

The Bird Box

Fall 2015 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

Are Bluebird Trails Still Needed?

Article by Carmen Bishop, President



This year more than any other since I've been a "bluebirder" has convinced me that our efforts to install, monitor and maintain nest boxes are still needed. In the past, some naturalists and park employees from various parts of the state have told me that bluebird populations are stable and the boxes can (some even have said "should") be removed, but I don't believe it! Mother Nature is fickle and this year has been tough for bluebirds.

I didn't realize it had been such a tough winter until March, when Christine Boran (VBS State Coordinator) and I started to receive emails from across the state, one after another asking if others had reported widespread losses. On March 16, a bluebirder from the Wicomico Church area reported that she hadn't seen a bluebird since the last snowstorm when she had observed them piling into the purple martin house "like clowns into a Volkswagen." The information that we have is certainly not comprehensive ... it just reflects the information from those who felt compelled to email. Nevertheless, the statistics are grim. First came the reports of finding a large number of bluebirds that had died in nest boxes over the winter. For example, from the southeast area of the state, I heard that over 50 dead bluebirds were discovered.

After the findings of dead bluebirds from the winter, came the reports of a slow start to nesting, particularly for bluebirds. In mid-April, an email came in stating that there were no bluebird nests at Westmoreland State Park, and only one out of 35 boxes at Stratford Hall. Similar reports came in from other areas, including (but not limited to) Fredericksburg, Rappahannock and Fairfax. By the middle of May, some well-established trails in Fairfax and elsewhere still had no bluebird nests, even on trails with paired boxes. The tree swallows had migrated back from warmer winter climates and were successfully claiming boxes and starting nests. Then, there was more bad news in May, and a significant number of reports in the beginning of June, of monitors finding dead tree swallows in nest boxes. For example, on three trails in the first week of June, monitors found a total of 52 dead tree swallow nestlings. There appeared to be no trauma or other outward signs of predation. A number of these reports came in from golf course trails in the Fairfax/Loudoun area, leading us to wonder whether pesticides might be to blame. While I can't rule that out, just as extended cold appeared to be a factor in the death of bluebirds over the winter, extended rain could have been a factor in the spring deaths. Continuous rain for 24 hours, or consecutive days of rain, can make it more difficult for the

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adults to forage for insects and feed the nestlings.

Based on the emails that I've seen, the bluebird and tree swallow troubles were not uniformly experienced. In some areas, such as Roanoke, nesting seemed to be on track, so we'll see how the data averages out when it's all compiled. Sadly though, I have heard that some trails, such as at Brambleton Regional Park in Loudoun County, which has had a trail since 1998, there were no bluebird nestings at all for the first time. In Botetourt County, preliminary results indicate that nesting was down for all species, with approximately 30 percent of the nest boxes remaining empty.

As reported in the Spring 2015 newsletter, bluebird fledgings dropped 14 percent from 2013 to 2014. As we tally up our results (please be sure to send in your data), I fear that 2015 will continue the downward trend. I know we are all wondering if there's something more we can be doing to assist bluebirds and other native birds. Nest boxes primarily serve to supplement nesting habitat, but it's also important to plant native trees and berry-producing shrubs that provide both food and shelter. Several shrubs planted together can provide shelter in the winter. Native vegetation supports native insects, which provides food for nestlings, and native berry-producing vegetation provides winter food.

The messages that I think we should take away from this year are to continue to maintain and monitor well designed and strategically located nest boxes with predator guards, improve bluebird habitat, and perhaps provide supplemental water and mealworms. In addition, this fall, I think we should all "winterize" our nest boxes (see article on p. 3 by Christine Boran) and at <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org/about-bluebirds/winterizing-nest-boxes>). I have to admit that I haven't always felt that winterizing was necessary in our area, but given the setbacks that our bluebirds have faced, I want to give them the best chance I can. Because if Mother Nature is fickle, we can't be.

Thank You From Old Rag Master Naturalists

Article by Pam McMillie, Photos by Doug Rogers

The Old Rag Master Naturalists (ORMN), and Town of Culpeper, VA wish to thank the Virginia Bluebird Society for the \$350 grant for improving the wildlife habitat at the town's Sports Complex. There is already a bluebird trail on the property, and a number of ORMN chapter members have been working to put in new shrubs, trees, grasses, and forbs that will provide nesting sites and food for the birds in the Culpeper area. Additionally, students from Eastern View High School's Environmental Science classes will be assisting the members of ORMN in maintaining the habitat. Your generous contribution will definitely be making a difference for the birds in central Virginia.



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Virginia Bluebird Society



Fall 2015

Helping Bluebirds Stay Warm – Winterize Your Nest Boxes!

Article by Christine Boran, State Coordinator

Don't take your nest boxes down for the winter – instead winterize them! Your resident cavity-nesting birds will want to keep warm in them during any ice and snowstorms and through those frequent freezing temperatures we get in Virginia. After last winter's repeat sub-freezing temperatures and discoveries by monitors of dead bluebirds found inside the nest boxes in early spring, it is apparent how helpful we can be to the birds by doing a few simple steps to prepare our nest boxes for winter roosting bluebirds, chickadees, wrens, titmice, nuthatches, and even a small woodpecker, too.

Did you know that several bluebirds will cluster together inside a nest box and use each others' body warmth to help stay warm? So, here's how to help them: After your nest boxes have been cleaned and scraped, put a couple inches of CLEAN fallen pine needles or dried grasses onto the nest box floor – the same type of materials the bluebirds use to build their nests – then tamp it down with your hand; next plug up the ventilation openings at the top of the box; air conditioning unit foam weather-stripping works great —easy to cut with your scissors to fit the openings.

Keep the drainage holes open and unplugged on the floor just in case snow or rainwater blows through the entry hole. Keep the entry hole open, of course, so the birds can enter and exit, as they want. If you have Noel Guards on your boxes, no need to remove them. That's all you need to do.

On or around March 1st, remove the bedding material but leave the ventilation plugged until the middle of April—laid eggs or fragile, un-feathered hatchlings can succumb to sudden freeze snaps during first-brood nestings, especially overnight. After mid-April the ventilation can be opened up for the rest of the nesting season; this is necessary during the warmer months.

Note: DO NOT allow the non-native house sparrows to roost in your nest boxes. The male will bond to the box and will claim it and breed there as early as February. If house sparrows are attempting to roost in them, I suggest plugging up the entry hole altogether until they have left the area.

Nest Camera Report

Article by a Fifth Grader at Stony Mill Elementary School – Teacher: Mrs. McGarvey

My class and I have really enjoyed watching the birds. It is not just for fun but it also helps Mrs. McGarvey teach. We got to watch them from eggs to hatchlings. During the winter we got to see the mother and father through the camera. My class and I talked constantly about the birds both in our class and out.

Most schools don't get to watch bluebirds grow, luckily we do. We get to observe and take notes about the bluebirds. Getting to watch them grow is really fun. I will really miss getting to see the bluebirds when we go to sixth grade but we'll get to remember how fun it was seeing them.

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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 Blurb From Western Branch Intermediate School

Article and Photo by Kim Hogan, Teacher

To the absolute delight of students, faculty, and staff, Western Branch Intermediate School in Chesapeake is pleased to announce the arrival of this year's bluebirds!

In mid-April, a nesting pair of bluebirds beat out local chickadees for a coveted spot in the bluebird house, provided courtesy of the Virginia Bluebird Society.

Nestled in the comfort of our outdoor courtyard, complete with private pool, mature dogwood and Japanese maple trees, and centrally located near the butterfly and herb gardens, the nesting pair could not have selected a more lovely location. Five beautiful eggs were laid and all hatched at the end of April.

We watched the progress: Days of egg-sitting and then babies hatching right on schedule. The parents stuffed down many green worms and we viewed this via camera-feed to our large screen in the computer lab. In mid-May, we carefully lifted the cover to capture these photos of our precious and alive five babies.



Save the date! 2016 Virginia Society of Ornithology's Annual Meeting April 29-May 1, 2016.

The Roanoke Valley Bird Club will be hosting the VSO Annual Meeting. You don't have to be a VSO or RVBC member to attend. In addition to lots of field trips around the Roanoke area Saturday and Sunday mornings, you can also enjoy keynote speaker Pete Dunne at Saturday night's banquet. Pete is a renowned author and speaker, longtime director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, New Jersey Audubon's Birding Ambassador, and founder of the World Series of Birding.

Home base for the weekend is the Sheraton Roanoke Hotel and Conference Center at 2801 Hershberger Rd. Room reservations can be

made at 540-563-9300, 800-325-3535, or www.sheratonroanoke.com. Rates are \$99 plus tax, but you must use the "Virginia Society of Ornithology Annual Meeting 2016" designation when reserving your room.

More details will be forthcoming as they become available, so check our Facebook page or our website at roanokevalleybirdclub.com often. But for now, make plans to attend this fun event!

Alyce Quinn General Chairman,
twoquinns@yahoo.com

Are Tree Swallows Taking Over Our Bluebird Trails?

Article by Phil Kenny

This spring I was included in a series of emails the subject of which was concern about lack of bluebird nesting activity and that the tree swallows were taking over bluebird trails in many areas. The trend seems to be more and more that tree swallows are getting so aggressive they drive bluebirds out of their boxes, removing eggs or nesting over them in some cases.

I began to wonder: Is this something that we need to be concerned about? So, I took a look at my data from 15 years of monitoring bluebird boxes at Meadowlark Gardens. The trend line was steeply increasing for tree swallows and slightly decreasing for bluebirds!

I then looked at the statewide data. While the trend line for tree swallows is positive, it is increasing at a more rapid rate for bluebirds. Are tree swallows taking over? The answer is probably not. But if tree swallows are an issue on your trail there are some steps you can take to address this concern. One common approach is to install nest boxes in pairs. As you know, bluebirds are territorial and will not nest in close

proximity to another pair of bluebirds. Tree swallows likewise want some space between themselves and another nesting pair. However, each species will tolerate the other species in a nearby box. You can even "triple" your boxes and get chickadees or titmice to use the third box! See the website <http://www.sialis.org/pairing.htm> for more info on this subject.

If tree swallows are dominating your trail, take a deep breath and wait until the season is over. You might find that the bluebirds "catch up" later in the season. Try experimenting with moving boxes, adding boxes, pairing and even tripling boxes. Keep in mind that other native cavity nesters are almost as desirable as bluebirds. The bluebird population has increased ten-fold from the 1960's, thanks largely to bluebird trails sponsored by bluebird societies, so why not try to help other species, too? Can you imagine an email 25 years from now: Help, prothonotary warblers are taking over my bluebird trail!

Pantops Bluebird Trail – 2015

Article and Photos by Doug Rogers, Editor

The article on page 1 of this edition of *The Bird Box* was intriguing to me. While I know that some areas of our state had good success this season, my trail did not. Take down my boxes? No way!

I monitor twelve boxes on private land. These past two years have been tough on the bluebirds in my area. 2014 was a year of battling predators: black rat snakes, European starlings, house sparrows, blowflies and some unknown predator. 2015 saw the bluebirds slow to establish their territories, slow to build (and defend) their nests and slow to lay their eggs. This year I was much more aggressive in protecting my boxes against predators – thanks to ideas provided by Christine Boran. Here is some brief data:

	<u>2014</u>	<u>2015</u>
Number of eggs	85	48
Number hatched	54	45
Number Fledged	36	41

Note: The number of eggs was down by 44%.
Fledging success was up by 43% due to increased predator protection.



Given the bluebirds' late start in establishing territories and staking claim to the boxes, they were out-competed for four of my twelve boxes by Carolina chickadee, tree swallow and house wren. This was my first year of hosting house wren. (It's a native species and I can't, in good conscience, remove its nests.)

I firmly believe the bluebirds still need our help!

Experiencing the Butterfly Life Cycle

Article and Photos by Lexi Meadows

Three years ago, at the conclusion of a monthly Southside Bird Club meeting, I noticed a friend buying a tray of different herbs. I asked her about all the different kinds she had and she told me the fennel was for the butterflies. I decided I would try my luck with it and I have been growing it ever since.

This year I decided to pay particular attention and several weeks ago I was excited to find I had lots of eggs. Within a week I had 13 caterpillars (all different sizes) on one bronze fennel plant. It was exciting to see how fast my fennel plant was disappearing and at the same time how big the caterpillars were getting. After some time the caterpillar count was going down each day as they departed to form a chrysalis. In years past I have eagerly searched my flower bed to find one

- without success.

Imagine my surprise when I came home from work on May 29th and found a caterpillar that had attached himself to my cone flower plant. I could not contain my excitement as I ran inside for my camera. This plant was about 15 feet from the host plant and on the very edge of the flower bed. The very next day he was in chrysalis form. Then five days later another caterpillar came to the same plant!! I have now enjoyed the emergence of two beautiful butterflies.



VBS Biennial Fall Conference

Join us on Saturday, November 14th in Charlottesville for the biennial Virginia Bluebird Society conference. Every other year, VBS invites members and non-members to a conference that's all about bluebirds and other avian life. The conference will run from 9:30 to 2:30, including lunch. We are excited that our speakers will include Bob Schamerhorn, presenting "Attracting Birds with Water" (www.iphotobirds.com), and William Young, presenting "99 Reasons to be Fascinated by Birds" and Dr. Caren Cooper with "Bluebird Happiness and Turning House Sparrows into Canaries."

Registration forms can be found on the VBS website and are due by October 31. See you all in November!

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:

Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
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Membership forms are available on the VBS website: <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org>



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