in touch with Anne Little, the VBS President. She was extremely encouraging, and after a couple of serious conversations with her and Barbara Chambers, a former editor, I decided to take the plunge. Anne and Barbara have been my guides and mentors in bringing out this issue. I would not have been able to do it without their help. My heartiest thanks to them!

I grew up in India and had the good fortune of working on some of the issues confronting that country's environment and wildlife. Here in the United States, too, I've tried to establish a relationship with its amazing outdoors, and being a Master Naturalist is a part of that pursuit. Bluebirds are a great discovery for me because we don't have them in India. What we do have is the Fairy Blue Bird, which belongs to a different family, *Irenidae* (not *Turdidae*), and is related to the Ioras and Leafbirds and not Thrushes. It's a strikingly beautiful bird, but I have never seen it in the wild. Now it's the charming Eastern Bluebird that I'm getting to know and appreciate as a monitor and through this opportunity as *Bird Box* editor.

I'm a newcomer to the bluebirder family and want to learn from your experiences. I hope I'll hear from you on how you would like this newsletter to evolve. Please send your suggestions for improvements as well as critiques. *The Bird Box* is an evocative reflection of your love and concern for bluebirds, and I will make a sincere effort to maintain its high standards. I consider it a unique privilege to be its editor. As we hunker down for another long cold season, our birds will soon start moving to warmer climes. Wherever they go, I'm sure they'll take care of our longing for spring and their return. In the meantime, have a great winter!

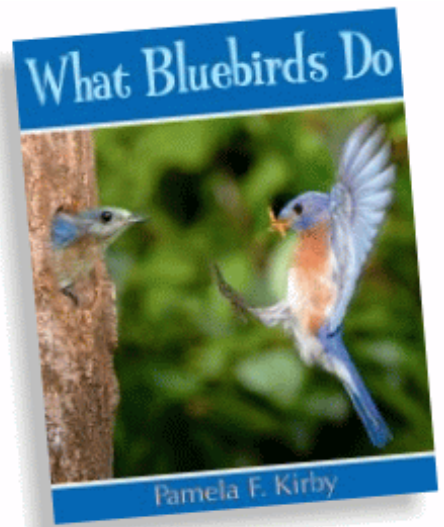
– Pallav Das

Nest Boxes for Sale

VBS now has fully assembled nest boxes for sale. The boxes are beautiful cedar wood, mounted on a one-inch steel conduit. The poles have a snake/raccoon guard as well as a Noel guard for cats, squirrels, and other predators attached to the front of the box, making them a very safe haven for your bluebirds.

These boxes are the Carl Little Design, with a side opening that hinges downward for easy cleaning and monitoring. The boxes are \$60 for the entire setup. If you are interested in purchasing a nest box, please contact: Barb Chambers in Northern Virginia, 703-978-6609, bj.chambers@cox.net; Anne Little in Fredericksburg/Richmond, 540-373-4594, thegate@cox.net; or Pat Wilczek in Rappahannock County/Charlottesville, 434-985-4444, patricia.wilczek@comcast.net. Sales are limited to the supply on hand.

A Fascination for Bluebirds



What Bluebirds Do, by Pamela Kirby, is a lovingly written book about a nature lover's fascination for a pair of eastern bluebirds. The birds chose to live one nesting season in a nest box in Pamela Kirby's backyard. Enthralled, enchanted, and mesmerized, she took the time to study and photograph the activities of this bluebird couple. Her brief notes and magnificent pictures combine to weave a fascinating review of mating, nesting, hatching, feeding, and fledging.

Aimed at children five through eight years old, this is a charmingly told story of work, endurance, commitment, and growth. Wise parents and grandparents can talk a child through this story and note the parallels of growth and development of children and baby birds.

What Bluebirds Do is published by Boyds Mills Press and lists for about \$19.00. It is available on-line, at bookstores, and through the publisher at 1-877-512-8366. – Kay Fry

How to Join

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

Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

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

Visit Our Web Site

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

www.virginiabluebirds.org.

Mark Your Calendar

Today: Send your data to Charlie Chambers. Data forms are available on the VBS Web site (under Forms). Please do it now while your information is fresh.

Today: Register for the VBS Bi-Annual Conference, **Saturday, November 7**, Lynchburg, Virginia. We are hoping to see a lot of members from Southwest Virginia attending this conference.

October/November: Time to winterize your nest boxes. See page 3.

October 10: Bluebird presentation, Ginter Botanical Gardens, Richmond. 9:00 a.m. Anne Little.

November 2: Bluebird presentation, Woodbine Garden Club, Woodbridge. 7:00 p.m.

November 7: VBS Bi-annual Conference, Lynchburg (see page 1). 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

March 13, 2010: VBS Board meeting, Richmond. 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.



Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

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