

The Bird Box

Fall 2013 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

Bluebirds vs. House wrens

Article and Photos by Lee and Jane Hesler



This summer our backyard bluebirds raised two broods of 5 fledglings each. After the second clutch fledged, the pair quickly set about having a third brood in a newly placed box about 50 feet from their “old home”. That box contained a nest camera; we observe the action on a TV monitor on our screened porch. On Monday the bluebirds began to build their nest; at 8 am on Saturday we watched the female lay the first egg; at 1 pm we noticed there was a dark spot on the egg; by 3 pm we noticed the egg was gone!

Although we did not witness the egg removal, we were pretty sure it was a house wren. We had seen and heard a lot of house wrens around the yard and we had found a broken blue egg shell beneath the box. We previously read about deterring house wrens, and Lee had built a “wren guard” which hides the box entrance from the wrens but still allows the bluebirds to enter. Lee designed the “wren guard” for our old style box which had a sloped roof. The new box designed for the nest cam was taller and had a flat roof. Lee quickly modified the “wren guard” to fit the new box. He removed the Noel guard and replaced it with the “wren guard” about 5:00 that afternoon. (See pictures).

We watched as our bluebird pair worked to discover how to get back in the box. They perched on top of the box and looked puzzled about what to do. The female of course was quite determined and figured out that she had to approach the box from the side. Her first attempts were not successful, and we adjusted the distance from the front of the box to the guard. When we got to 4 inches, the female successfully entered the box. The male seemed less determined, but we hoped in time he would also figure it out. We were afraid to increase the distance further as we were concerned the sneaky wrens would get back in the box. Our female bluebird then laid one more egg on each of the following three days. We watched to see if the wren would return, but we think the male bluebird was watching as well and was now able to fend off the wren.

Two of the three eggs hatched on schedule and we noticed that the male bluebird was now able to get in the box as well. After a week the nestlings were no longer in danger from the wrens. We read that the nestlings might not be able to exit the box with the “wren guard” in place, so Lee replaced the “wren guard” with the original Noel guard. We were surprised to see that the bluebirds had to discover again how to get into the box. They flew sideways into the Noel guard but after a few failures they returned to entering the box from the front. The two nestlings continued to be fed by both parents and fledged on schedule. We enjoy seeing the whole family at our meal worm feeder each day. We wonder how we can discourage the house wrens in the future. The house wrens headed south, leaving here in mid August, but we know they will be back next year. We will be brainstorming this problem over the winter while we watch our bluebird family.

Noel Guard



Wren Guard



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Every other year, VBS holds a statewide conference to connect with all of our members. This year, the conference will be held on Saturday, November 9th from 9:30am to 2:30pm, with an optional birding outing until 4:00pm. The meeting will be centrally located in Charlottesville near I-64 in the Albemarle County Office Building on 5th Street.

Registration includes breakfast, lunch and all programs for the entire day. I hope you will join us for a great day of education and camaraderie with other bluebirders. It is not necessary to be a member of VBS to attend - all are welcome!

Location: Albemarle County Office Building, Conference Room A, 1600 5th Street Ext., Charlottesville, VA 22902

Directions: After taking exit 120 from I-64, turn west onto 5th St. Extended, following signs for the County Police Office. Continue about 0.7 miles (passing by Stagecoach Rd); the County Office Building will be on the left. Enter the parking lot. Conference Room A is located just to the left of the main entrance of the building.

Registration: The registration fee is \$25 which includes breakfast, lunch and all programs. See the registration form on page 7.

Display Space: If you wish to have a display table at the conference, please contact Carmen Bishop at 703-764-9268 or cjbish@aol.com.

Nest Box Sale: A limited number of quality nest boxes with Noel guards and snake guards (poles not included) will be available for pick up at the conference. The cost per box is \$45. Payment for nest boxes must be included with your registration.

Both by Doug Rogers



Agenda

- 9:30 - 10:00 Registration & breakfast, followed by door prizes
- 10:00 - 10:15 Election of new board members
- 10:15 - 11:15 Marshall Faintich, PhD, Birding Activity Manager, Rockfish Valley Trail "The Birds of Wintergreen"
- 11:15 - 11:30 Break
- 11:30 - 12:00 Alycia Crall, PhD, Virginia Master Naturalist Coordinator
The Virginia Master Naturalist Program: "Opportunities for Volunteer Projects with Bluebirds"
- 12:00 - 12:15 Awards
- 12:15 - 1:00 Lunch
- 1:00 - 1:15 Announcements
- 1:15 - 2:15 Maureen Eiger, Wild Bird Rehabilitator
Bluebirds in Rehab: "When they should come in for care and how they are returned to the wild"
- 2:15 - 2:30 Break
- 2:45 - 4:00 Birding at Secluded Farm
Led by Janet Paisley of the Monticello Bird Club

Success at Last!

By Vickie Fuquay

We have an extensive bluebird trail along our Riverwalk in Danville. The trail follows the Dan River through Danville and is widely used by walkers, bikers and runners. Our first houses went up in 2007. With tree swallow competition along the open areas nearest the water, we were having more fighting than nesting. We found pairing the boxes 10 – 25' apart helped keep the peace. We have had a few squabbles; one week we have bluebird eggs in a box, and the next week we may have tree swallow eggs as well. This spring I received a call from a family who wanted to adopt a box for the trail. I explained that I really could not place any more in that location but had other options. They were disappointed but agreed upon an alternate location.

Box #20, on this trail, had always been a problem box with no birds nesting in the six years it had been up. Unexpectedly, in April of this year, I was elated to find a bluebird nest in this box. I happened to be in the area for several hours one day and watched a tree swallow dive bomb the poor bluebirds.

Realizing this had probably been the ongoing problem for several nesting seasons, I called the family and told them I now had a spot on the trail system and I would be able to put up their box within the Riverwalk trail after all. I paired their new box with the old problem box # 20. For the first time in six years, we had bluebirds succeed with 4 fledglings and the tree swallows moved right into the new box and fledged 5!

Rescue For a Baby Bluebird

Article and photos by Cathy Hindman

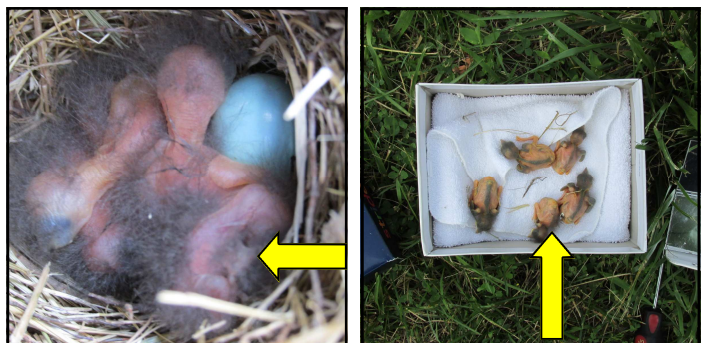
In mid-June of this year, I received an email from the VBS President asking for a possible nest for a lone baby bluebird found in a lady's driveway in Bristow. The bird was newly hatched and lying with part of a blue eggshell on its head. Remarkably the woman had cared for the bird overnight and contacted VBS via email. The county coordinators in Prince William were alerted and we then asked all our trail leaders if there was a box with newly hatched babies.

At Leesylvania Park box #3 was a match! I met the lady with the orphaned bird at a retail store parking lot and took the shoebox with the small treasure to the park that afternoon. It happened to be my day for monitoring so I placed it in the box with the other new ones and went on the trail to record all the wonderful data we collect each week. In an hour and a half, I returned to box #3 to check on the babies. All were snuggled together waiting for the parents to bring a tasty morsel of insects. The new one was accepted.

I returned to the park five days later to see how the nestlings were doing. With gloved hand I carefully pulled out each baby. One was noticeably smaller but they had all grown a lot. After about two weeks, each one fledged. We had success with the adopted baby! The VBS President, Carmen, said, "If we didn't monitor trails, this would not have been possible." I was glad to have been part of the successful rescue.

In the left photo, the adopted baby is the one below the egg.

In the right photo, the adopted baby is the smaller one and at the bottom middle position.



Results of a Bluebird Study

Mary K. Tillman

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 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 Doug Rogers.

During the spring and summer of this year I conducted a bluebird study on 24 nest boxes at Bundoran Farm in order to determine whether the Carl Little, pole-mounted nest boxes made a significant difference in the mortality rate of bluebird offspring. I decided to do this study because, during the summer of 2012 I saw undeniable evidence of predation. It was shocking how many eggs and babies never made it to adulthood. At the same time, I learned about the Carl Little design for bluebird boxes and found that it had a number of features to protect the birds from snakes, raccoons and other predators.

The Carl Little design attaches the box to a pole one inch in diameter with a free-swinging baffle which prevents predators from climbing up to the box. Seven of the 12 new boxes that I purchased for the study had wire mesh or Noel guards at the box entrance which provided additional protection against predators.

To conduct my study I replaced 12 of the old post-mounted boxes with the new Carl Little boxes. These new nest boxes were not near fences or trees where predators could jump onto the nest box roof. I then selected 12 post-mounted boxes to use as a comparison. These boxes have been in place for many years, had no predator protection and were part of the fencing system of the farm.

I monitored the boxes from March 30 until July 25 and visited the 24 boxes 25 times during this period. I stopped monitoring only when the birds stopped building nests in the boxes and I made no changes to the boxes during the monitoring period. (except to clean out old nests periodically)

The results of my study are as follows:

	Post Mount	Pole Mount	Difference	%
Nest attempts	24	15	-9	-37.5
Eggs Laid	106	74	-32	-30.2
Eggs Hatched	55	65	+10	+18.2
Fledged	27	65	+38	+140.7

The difference is striking! With 37.5% less nest attempts in the pole mounted boxes and 30.2% less eggs laid, there was still 18.2% more eggs hatched and 140.7% more chicks fledged.

What accounts for the differences in the number of hatchlings and fledglings between the two types of boxes? Predation is one factor. Doors had been

opened, nests were pulled through the holes or found on the ground, and eggs were broken with shells apparent in the nest material. There were more than eighteen instances of predation, probably from raccoons and snakes. Post-mounted boxes without any guards or protections were an invitation to dine to predators that enjoy eggs and birds.

Another factor responsible for the differences in number of hatchlings and fledglings was the design of the boxes. It is clear from the study that the Carl Little boxes provided significant protection to both eggs and babies.

Based on the above findings, I would recommend that, as the post-mounted boxes need replacing or if a new trail is being considered for development, new pole-mounted boxes be installed instead of the old fence post boxes. If that can't be done, then, at the very least, Noel guards should be added to the post-mounted design.

Back to School

Article by Carmen Bishop

We are pleased to offer additional grants for schools. Because of the support of an anonymous family foundation, we can offer schools:

Nestbox cameras - We are able to extend the nestcam program to ten additional schools. This includes the nestbox, predator guards, and camera. For more information, please contact Vickie Fuquay at vickiefuquay@comcast.net.

Bluebird trails & habitats - Grants are available for constructing new or refurbishing old nest boxes. Schools have been able to apply for grants for nest boxes under our New & Refurbished Grants program, but now we also have money earmarked specifically for schools. In addition, this grant money can be used to help create bird-friendly habitats on your school grounds. For more information, please contact Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com.

Unusual Visitor

Article and Photo by Lexi Meadows

It only took a glance to realize I had a new visitor at my window hummingbird feeder the morning of August 15. A male Rufous flashing his bright orange/red throat was trying to defend its territory amidst 20-30 Ruby Throats.

I photographed the bird and emailed it to Bruce Peterjohn, Chief of the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory at a research center in Laurel, MD, who confirmed it is a male Rufous. This species's normal range is the west coast. They migrate north in spring from Mexico to northern California and all the way to Alaska to breed. Bruce Peterjohn said an adult bird is reported in the Mid-Atlantic states in August about once every 3-4 years. This one was last seen Friday August 16.

If you would like to attract a wintering hummingbird to your yard Bruce Peterjohn suggests the following:

- Leave a feeder out in an exposed area until January 1
- Plant late-flowering plants in the yard; have some dense shrubs, conifers or similar vegetation nearby that provide protected night roosts



You might get a pleasant surprise!

An Eagle Scout Project: One Boy's Commitment to Bluebirds

Article and Photos by Vickie Fuquay

I first met Joseph Worley when local Boy Scout Troop 359, under the direction of Scout Master David Torborg, came to my rescue repairing baffles and boxes along the Riverwalk Trail here in Danville, VA. The troop did a fantastic job of fixing and replacing damaged snake guards and repairing boxes on the trail.

Joseph is 15 years old and a 10th grader at Tunstall High School. He is a life scout working toward Eagle Scout. Joseph mentioned a project he was looking into for Eagle Scout, and I told him to check out Virginia Bluebird Society's website to see if building bird houses was something he would like to do.

VBS has a grant to cover costs of materials and provides the design for the nest box and predator guards and any construction advice as needed. The boxes, poles and predator guards are donated to VBS to use on public land.

After talking it over with his scout master, Joseph applied for the grant to build 25 houses, complete with poles and predator guards. He wanted to raise half of his funds rather than apply for the whole amount.

On June 22nd Joseph headed up a car wash with his troop at Fairview United Methodist Church to begin his fund raising project. They received an overwhelming amount of support and raised over \$700.00. With these funds, he purchased supplies and began working on the houses by the end of June.

By July 20th he was far enough along to schedule a work day with his troop to build the noel guards, snake baffles and start assembling the bird houses. He volunteered to assist me with a bluebird presentation for the local Rotary Club on July 30th. The requirements for his Eagle Scout project, were finished, but Joseph was not done.

This amazing young man wanted to install each house himself with my guidance. To date Joseph, along with his very dedicated parents, has installed 15 of the 25 houses. Four were paired with existing boxes at Sacred Heart School to help with Tree Swallow competition. Five have been installed at Roman Eagle Nursing Home to increase their very productive trail which was started several years ago.

The most exciting venture was the 6 bird boxes we used to start a new trail at Gibson School in Danville. There are no houses to my knowledge anywhere close to the school. As we started pounding in the first pole, **eight** bluebirds lined up on a chain link fence to watch their new home going up. We were more than encouraged that day for a job well done!



Registration Form VBS 2013 Conference

Return this form and check(s) to: VBS, c/o Carmen Bishop, 4794 Tapestry Drive, Fairfax, VA 22032
Registration must be received by Thursday, October 31st. Please call or email about availability after that date.

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Email address _____

Fees: \$25/person (includes breakfast, lunch and all programs)

\$45/nest box (orders will be filled on a first-come basis; please enclose a separate check for nest boxes; your check will be returned to you if we cannot fill your order)

Number Attending _____

Number of Nest Boxes _____

Amount Enclosed _____ (check payable to VBS)

Lunch will be provided by Bread Works Deli. Please indicate your choice of sandwich:

Number:

_____ Roasted Turkey with lettuce and tomato on sunflower wheat

_____ Ham & Swiss with lettuce and tomato on light wheat

_____ Cheese and Swiss with alfalfa sprouts, cucumbers and tomato on sunflower wheat

(condiments will be provided separately)

For further information, contact Carmen Bishop at 703-764-9268 or cjbish@aol.com

Additional registration forms can be found on our website, www.virginiabluebirds.org

Forward this to a friend:

<http://us2.forward-to-friend.com/forward?u=faf7f100daef356610d4a28b6&id=6f51174caa&e=e7333cd3a5>

Update your profile:

<http://virginiabluebirds.us2.list-manage.com/profile?u=faf7f100daef356610d4a28b6&id=fa26f4c363&e=e7333cd3a5>

Mark your Calendar

If you haven't already done so, please submit your data to your county coordinator or, if you don't have a county coordinator, to Charlie Chambers at ce.chambers@verizon.net

Eastern Shore Birding and Wildlife Festival, October 11-13, Cape Charles, <http://www.esvafestivals.org/>

VBS Conference: November 9, 9:30am, Charlottesville; Everyone is welcome; Registration forms available in this newsletter or online

Bluebird presentation by Earl Morris, Moneta Garden Club, Moneta, January 20, 2014

Virginia Beach Winter Wildlife Festival, January 24-26, 2014

Bluebird presentation by Earl Morris, North Lakes Garden Club, Roanoke, February 20, 2014

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 website: www.virginiabluebirds.org



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