



The Bird Box

Spring 2010

Nest Box As Art

Cathy Messina, one of our monitors in Alexandria, is a painter. Last fall she borrowed the display bluebird nest as a model for an art class she was taking. It was a style new to her, called *trompe l'oeil*, French for "fool the eye," in which the artist strives to make a painting so realistic that at first glance it is mistaken for the object being painted. She has painted the inside of a bluebird nest box on a flat surface, complete with nest, five eggs, hole and wood. It fools my eye, as if I were monitoring the nest box! She has donated her wonderful work to VBS to be used as a fundraiser. I'll bring it to our board meeting in March. I may have to buy it and donate the price to VBS! Perhaps we can auction it at our next general meeting (that means I get to have it for two years!) She has titled the work, "Boxful of Blue." It's priceless.

– Barbara Chambers



Are You Ready For the Bluebirds?

It has been a pretty intense winter, but finally another nesting season is upon us. Trail leaders and monitors, all over the state, should be gearing up for the new season. One of the things that a state county coordinator tries to do is to alert bluebirders that it is time to get out there and take a look at their boxes. The other is to help you find new monitors if you need them, and then help you train them. It's important also to retrain the returning monitors. So let me know. Here is a checklist to help you do this big job.

Spring Checklist (to be completed during March)

- * Contact all the trail leaders in your county.
- * Leaders and monitors need to walk their trails and check each box.
- * Do any box repairs or location adjustments as needed. Call VBS for help if you need it.
- * Be alert for wasps. If present, clear them out and soap their nest attachment spot.
- * If you winterized your trail, wait until the weather warms appreciably, especially if nest or eggs are present, to remove the vent plugs. But do clear out any roosting evidence from the bottoms of the boxes.
- * Review the VBS protocols used on our trails. These are found on the VBS Web site: www.virginiabluebirds.org.
- * Call all the monitors from the last season to be sure they will be available this season.
- * Replace any monitors not returning and then train the new monitors (I may be able to help here).
- * Check your trail bucket, or however you carry the equipment, for complete, clean, contents.
- * Update your trail notebook with new pages for this season. Forms can be downloaded from the VBS Web site.
- * Check with trail property managers to find out about any changes, and remind them that monitoring will begin the first week of April.
- * Develop a calendar schedule for this season with your monitors and send out copies, to everyone who is working or has knowledge of your trail. This is a recommended practice for leaders who have several teams on one trail.

E-mail is a good way to communicate with your monitors, officers, and county coordinators. Call them if they don't have e-mail.

We are here to support your work on the trails. Let us know what you need. And thanks a lot for volunteering for this job. Remember the rewards! All those wonderful nests, eggs, nestlings and bluebirds, as well as all that good exercise you get in the great outdoors. Good luck, and have a great season. And *keep good data!*

– Barbara Chambers

The Bird Box

Issue 11.3

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.

VBS Awards Two Members

At our membership meeting on November 7 in Bedford, VBS gave out two awards to two active, involved members. One was for the Volunteer of the Year and the second for the County Coordinator of the Year. Here is what was said to honor those awardees.

Volunteer of the Year. This award is given to an individual who helps promote and enhance VBS through giving of their time and energy. This volunteer helps VBS grow and flourish and by doing that, helps the bluebirds in Virginia to grow and flourish.

This is the person we all go to when we have a need. She is a Vice President and a County Coordinator and manages the Scout Grants for the state, and does every thing most creatively. When someone was needed to handle the Grant forms from Exxon Mobil, this person stepped up. She also helped find the new editor for our newsletter.

Carmen Bishop can be counted on to step up when there is a need, and her ideas are always solid and always helpful. This is a real Volunteer! Congratulations, Carmen!



(Left to right) Anne Little, President; Carmen Bishop, Volunteer of the Year; Barbara Chambers, State Coordinator

County Coordinator

of the Year. A county coordinator can choose to do the minimum job, which is to collect the data for the county and pass it along to VBS and Charlie Chambers. A county coordinator who goes the extra mile can send articles to local papers and give programs about the EABL and other cavity nesters to groups and organizations to spread the word and educate the general public. Some do that and even more. These are the county coordinators who deserve special recognition, and today we are going to do just that.

There is a very pro-active coordinator in one of our rural, southern counties that has gone way beyond the minimum! She stays in touch with VBS on many levels, has good ideas to offer, asks questions to clear up areas that are new, and works with the local population to further the bluebird's increase. She attended the NABS convention in Pennsylvania this past September and even took a friend to further her education. She has her own

Web site and blog and VBS and NABS have linked to it from their Web sites. **Christine Boran** of Patrick County really works at bluebirding. Congratulations!



(Left to right) Anne Little, President; Christine Boran, County Coordinator of the Year; Barbara Chambers, State Coordinator

Sustaining Bluebirds in the Winter

Like most animals, bluebirds need shelter, water, and food to sustain them during the winter, all of which are difficult to come by in that weather. So what can we do to help them through that difficult period? Winterizing the nest boxes by sealing the ventilation holes and placing a layer of dried grass on the floor is of enormous help to the birds. (See *The Bird Box*, Fall 2009.) As for water, it can be kept thawed in the nest boxes by using a heated birdbath, livestock water heating elements, or a heated pet water bowl with large rocks to decrease the depth of the water.

Bluebirds survive on wild berries from plants like dogwood, holly, smooth sumac, and winterberry, but these are scarce in winter. My wife, Priscilla, and I have been feeding bluebirds since 1993, and we've placed currants, freeze-dried blueberries, raisins, holly berries, and dogwood berries in their feeder. Any feeder will do, but one that keeps out squirrels along with larger birds seems to work the best. Many bluebird feeders have been marketed, including tray/dish and round cage types and a "covered bridge" style with a hole in each end. The suppliers often use Plexiglas or 1-½ inch wire mesh as sides. Another type of feeder is made of PVC, 8-inch in length and 4-inch in diameter. It has end caps with two holes drilled into the side.

Once you get a feeder, it's important to lure the birds inside to feed. One way to do that is to use the branches of live winterberries or the plastic ones from the craft shop. To get the bluebirds to enter a bluebird feeder, take off the top or the Plexiglas sides to make it easy for them to get to the food, and then put the feeder back together after a few days. The feeders with the holes at each end may need to have a "platform" or an attached clothespin in which to place a few cut branches of the red berries just below the entrance holes.

In preparation for the winter, gather dogwood berries in the fall, and keep them in an open-ventilated, unsealed container in the fridge. They can also be frozen. A bluebird can swallow any berry that is 3/8 inch or smaller. The seed will be regurgitated shortly thereafter. Another interesting possibility is to feed the bluebirds mealworms during the first brood of the season, especially if insects are scarce due to cold and wet weather.

Mealworms are deficient in calcium, but they are a great source of protein. Calcium should be made available to the bluebirds in spring by giving them baked, crushed, dry chicken eggs or crushed oyster shells (bake them at 250 degrees for 20 minutes).

I hope these suggestions will help you help the bluebirds through the cold weather.

– Ron Kingston

Note: Many of our members had difficulty last year getting mealworms for their bluebirds. There is some good news on that front. Ohio-based Nature's Way Mealworms is now back up and running with their totally organic mealworms. They have also lowered their prices for 2010, and have special reduced pricing for NABS members. To reach them, call 800-318-2611.

Q & A Column

Noel Guard and Snake Guard, Too?

Question: Why is the Noel guard so important if we already have a snake guard on the pole?

Answer: VBS data shows that boxes that have both Noel guards and snake guards fledge more nestlings. There are several reasons for that. The snake guard is designed solely for snakes. But the swinging of the snake guard and its clanking sound often scare off many other predators before they get to the pole to try to climb or jump onto the nest box. If a predator like a cat or raccoon jumps onto the box, the Noel guard then limits its reach toward the eggs or nestlings inside. Similarly, larger birds like owls, crows, and woodpeckers can't reach inside.

The birds all seem to use that platform to sit on before entering or leaving the box. The bluebird will also take on an invader right there on the Noel guard. And haven't you noticed the male leaving his offering of nesting materials there for the nest builder to easily reach as she goes about her business of homemaking?

So never put up a nest box without that Noel guard attached!

Anne Little has this comment: Initially, I was a little skeptical (and lazy) about fixing guards on all of my boxes. But one day at Quantico Golf Course I saw a Red-bellied Woodpecker stick its beak into the box hole, pluck out a baby bluebird, and fly away. I was shocked. So, now all my boxes have Noel guards on them.

[A woodpecker has a very long tongue rolled up inside its skull, which can be reeled out at will. Its tip is both sticky and barbed, so it's a simple task to find food otherwise out of reach.]

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.

Nest Box Vandalism



Vandalized nest box found charred

Shortly after the Fourth of July, I learned from a neighbor that one of the nest boxes on our local trail had been “burned down.” Upon quick inspection, I found the charred remains of a nest and nest box lying on the ground with just one board dangling from a bolt. Only days earlier it had a nest full of house wren eggs ready to hatch. Needless to say, my children and I were devastated and saddened to see such thoughtlessness. Soon afterward, we were able to piece together the story that some teenagers had been lighting fireworks in the park and that sparks had been seen shooting out of the park as the kids walked away. Unfortunately, our park is more isolated, despite being close to the city, and therefore we have experienced several cases of vandalism during school breaks and over the summer. But this was more than a little graffiti. We called the police and they documented the incident and provided a case number. In addition, we publicized the incident on our neighborhood listserv bulletin board along with the case number, the officer’s name, and phone number. Amazingly, within a short period of time, the police identified the responsible party. Without too much prodding, the individual (a local teenager) confessed to putting a firecracker in the nest box.

Both state and federal laws protect nest boxes, and vandalism is a crime under Arlington County law. So VBS had the choice of either pressing charges or resolving the issue on its own. We discussed the matter and decided that if the culprit replaced the nest box and attended an educational program to learn more about the birds nesting in the nest boxes, then VBS would not press charges. In the end, this solution proved acceptable to all involved.

I met the guilty teenager at the park, showed him how the nest boxes work, and provided details about the birds nesting in them. I also described the nest that had been inside the box, and I conveyed the devastation felt by my own family and by the community who had been monitoring the boxes in the neighborhood. To demonstrate the extent of the damage, I produced photos of the charred nest and nest box that I had taken before cleaning it up. The teenager listened and seemed to sense the consequences of the vandalism, but there was never a formal apology. As compensation, he was asked to either pay for a new box or build one to specification. The teenager chose the latter, and he produced a new box within a couple of weeks. It was with some small satisfaction that I was able to see the replacement nest box hung in the spot where the old one once stood.

Some may say that the punishment was too weak for someone facing a potential legal penalty. If the teenager had faced charges, it would have probably been weeks or months before he went to court, without a guarantee that the judge would impose a meaningful penalty. I hope the teenager will think twice before doing something as insensitive as this again.

My advice to any trail managers or monitors who deal with vandalism is to file a police report, get a contact and a case number from the police, and spread the word about nest box activity (good and bad) throughout the community. In our neighborhood, I try to provide a program or two each year where the kids and adults of the community can join me on my rounds to the nest boxes, so they get a chance to learn about birds nesting and see some nestlings. The old adage, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” applies to educating people about nature, too.

– Allison Davis-Holland



New nest box made and installed by teenager who caused the damage

The Purple Martin

The Purple Martin, the largest of all North American swallows, is the true harbinger of spring. These interesting birds are found only in the New World, and they return to North America from their homes in Brazil and Bolivia on a very predictable basis -- as early as January in South Florida. In southern Virginia they can be seen by early March. They spend 120-150 days breeding and then return home gathered into huge flocks. Sometimes, as large as 700,000 strong, these flocks show up on radar, and hurricanes are known to wipe out entire colonies if the timing is bad.

There are a large number of Purple Martin monitors in North America, second only to bluebird monitors. But they may be first in terms of their commitment to their colonies. James R. Hill III, the founder of the Purple Martin Conservation Association, has excellent information and advice for all Purple Martin monitors. Visit their Web site, www.purplemartin.org, for everything you need to know to either begin or to begin doing it right! PMCA is located at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania (814-734-4420, info@purplemartin.org). A second organization is the Purple Martin Society, NA located at 7510 Farmingdale Drive, Suite 107, Danen, IL 60561; phone: 630-850-8529. Check them out on the web too at: www.purplemartin.com.

There is a wealth of information available on Purple Martins. *Bird Watcher's Digest* had an extensive cover article in the March/April 2004 edition, by James R. Hill. Every June there is an Annual Purple Martin Field Day and Workshop held at Lance D. Wood's Farm in central Virginia, which is well worth attending. Contact Ron and Priscilla Kingston at kingston@cstone.net for more information about this terrific event.

Native Americans in the Southeast had a tradition of hanging gourds around their campsites to attract Purple Martins, as much for their gregarious nature as for their ability to consume large quantities of insects. And it continues to this day for much the same reasons.

Purple Martins are not strikingly colorful birds. The male is a dark, glossy, purple/blue, and the female and the juvenile are gray below. But their noisy, constant chattering to one another is quite entertaining. They enjoy being around people as much as the bluebirds do. Purple Martins need to be near water as they bathe, drink, and eat on the wing. Before the Native Americans housed them, Purple Martins nested singly or in small colonies, as is their nature. They used woodpecker holes in abandoned snags and other dead or dying trees.

There are three geographic races, or subspecies, of Purple Martins: The Eastern Martin (*Progne subis subis*), the Desert Martin (*P. s. hesperia*), and the Western Martin (*P. s. arboricola*). The eastern race depends almost solely on man-made housing.

Nanette Mickle spoke about Purple Martins at the VBS State Conference in Bedford in November. Her talk was very informative. Bluebirds have been known to nest in the Purple Martin houses; they move into one of the apartments! I don't know about the gourds. But, as with the bluebird, you must have the proper habitat to attract Purple Martins. Some of us have put up martin housing, but have never gotten any Purple Martins. There is a trick, besides the habitat, so we still have to learn a lot about what to do, and how and where to do it.

– Barbara Chambers



Vital Facts

Purple Martin (*Progne subis*)

Length: 8 inches

Nest: In a cavity, in the East in man-made housing exclusively. Built by male and female of grass, green leaves, mud and feathers. A colony nester.

Eggs: 3-8; 4 or 5 are average. White and unmarked. 1-3 broods.

Incubation: By female; 15-18 days.

Age at fledging: 26-31 days.

Food: Insects. Hunts and drinks on the wing. Sometimes hunts for ants on the ground.

Fall roosts: Gather in enormous pre-migratory groups in communal roosts. Up to 100,000 birds at the end of summer. Richmond has a roost and there may be one near you. It is an amazing sight!

[From *The Backyard Birdhouse Book* by René and Christyna M. Laubach]



Purple Martin
(Photo: Copyright, Tony Quezon)



Let's Be Careful This Spring!

Spring is the season for the reawakening of life: of buds and babies and nestlings. Let's be very careful with our activities outdoors, so that we don't disturb or injure any wildlife, as life emerges after winter.

Before you prune or cut a tree or mow over tall grasses, inspect those areas visually. Squirrel nests are large spheres of leaves built high in trees. Rabbits (at least Eastern Cottontails) do not burrow, but place their babies in a shallow depression in the ground lined with their own fur. Lawn mowers frequently destroy all or part of the nest, exposing and sometimes killing the babies. Use a small branch or yardstick to gently part the grasses and look for these signs near the base of the grasses.

Baby mammals must be nursed by their mothers. If the mother has been killed, the babies must be brought in for rehabilitation. Caring for baby squirrels, bunnies, and other mammals in rehabilitation is a round-the-clock job, and there are no guarantees that orphaned animals will survive. In 2006, over 150 baby squirrels (spring and fall litters) were orphaned due to nest destruction and brought to Cape Wildlife Center.

If you find a baby mammal, get some advice from your local rehabilitation center on how to proceed. Do not remove it from its nest unless the nest has been destroyed. Depending on individual circumstances, age of the animal and species, you may be advised to leave them alone, "re-nest" them in a nearby location, or bring them in for rehabilitation.

If you find a nestling bird that is uninjured and has some feathers, place it on a branch in the nearest tree. It is a myth that touching a nestling will cause its mother to abandon it. The parents have no sense of smell and will not know if a person has touched the nestling. If it can't perch and has fallen out of the nest, put the nestling in the tree in a berry basket, a plastic margarine cup or a shoebox. Poke holes in the bottom for drainage and line the container with natural materials like those of the original nest. If you can't reach the tree limb, replacement nests can even be duct-taped or nailed to the trunk quite easily. Stand out of sight and observe to make sure the parents return. Parents will come back and feed the nestling if they are not frightened by the presence of people.

A nestling needs help and should be brought to a wildlife rehabilitator when:

- * The parents are known to be dead.
- * The bird is newly hatched (no feathers) and the nest is out of reach.
- * The bird fell from a tall tree and attaching a substitute nest failed to attract the parents.
- * The bird is injured.
- * A cat or a child has brought the bird in from somewhere unknown.

To find a local rehabilitator, go to the Web site of the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council. It has good tips for things you can do while waiting to reach a rehabilitator. You can also call your state's department of natural resources to ask for the name and contact information for a rehabilitator near you. Being a good neighbor will enable you, your family, and your local wildlife to enjoy spring without anyone losing their home or family members.

What Should Be My Name?

I am a tiny hatchling in a bluebird's nest or I could be any specie of bird. But I am called by many names. I am called a chick, a nestling, and many of you even call me a baby when talking about my nest-mates and me.

But really, I am a nestling! That is my accurate name.

Now, what could be the difference? All these names do describe me, and the people seem to understand you no matter what you call me. So what's the big deal?

Well, there *is* a difference! A baby is human. A chick can get up, leave its nest, and walk away following its parent bird in just a few hours. Think chicken (which must be where that name came from), or killdeer, or duck. It takes me 16 to 18 days, and sometimes even 21 days, to leave my nest, and be able to fly. Therefore, I am correctly called a nestling. That is where I live for quite a while – in a nest.

I know (sigh!), it is just a technicality, but I would surely like to be called by the right name while I am spending all that time in my often crowded nest! So I answer to chick, as that has come to mean any young bird, but nestling is more accurate as I remain in my nest while I grow fast and develop. When I fly out, you may call me a fledgling!

What do you think? Can you help me out here?

VBS County Coordinators

Here are the 38 dedicated volunteers who now go the extra mile for the bluebirds. This is an ever-changing list, and I wish to thank all those who now served and have served in the past. If you don't see your county listed here and would like to join us, contact Barbara Chambers, bj.chambers@cox.net, for the particulars. The contact information on the County Coordinators is available on our Web site. Those who don't have Internet access can call Anne Little, 540-373-5494, or Barbara Chambers, 703-978-6609.

Ann Dunn	<i>Albemarle</i>	Paul Davis	<i>Nelson</i>
Alison Davis-Holland	<i>Arlington</i>	Judy Strange	<i>Northumberland</i>
Jo King	<i>Augusta</i>	Bob Gibson	<i>Orange</i>
Theo Evans	<i>Botetourt</i>	Christine Boran	<i>Patrick & Floyd</i>
Roger Mayhorn	<i>Buchanan</i>	Vickie Fuquay	<i>Pittsylvania</i>
Kaycee Lichliter	<i>Clarke and</i>	Tom Witt	<i>Powhatan</i>
Barb and Paul Tracy	<i>Culpeper</i>	Cathy Hindman	<i>Prince William (south)</i>
Carmen Bishop & Barbara Chambers	<i>Fairfax</i>	Carl Hansen	<i>Pulaski</i>
Dale and Linda Kerns	<i>Grayson & Carroll</i>	Brian Patterson	<i>Rapahannock</i>
Patricia and Frank Wilezek	<i>Greene, Madison, Page, Fauquier</i>	Earl Morris	<i>Roanoke</i>
Susan Bradshaw	<i>Hanover, Henrico, Richmond</i>	Steve Kvech	<i>Rockbridge</i>
Jimmy and Carole Doyle	<i>Henry</i>	Charles Kahler	<i>Rockingham</i>
Mark Byrd	<i>Isle of Wight</i>	Steve Morlan	<i>Shenandoah</i>
Elizabeth Evans & Debra Gutenson	<i>Loudoun</i>	Anne Little	<i>Spotsylvania</i>
Fay Tyler	<i>Louisa</i>	Beth Elkins	<i>Stafford & King George</i>
Bill Opengari	<i>Montgomery & Giles</i>	Brian Swanson	<i>Warren & Prince William (north)</i>

Peggy Spiegel Opengari Fund

The Roanoke Valley Bird Club has established the Peggy Spiegel Opengari Memorial Fund. Peggy was a bird lover extraordinaire and the driving force behind the Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Festival. Donations will be used for hummingbird research and habitat preservation. A plaque will be installed at Woodpecker Ridge Nature Center, one of her favorite places in the Roanoke area. Send your donations to the Virginia Society of Ornithology at 1230 Viewmont Dr., Evington, VA 24550-2006, with a notation that they are for the Peggy Spiegel Opengari Memorial Fund. Contact Alyce Quinn, twoquinns@yahoo.com.

Letter to the Editor

Nesting Season, Noel Guards

I read your "Nesting Ending Early?" and "Cats Indoors" articles [*Bird Box*, Fall 2009], and offer my two cents.

I monitor the bluebird trail on Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland. The 2009 nesting season produced 540 fledglings, a very good year, especially considering our previous 30-year high was 454 fledglings. Fledging continued throughout August (latest recorded on August 29) with a total of 63 for the month. So, we did not experience the post-July shut-down you mentioned.

On a broader note, our last three years have been our most productive by far – 540, 454, and 453, surpassing the previous 30-year high of 377 fledglings. The one variable separating the latest figures from those from earlier years has been the use of Noel predator guards, which are now mounted on all of our nest boxes. They definitely are effective in thwarting raccoons and cats (feral or domestic), and it is my unproven theory that they also inhibit sparrow vandalism. If you've ever witnessed House Sparrows ganging up on an unprotected entrance hole of a nesting box, with bluebirds in the box, you'll get my point. The Noel guard tends to discourage a sparrow attack, and maybe even discourage it from the outset, all to the advantage of the nesting bluebird.

– Mark Raabe

[We would love to get your responses to the articles in *The Bird Box*. Let's make this a regular column!]

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

March 1: Repair and inspect your nest boxes for the upcoming bluebird season.

March 13: VBS Board Meeting, DGIF Headquarters, Richmond. All are welcome to attend. For more info call 540 373-4594

April 1: Time to start monitoring your nest boxes if you have not already started. If you are interested in monitoring a trail near you, contact your county coordinator (see our Web site).

April 24: Mason Neck Earth Day Celebration, Lorton.

April 24: Fredericksburg Earth Day, Alumn Springs Park.

May 6 - 8: Great Dismal Swamp Birding Festival, Suffolk.

May 21 - 23: Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Festival, Giles County.



Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

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