

The Bird Box Bird Box

Fall 2018 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

Odd-shaped Bluebird Eggs

By Christine Boran, Woolwine House Bluebird Trail, Patrick County

My bluebird trail in Woolwine, now in its 10th year of operation, had a late but very odd nesting. There was a first nesting that fledged 5 bluebird young on May 11. The rest of the summer yielded no second nesting at this nest box. Then, lo and behold, a new nest was built with a first egg laid on July 27. The egg clutch of four had three malformed-looking eggs with the strangest-shaped looking like an oversized kidney bean or one large piece of elbow macaroni! The other three eggs were misshaped — not the rounded oval shapes we monitors are accustomed to viewing in the nest.



Clutch of odd-shaped eggs in Patrick County. Photo by Christine Boran

Since I submit my trail data to Cornell NestWatch, I decided to contact the project managers at NestWatch about my finding. They were highly interested and chose to publish this odd clutch in their August eNewsletter online. The first consensus by Nest-

Watch was that the laying female bluebird was experiencing some environmental stresses or physical nutritional deficiencies that prevented the eggs from developing normally during the egg laying period. On August 13, the first egg hatched - not the kidney bean egg. That hatchling died within a day, and the parent birds removed the deceased. Egg number 2, a slightly misshaped egg, hatched. The hatchling looked weak to me, but I kept up hope! At that point, it was clear that I needed to check this nest every other day to get updates and watch closer and keep NestWatch up to date. Later, NestWatch contacted Dr. Mark Hauber, author of *The Book of Eggs: A Life-Size*

Guide to the Eggs of Six Hundred of the World's Bird Species, about what could have caused this. Dr. Hauber told them, "It looks like the female laid the eggs too fast without the shell being fully formed — I would suspect that these eggs are incredibly thin. They are incredible eggs indeed!"



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I kept a photo journal for this unusual event. Two eggs did not hatch, but the sole surviving nestling did indeed make it! I candled and then dissected the two unhatched eggs remaining; one had a developing yolk (not a double yolk) and the other was clear fluid, which means it was unfertilized. The sole surviving nestling fledged on August 30. Of course this was a celebration!

Advice I always give monitors: do not underestimate our bluebirds. Keep checking your nest boxes through the month of August. You may find late nesters. Every year on my 50-nest-box trail, I find at least three late nests, and it never gets old or tiring for me to keep monitoring the trail, even in August. My latest fledging ever was September 6. This year, I feel I hit the jackpot with this odd egg clutch. I celebrated once again one sole surviving fledging. Both parent birds remained present during this nesting cycle and kept diligent in guarding the nest and at Fledge Day, which was on Day 17. For those interested in the August NestWatch article online, you can read it here:

<https://nestwatch.org/connect/news/nestwatcher-spots-odd-eggs-in-bluebird-nest/>



Beautiful Leucistic Bluebird's Nesting Success

By Doug Rogers, Charlottesville, Virginia Bluebird Society Board Member

About 7 or 8 nesting seasons ago, my wife and I, with the help of our County Coordinator, Ann Dunn, started a nest box trail on three pieces of private property here on Pantops Mountain near Charlottesville. We have boxes on the property behind the Giant Store, which is managed by Virginia Land Company; we have boxes on the Worrell Property where the Hilton Garden Inn is located; and we have boxes on the Martha Jefferson Hospital property. Permission to locate our boxes on these properties was arranged in advance.

We've learned a lot here and have enjoyed every nesting season! Our first season was an unqualified success. In our original twelve boxes, we fledged 82 babies. That number was the highest number we have ever had. Following that first year, we have been dealing with multiple predators. To thwart them, we have followed the advice of Christine Boran at Woolwine House.

We've dealt with lots of predators, but something different and really special happened this year.

In the last three years, our boxes have been taken over by lots of Tree Swallows. To thwart them we installed four sets of paired boxes. At first, this worked well but during this past season, we saw all four sets occupied by Tree Swallows.

One day around mid-season while I was monitoring I saw a Bluebird couple checking out one of the paired boxes occupied by a pair of Tree Swallows. The female was a beautiful leucistic bird, with mostly white plumage.



Beautiful Leucistic Bluebird's Nesting Success, continued from page 2



Above: a leucistic female Eastern Bluebird and her mate atop a nestbox in Charlottesville.

Right: Here's mom in action. Isn't she lovely?



Above and Below: Here's Dad "relaxing" a caterpillar for immediate feeding. Then he delivers it and goes out for more – and more – and more.



Left: Here's Jamie and Janie Bluebird on their first flight. They took off and actually flew up a small hill to a tree up there. There was another tree much closer to the box.



Can you see her there on the front, left side of the box?

She and her mate successfully evicted the Tree Swallows and built their nest on top of the TRES nest! Within a week, she had laid four eggs – all of which hatched! All of the chicks had normal pigment and all of them fledged.

This year our trail fledged 48 Bluebird babies – which was up from last year's total of only 32.

It was a real treat to conclude the nesting season watching the beautiful leucistic female and her mate succeed in wresting a nest box from the Tree Swallows – and raise their own family in it.

The Perfect Nestbox

By Barbara Chambers (VBS Board Member at time of article) Excerpt Reprinted from *The Bird Box*, July 2005

Is there such a thing as a “perfect nestbox”? Marci Swanson sent me an article, “Bluebird Trails and Tails,” from a recent newsletter of the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania (BSP). With thanks and apologies to the BSP and the author, Susan Renkel, I shall borrow from it here and add a few notes of my own. With so many different nestbox styles, it can be tempting to choose a box that is clever, fancy, pretty or touted as being House Sparrow-proof. Let common sense be your guide and remember these basic principles.

Lumber: The thicker the walls and roof, the more insulated the nestbox will be from the heat and the cold. Rough-cut cypress, redwood, pine or cedar is frequently recommended. Always use untreated lumber. Treated or painted wood gives off gases that, even when odorless, are toxic to birds.

Roof: It will deteriorate faster than the rest of the box. BSP says the longest-lasting roofs are made from exterior-grade plywood or vinyl. VBS recommends 2-inch thick pine. Adding shingles also extends the life of the roof. VBS has also tried metal, which reflects the sun away and protects the wood from warping and splitting. Be creative! The roof should have an overhang of at least 2 inches, on at least three sides. The more the roof overhangs the better it will prevent blowing rain and snow from getting inside. A slanted roof or a flat roof with grooved drip edge on the under-side will provide additional weather protection.

Ventilation: A small gap between the roof and sides will provide good cross ventilation, a very important item during our hot Virginia summers. Several holes drilled in the sides near the top carry an additional benefit; during winter or during cold spring days, those holes can be plugged. VBS suggests winterizing our boxes using insulation strips and placing putty in the ventilation holes. The box should be weather-proof; if it leaks it could cause the death of nestlings and even adults.

Floor: It must have drainage! Cutting the corners off the square wood floor is sufficient.

Entrance Hole: It should be exactly 1-1/2 inches for bluebirds. Other cavity nesters will use it as well. Though it won't eliminate the House Sparrow, it will keep the European Starling out. It should be protected with a Noel guard to eliminate raccoon and cat predation.

Box Depth: The deeper the better. Minimum recommendation is 7 inches from hole to floor. Depths less than this make inhabitants easy targets for predators. However, with the VBS-recommended Noel guard around the hole, that type of predation is mostly eliminated.

Floor Space: Minimum recommendations are 4x4 inches (or for a PVC round box, 4 inches). But a box this size can get pretty crowded! A larger, 5x5-inch box would allow nestlings to stretch their wings and develop flight muscles.

Easy to Monitor and Clean: It is best if the box opens down on one side. Boxes need to be monitored at least once a week. More frequent monitoring means more fun and it helps calculate how old the nestlings are as well as their growth and health. Do not open the box after the 13th day in order to prevent premature fledging. Clean out each nestbox after the nestlings fledge. Side opening boxes make this easier.

Pole Mounted, with a Snake Guard: The VBS protocol also calls for mounting the nestbox on a 1-inch metal electrical conduit pole. This allows for easy placement and removal. Onto this pole is mounted, below the box, a metal stove pipe “snake guard” with a cap. It has been 99 percent effective in eliminating snake predation. See the VBS Web site for the plans.

Habitat: Bluebirds require approximately one acre of open mowed area (mowed at least four times a year) for hunting the insects that make up 70-80 percent of their diet during nesting season. This open area should be dotted with a few large trees, which offer protection for the parents and the fledglings. Perches, natural or man-made, help bluebirds hunt their prey. Don't use pesticides where there are nestboxes. It poisons the birds' prey base, and you may never know how it affected the birds in your boxes.

Water: All birds need access to clean, fresh water!

Landlord: VBS and BSP both encourage responsible nestbox owners. That is someone who loves and respects nature and is willing to protect native species of all kinds. This may require putting up a house for another cavity nester alongside your bluebird box, and/or removing the nest and eggs of the non-native House Sparrow. Starlings should not be a problem if you use a 1-1/2 inch hole.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Current nestbox recommendations and plans/instructions can be found at:

<http://www.virginiabluebirds.org/about-bluebirds/nest-boxes-guards-signs/>

Resources for purchasing can be found at:

<http://www.virginiabluebirds.org/nest-box-suppliers/>

Bluebirds Roosting

By Jane Hesler, Chesterfield County Co-Coordinator



Nestcam photo of Eastern Bluebirds sheltering together in a nestbox last January.

Photo by Jane Hesler

During our very cold January last year we had bluebirds roosting in many of our boxes. We did not put straw in the boxes when we winterized because our birds start nesting in early March. We worry about disturbing that process when we remove the straw in February. We do plan to put pine straw in the boxes this year and hope to remove it before nesting begins. We use foam to seal up the vents in the top of the box to prevent drafts. With 50+ boxes we had evidence of roosting in at least 1/3 of the boxes. We did find one dead male on the very last box we opened in February. We were able to get a video of birds roosting on a cold night. Paste this link into your browser to see a female piling onto the huddle.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8xhqpdz>

Photos From the Fort CF Smith Trail

By Paul Mocko, Arlington

The Fort CF Smith Bluebird Trail consists of 5 boxes in an Arlington County park that preserves the remnants of a Civil War fort. The fort was one of the many Union installations that protected Washington DC. Although we have not had a bluebird nest in the six years I have monitored, every year we fledge Carolina Chickadees and House Wrens, and for the past two years, Tree Swallows.



Carolina Chickadees in Fort CF Smith Bluebird Trail nest box

Photos by Paul Mocko, Arlington County



Tree Swallow nest and eggs

The Year of the Snake

By Jane Hesler, Chesterfield County Co-Coordinator



This was my eighth year monitoring bluebird trails and we have never had a snake problem. I believed the stovepipe baffle kept them away. This year proved me wrong.

My first snake encounter was in a chickadee box. We had a camera in the box and saw the snake come in and eat one of the chicks. The happy snake was just hanging out, digesting and comfy in the box. The three remaining chicks (only two can be seen here) were oblivious and were begging for food when we opened the box. We removed a young black snake that had likely hatched the previous summer. Mr. and Mrs. CC were scolding us the whole time but immediately returned to feeding the chicks when we closed the box. The remaining chicks fledged successfully.

My second encounter was in a bluebird box. We were monitoring with a new monitor when we found this ... definitely a large black snake, also happy, disgusting and hanging out. My first concern was for the five chicks that had been in the box. Clear-

Above: A young black rat snake hanging out in a nestbox with Carolina Chickadee nestlings.

Right: Large black rat snake hanging out in a bluebird nest.

Photos by Jane Hesler



ly they were eaten. My second concern was whether I would ever get this new monitor back again. The staff in the park told us that black snakes were “acting weird this year.” I certainly agree. In all we lost 5 clutches. Some were our “best boxes.” We noted that once a box had a snake attack it was not used again, so that meant we lost several clutches.

We plan to install a “redesigned” snake guard on the affected boxes and will report on the results. We will not install a guard that entangles the snake because we certainly like the black snakes. We just think we owe it to the bluebirds to keep them safe in the boxes we provide.

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We welcome your written items and artwork (photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box*.

The Bluebird Advisor

By Christine Boran and Anne Little



Q: I have heard about winterizing a nest box. What does that actually mean, and is it really necessary?

A: I'm so glad you asked, because this is the time to do it after you've cleaned out your last nests in your nest boxes. Nest boxes are houses during the nesting season and shelter during the winter. This is why it's good to leave your nest boxes installed year-round. Winterizing and preparing your nest boxes can help the birds survive the winter by providing needed shelter for roosting. Truly, it helps our Bluebirds and other cavity nesters, like the Titmouse or the Chickadee that stay for the winter, by providing warm shelter, especially during harsh winter weather - ice storms, snow, and high-velocity freezing winds. Bluebirds have been documented on video entering the nest boxes in multiples before a big storm to huddle together — they use each other's body warmth. It sounds crowded sometimes, but it is an amazing survival technique by these remarkable birds. Simply, you plug up the ventilation holes and slots at the top so cold air does not drop down inside the nest box, then you add warm bedding a couple inches thick to keep their bellies away from the cold wood floors and drainage holes - that's it. I use white pine needle. Autumn is a great time to collect those needles - they fall off the trees in large quantities. You can also use clean dried grasses or wood shavings. I like the pine needles best because it's their preferred natural nesting material for their young, and if water or snow gets on the needles, it does not hold water like dried grasses or wood shavings might. I shake out any leaves and sticks, place them in a cleaned-out nest box, and bat them down flat with my fist. I use foam insulation to plug up all ventilation as recommended by VBS. It can be cut with scissors to fit just right, and this material can be removed in spring and recycled for future winters. Keep the entry hole open, of course. Also keep the drainage holes open in the bottom in case water or snow gets inside so it drains out. I keep the ventilation plugged up through April 15 due to freeze snaps that we can get overnight on newly laid eggs and hatchlings in March and April. If you have just a few boxes and you get some heat spells early on during the spring nestings, just remove the ventilation plugs. I winterize all my nest boxes on the bluebird trail - I enjoy one last visit on the trail during this time when the air is crisp and the leaf colors are changing. While there, I tighten the screws of the box attached to the conduit so blowing winds won't loosen anything. When you make your first visit to your nest boxes again in March, you can leave the bedding if it is clean and unsoiled - otherwise, you should remove the soiled bedding. Sometimes you will find small pits deposited on the bedding from the winter berries they eat - that means more than likely bluebirds roosted in your nest box during the winter! Do it now or by Thanksgiving at the latest. You can see photos of how this can be done with a printable color PDF on the VBS website under the Winterizing page: <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org/about-bluebirds/winterizing-nest-boxes/>

The Bluebird Advisor

Send your questions to vbs@virginiabluebirds.org

Mark Your Calendars

- October** Clean, repair, winterize nest boxes.
- November 10** VBS Board meeting in Charlottesville, location TBD; contact Cathy Hindman if you are a County Coordinator and would like to attend.
- January 30** Deadline for submitting articles, photos, ideas, and artwork for spring newsletter
- March 12-15, 2020** **Save the date!** NABS Conference in Kearney, Nebraska. More information will be posted later at www.nabluebirdsociety.org/.

Check out our Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Virginia-Bluebird-Society-133048243442687/> for photos and videos throughout the year, and follow us on Twitter at https://twitter.com/VA_Bluebirds.

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 if you prefer a mailed 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

We welcome articles and photos from our active VBS members. We want to share our success stories from your home and your trails. Send your original articles, photos, or artwork, or suggest a topic for a future newsletter. Submit materials to Judy Hall, Editor, at carjuwa@hotmail.com by January 30 to be considered for the spring newsletter. Please include your location, identification of people and birds in photos, and name of photographer.



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