



**Virginia
Bluebird
Society**

The Bird Box

Spring 2011

From a Bird's-eye View

Happy House-Hunting

It's been a long winter, and we have used birdhouses in backyards and on the golf course to shelter us from wind and snow. But now is the time for us to find the perfect nest box for raising our family. What are we cavity-nesting birds looking for? First we look at "location, location, location"! Is the house near an acre of lawn where delicious, high protein insects live in the spring and summer? If it is, then our young will get a good nutritional start in life. An added attraction would be a mealworm feeder in the general vicinity. A real plus would be a homeowner who regularly puts out mealworms. That means there will be times when we won't have to go far and wide looking for food for our youngsters.

Is the house easily accessible to a bubbling water source from which to drink and in which to bathe in the hot summer days to come? If all the above criteria are met, we inspect the box to see that it is clean on the inside, free of ants, wasps' nests, field mice, and signs of winter occupation. How has the box weathered over the years? Does it have leaks or a rotting roof? If it does, we might consider looking elsewhere.

We also look at protection for the family. Does the house have a snake guard, a guard against cats and raccoons, and a one and half inch hole small enough so that birds that prey on young cannot get into the snug home? Is there a shrub or tree less than 100 feet from the box where our fledglings can land and rest for a moment after taking their first scary flight? Is there a tree or a sheltering bush in the general vicinity of the box where we can hide when hungry raptors fly over, and are there perches nearby from which we can hunt for insects on the ground? If so, we may have found our dream home.

And just another thing before I close, one more feature we would really appreciate is privacy in which to raise our family. Are there feeders for seed eating birds nearby? That is not so appealing since it is wise to keep as many other species as possible away from the house while our young are growing up, especially when mockingbirds, House Sparrows, and other bullies are present.

When all our criteria are met, we know we have found just the right house and neighborhood for raising a family. It's time to drop a dry wisp of grass into the box of choice as a down payment, while waiting for some warmer days to begin the important task of nest building. – *Marci Swanson*

State-wide Bluebird Trail Results

It has been another very productive and fulfilling year for VBS's efforts at conserving our state's cavity nesters. People all over Virginia volunteered their precious hours to set up new nest boxes, take care of the old ones, diligently monitor them for bird activity, and record data to make our trails and parks an inviting and safe habitat for these wonderful birds.

Here are some results of our members' efforts in monitoring their bluebird trails throughout the state:

- * Results came in from 45 counties, covering 379 trails, 4,103 boxes.
- * An astounding 20,000 birds of all species fledged.
- * Two-thirds of these (12,998) were bluebirds; one-fifth (4,587) were Tree Swallows.
- * The rest (2,407) were chickadees, House Wrens, and other species.

It is not too late to get your nest box data in for last year. We still accept your data from past years. Please send all data to your county coordinator or to me at 8911 Moreland Lane, Annandale, VA 22003, or ce.chambers@cox.net.

We thank our trail monitors for all their efforts. Detailed results are on the pull-out page in this edition of *The Bird Box*.

– *Charlie Chambers*



Bluebird fledgling's first flight (Photo copyright: Dave Kinnear)

Promoting bluebirds and other cavity nesters

The Bird Box

Issue 12.3

Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society
www.virginiabluebirds.org

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

Nest Boxes and Native Trees

What are the chances of a bluebird nest box being made out of the wood of an American Chestnut Tree? Pretty low, you would say. Maybe, none whatsoever! In fact, where would you find a chestnut today, anyway? Until the early 20th century it was one of the most important trees on the East Coast; it was wiped out in the first half of the last century by blight, which came into the country on Chinese Chestnut trees. By 1951, some four billion trees were lost. The American Chestnut was an imposing tree, growing to a height of 150 feet and a girth of 10 feet. It was used for building homes, furniture, cradles, caskets – everything that was important for daily life. As the blight spread it was followed by panic cutting to save the wood of the trees which were left. It was a complete disaster. Some experts believe that this indiscriminate cutting actually ensured the demise of the American Chestnut, as some of the harvested trees might have been blight resistant and could have stemmed its tide. Today, a few concerned organizations like the American Chestnut Foundation are trying to develop blight resistant chestnut trees through selective pollination and propagation, and hope to eventually replant them in the natural range of the American Chestnut. Could we some day see bluebirds nesting in chestnut cavities? It will be a tough task.

As for the nest box built from chestnut wood – one of the trees hurriedly cut down in the first half of the 20th century ended up as a telephone pole in Virginia. It stood there steadfastly, all this while, holding aloft the wires connecting people to one another. Recently, the time came to bring it down. That's when Paul Davis, the VBS County Coordinator from Nelson County, entered the picture. Paul is an expert woodworker, and he blends his interest in carpentry with a fervent love for bluebirds. He has been making nest boxes for the last four years, mostly using cedar wood, and has made them available to VBS and others in Nelson County.

A few years back, Paul came across a Virginia Forestry brochure on the native trees of the state, and that sparked a novel idea – why not make nest boxes out of all the trees native to Virginia? That creative idea has become Paul's pet project. He has already built 70 such boxes using woods from trees as diverse as cucumber and holly. In his quest for rare species, Paul didn't just stop at the chestnut. He even managed to get his hands on an 80-year-old Long Leaf Pine beam from a factory which was being dismantled. Paul has made nest boxes using the dense wood of the Black Locust and worked with the soft texture of the Yellow Poplar, Dogwood, Paulownia, Red Mulberry -- Paul has converted wood from these and 30 other Virginia native species into nest boxes and hopes to reach his goal of using all of them soon. He's going to make a presentation at the November 11 VBS meeting on his interesting work and what it has meant to him. In the meantime, Paul has also been in touch with the officials of the Virginia Forestry Department, who're interested in installing a permanent display of his work at one of their locations. That would go a long way in promoting the goal of bluebird conservation in the state. And what a wonderfully creative way of doing that! Bravo, Paul Davis!

Bird Science in a Virginia Backyard

Until recently, scientists knew little about songbird migration. They speculated based on the rare recoveries of banded birds on wintering grounds, which did little to reveal the details of actual migration. Banding studies could not answer questions such as “How long did it take?” or “How often do they rest?” Without exact data, conservation of critical rest and refuel stopover points for songbirds was only a distant dream.

In 2007 that dream took a step towards reality. In a groundbreaking study (published in *Science*, February 2009), Dr. Bridget Stutchbury of York University tracked the first songbird migration using tiny geolocators harnessed on the backs of Purple Martins. During spring migration, one bird flew approximately 4,400 miles in 13 days! Another bird took 27 days, but was recorded traveling approximately 600 miles in one day! The data gained from these two pioneering birds may rewrite the textbooks.

The geocator works by measuring light levels every minute and recording the highest level every five minutes. Once the geocator is recovered and data downloaded, software calculates the latitude and longitude, allowing analysis of where the bird was, when. Geolocators are limited by their size, tiny battery, and short battery life, so birds have to be re-tagged annually. Additionally, geolocators do not use GPS and must be removed from the bird to retrieve the data.

The biology of Purple Martins makes them ideal candidates for this type of study. They are neotropical migrants with a relatively long migration. Because they are dependent on man-provided housing and have strong site loyalty, they can be relatively easily recaptured. Although on average, one can only expect a 50-60 percent migration survival rate, approximately 92 percent of the surviving birds return to the colony from which they started, making the retrieval of geolocators possible.

Studying birds from different regions is important for determining the influence of geographic location of breeding colonies on migration routes. Geolocators had been used on Purple Martins in Pennsylvania, Texas, and British Columbia. In 2010, I was able to add Virginia to this effort. With mentoring from the Purple Martin Conservation Association and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, I drafted a proposal and obtained the necessary permits. With help from several grants, including a very generous one from the North American Bluebird Society, I purchased 40 geolocators. On June 19, 2010, with a team of experienced bird banders (and a *Washington Post* video news team), we harnessed the first 20 geolocators on Purple Martins from my colony in Woodbridge, Virginia.

Deployment of the last 20 geolocators was complicated by the devastating summer heat. To minimize the possibility of site abandonment after the birds were trapped and handled, geolocators are placed on adult birds with babies. When daytime highs soared above 106/F for six days in a row, reaching up to 113/F, parents quit feeding, and babies were jumping out of their oven-like nest boxes. Although I water-misted the colony during the heat of the day, 44 babies were lost in three days, leaving no suitable birds for the last three geolocators.

With spring approaching, I'm looking forward to recovering geolocators from the returning birds. I will be re-tagging them for a second year, later in the season when they have babies. Tracking consecutive migrations can provide insight into the question of whether migration routes are genetically hardwired or more opportunistic. As a bonus this year, I am very fortunate to be collaborating with Dr. Stutchbury, who has initiated some very fascinating migration research. Backyard science just doesn't get much better!

– Nanette Mickle



Purple Martin with geocator attached.
(Photos: Nanette Mickle)

The Answer Lady

Nest Box Fidelity?

Question: Does the male/female come back to the same nest box for subsequent years to nest again or do they find a new nest?

Answer: We are often asked this question as our bluebird season begins. The answer is a qualified Yes, but only if the pair survived the winter and if they fledged their nestlings in that box the year before.

The male returns to the box first, and then the female. If she doesn't arrive, the male goes off to find another female. If the male doesn't survive, the female may wait to be claimed by another male, and he may have his own box that he prefers! It can get complicated.

Bluebirds begin the fall in family groups and fly with mixed flocks to find food and shelter. Sometimes, they will hang around a box all winter and use it as shelter. Later, they go off on their own and do not stay together as a pair. It is the nest box, that brings them together again in the spring.

Many folks say that "their" bluebirds have returned, to the backyard box. But bluebirds all look alike! Unless they are banded, you can never be sure you are seeing the same birds. Just be glad that there are two birds who found each other and are raising the next generation in your box!

We have noticed on our trail that bluebirds will play a game we call "musical boxes." A pair may nest in one box the first go-round and then find a different box for Round 2. That may be because of a predator, a sprinkler, or a golf ball, but whatever causes it, there is not necessarily a site preference in some birds.

Do you have a question for The Answer Lady? Send it to Barb Chambers at bj.chambers@cox.net, or call 703-978-6609.

Bluebirds and Flying Squirrels

It was a beautiful winter weekend, unusually warm, and a friend and I decided to take advantage of the weather to clean out last year's nests from our nest boxes. We've had 10 of them in place since the last seven to eight years. We weren't expecting anything surprising, just the usual chickadee and bluebird nests. We were startled by a mouse jumping out of one of the boxes.

And then we came to a box that had had the entrance hole enlarged by some gnawing critter. We suspected a squirrel from the teeth marks, though it seemed like a small nest for a squirrel. Inside, the box was completely filled with a ball of fine grass and bark stripped from tree branches. I had watched a gray squirrel stripping bark only a few days earlier.

We were, however, totally unprepared for what happened when we poked the nest. A flying squirrel popped out of the entrance hole and sailed to the ground only six feet away. It went under a rock, and we decided not to bother it anymore. We thought it would be better to come back with a camera to document this unusual happening. This was, in fact, the first flying squirrel we had ever seen in the wild. It was thrilling!

After a little Web searching, I found the following information about this critter: Flying squirrels are primarily nocturnal. They are often seen in pairs and can sometimes be gregarious in the winter when 10 individuals may be found in dens in hollow trees. Females tend to be territorial and may defend the nest sites during mating season. Their home range may be 1 to 4 acres. The male's ranges may overlap but female ranges do not overlap with each other or those of males. Females typically mate twice a year, February to May and July to Sept. Gestation takes 40 days. Litters can range from one to six young though two or three is most common. The young are weaned after 65 days (an unusually long time for an animal this small) and are independent at 120 days. Maturity is attained at 12 months.

They are found in woodlots, seeming to prefer seed-producing hardwoods such as hickory, maple, beech, and poplar. Nesting cavities are as important for the flying squirrel as they are for the bluebird. Not surprisingly, we found one nestled in the nest box!

Notes from the Bluebird Trail

We now have over 500 members across Virginia, and it is exciting to know how many share our love of the bluebird. We continue to add more trails across the state with the help of our grants, for new and refurbished trails. Folks are racing to get their boxes up this month to make sure that they are ready for the bluebirds that are now scouting out their territories.

I do want to caution everyone to remember that we are still bound to obey federal and state laws that protect all native birds. In a recent newspaper article, one of our trail monitors was advocating that children all hold the newborn chicks to see them up close. To be clear – this is not legal. Yes, we are monitoring our nest boxes, and sometimes we intercede if the chicks are in danger by either contacting a wildlife rehabilitator or by helping with repelling sparrows or ants. But we need to remember that bluebirds are not our pets and that our objective is to help native cavity-nesting birds with increasing their habitat and educating others about our efforts.

We still have a few nest boxes for sale. The boxes are mounted on poles with two predator guards. VBS is selling the boxes for \$60, and the proceeds go to our grant programs. Please contact me if you are interested in purchasing a nest box. Happy Trails!

– Anne Little, VBS President

Mealworms Make the Difference

Last summer I was fortunate to get to know a family of bluebirds more intimately than usual. While monitoring my neighborhood trail I noticed that five nestlings in one of the boxes appeared quite hungry late in the day. They also did not have as many feathers as they should for typical 10-day-olds. I suspected that one or both parents had perished, and I returned first thing the next morning with a bowl of mealworms. I put the mealworms down a few feet from the box and moved away. Within moments, a male bluebird appeared and fed the mealworms to the nestlings. The female, which had never left the nest of eggs and chicks during my monitorings, must have perished. The male was a bit overwhelmed with five to feed. I returned with mealworms twice more that day, and by evening the nestlings were quietly content. I continued to bring mealworms two to three times daily, periodically checking on the nestlings' progress. Their feathers grew in beautifully, and all five of them fledged on day 18.

I continued to bring mealworms twice daily. The male bluebird would fly to the branch near the box as soon as I approached; he could spot me from across the field. During the first few days, it was difficult to see the fledglings, as they kept high in the trees, and the male would carry up the mealworms. The first time I got a good look at them was on the sixth day, when two males and one female fledgling perched on the branch waiting their turn to be fed. I could hear the plaintive calls of the other fledglings and was thrilled the following day when I was able to see three males and one female fledgling being fed by the adult male. It got even better. The following afternoon the male bluebird flew to the other side of the soccer field and within minutes I witnessed five fledglings (three males and two females) follow the adult male across the field to the mealworms. Within two weeks they were feeding themselves from the bowl, although a couple of them would still flutter their wings and get fed by the male.

I brought mealworms for about two more weeks, until a combination of bad weather, less frequent visits by the bluebirds, and a short trip on my part ended the affair. Even though the babies fledged early in July, the widowed male bluebird did not mate again; he was a most devoted father.

Those five lovely spotted fledglings all survived the dangerous first few weeks and blossomed before my eyes. It was a wonderful trail experience.

Conversations With Herself

It got dark in a hurry, but I still managed to install a new nest box that Wednesday evening. It started snowing and I decided to come back the next morning to take a few pictures. This was box # 207 on public land and an "Adopt-a-Box" someone purchased as a Christmas present. It was bright the next morning, and bluebirds were everywhere. I was able to get some nice pictures. As I headed back to the car, I witnessed a precious little drama taking place on my window. This female, captivated by her own image in the mirror, was having quite a conversation with herself. I would like to think she was looking for me to say thanks for a new warm home in this cold snap we are having, rather than trying to run off the "other" female from claiming the new house! What a treat it was to witness and a real blessing to lift my weary spirit on a cold winter day a week before Christmas. Being a county coordinator has been such a wonderful experience. I have met so many kind souls who are eager to help our cause to bring back the bluebirds to our area. Believe me, they are everywhere you look down here in Southside! Have a wonderful spring, and may all your blues be birds in 2011!

– Vickie Fuquay

Book Review

Fledgling

Fledgling is a picture story about a young bird with fear of first flight. A recently hatched American Kestrel has the responsibility to be the first of its brood to fly. This is an inspiring tale of a youngster afraid of his family's expectations but courageous enough to take a leap of faith. It's a fine example to reference when encouraging the very young to try something new. The story's setting also presents many familiar contexts to families and kids: the kestrel family is urban with a high cupola home and different human and animal activities take place on near-by roof tops. While the written narrative is quite spare, it brings alive, quite smartly, the often neglected urban wildlife paradigm. For a non-city human child, obviously, these illustrations will literally be eye openers. There are also drawings of a Ferris wheel, roller coaster, and a subway car that can be stories by themselves. A child from about two-and-a-half to four years old will be curious and attentive. *Fledgling*, written and illustrated by Robert J. Blake, is worth a few iterations with a patient commentator. Although available in hardback on the web (about \$15.00 and on the higher side), this reviewer would recommend borrowing it from a library.

– Virginia Kostenbader



Photo: Vickie Fuquay



Nest box with fishing line hanging in front of opening; parent feeding fledgling (Photos: Earl Morris)

The Sparrow Problem

One of our monitors confronted a tricky issue last season. A House Sparrow took a fancy to a nest box in their yard and began trying to colonize it in earnest. Simply dismissive of the bluebird occupants, it kept going in and out of the nest box and had already destroyed the first egg of the third clutch when our monitor friend decided to intervene. The monitor got in touch with Earl Morris, Roanoke County coordinator, for advice. He suggested hanging a fishing line in front of the opening. This had an immediate impact and apparently discouraged the sparrow from dashing into the nest. The female laid two more eggs, and the bluebirds appeared to avoid the sparrow's depredation. The female also started spending a lot more time in the nest, suggesting that incubation had resumed.

Our trail monitor wondered if it was all right to leave the fishing line in place; taking it down too soon might invite the sparrow back. Or it might interfere with the parents' feeding of the nestlings. According to Barbara Chambers, Fairfax County coordinator, the fishing line does not bother the bluebirds, so it can be left up indefinitely. In fact, anything that moves with the breeze will work, like strips from a plastic bag tacked onto the box. The ploy worked very well in this case, and here are the photographs of the fishing line in front of the box and of some of the fledglings from the first two broods with the male feeding.

New Houses in Southampton

Southampton's Garden Club members recently put up two bluebird houses on two very wintry afternoons. Everyone took turns digging holes. The third-grade members from Southampton Elementary School studied about bluebirds and their habitat requirements, particularly protection from predators, and then shared their knowledge with the fifth-graders. The third-graders reported these as the most interesting things they learned:

- * Digging the hole to put the birdhouse in the ground is hard.
- * How bluebirds nest.
- * If bluebird houses do not have all the things needed to protect them, other animals can come and eat them.

We have not yet seen bluebirds investigating the houses, but we hear them calling in the neighborhood. In the first of a number of activities to introduce the whole school to bluebirds, Mrs. Wilson's third grade followed an indoor lesson on prey and predators with a walk to see the new houses with their predator guards and other features likely to make nesting a success.

This was a thoroughly collaborative project of several groups interested in promoting conservation and enjoyment of birds and the natural world. The Garden Club is sponsored by the Richmond Audubon Society's RAS Kids program. Nick Conklin and Gary Sargent, two Riverine Master Naturalists, supervised installation of the bird houses and provided the skilled labor. VBS donated the boxes, and Anne Little provided the information we needed to site the houses.

– Mary Arginteanu



Southampton third-graders installing a nest box (Photo: Mary Arginteanu)

A Page From History

One spring a pair of Bluebirds came into our yard, and to the accompaniment of much cheerful bird conversation, in the form of whistles, twitters, chirps, and snatches of song, began hunting eagerly for some place to locate a nest. Out in the woodshed I found a box, perhaps six inches square and twice as long. Cutting a small entrance hole on one side, I fastened the box seven or eight feet from the ground on the side of a young tree. The newcomers immediately took possession and began carrying dry grasses into their adopted sanctuary. Several days elapsed and then one morning, while standing on the back of a garden settee and peeping into the hole, I discovered that a pale-blue egg had been laid. When the nest contained four of these little beauties incubation began.

One rainy night while the mother bird was on duty she must have heard the scratching of claws on the box outside. A moment later two yellow eyes blazed at the entrance and a long arm reached into the nest. The next morning on the grass beneath the window we found her wing tips and many other fragments of her plumage. All that day the distressed mate flew about the lawn and called continually. He seemed to gather but little food and the evidence of his suffering was pitiful. In fact, he stirred our feelings to such a pitch we at length closed the windows to shut out the sounds of his mournful calls.

Upon looking out next morning, the first note we heard was that of a Bluebird, but his voice seemed to have lost some of its sorrow. Walking around the corner of the house, I found him sitting on a limb near the box. Two feet from him sat another Bluebird – a female. At eleven o'clock we saw her clinging to the side of the box and looking inquiringly into the entrance hole. We knew what this meant; incidentally we knew, too, that being a ladybird she would have no use for the nest and eggs that had been placed there by another, so I cleaned out the box.

We were anxious that the cat should have no chance to destroy our little friend's second wife, so the box was suspended from a limb by a wire over two feet in length. Five eggs were laid and the mother bird began sitting. Then one night the cat found out what was happening. How she ever succeeded in her undertaking, I know not. She must have started by climbing the tree and creeping out on the limb. I have never seen a cat slide down a wire; nevertheless the next morning the box was tenantless and the feathers of the second female were scattered over the lawn. This time the Bluebird's heart seemed really broken and his cries of lamentation filled the grove. Eleven days now passed before a third soul mate came to share his fortunes. We could afford to take no more risks. On a sunny hillside in the garden the cat was buried, and a few weeks later four little Bluebirds left the lawn on their own wings.

[Excerpted from The Bird Study Book by T. Gilbert Pearson (Doubleday, 1917)]

– contributed by Steve Johnson

A Special Grant Award

VBS has received an anonymous grant award of \$1,000 from a private family trust. The only stipulation is that it be used for education purposes. This is a timely grant since last year the Board of Directors of VBS voted to focus on education efforts, especially in the primary and middle schools. VBS wants to help children appreciate the beauty of nature, and what better way to do that than with the introduction of the bluebird at their schools.

We have many schools around the state with nest boxes, and some even with nest cams. Rodney Thompson middle school in Stafford Virginia has two cams thanks to the extraordinary efforts of science teacher Craig Vann. The entire school is able to look into the nest via the cam and have had the experience of watching the entire life cycle of the bluebird from egg to fledge.

Our Board of Directors will be meeting in Richmond on Saturday, March 12, 10a.m. to 1 p.m. If you have any comments regarding our education efforts, or would like to join us at our board meeting, please contact any board member for further details.

Nest Boxes For Sale

Bluebird nest boxes - \$60. Complete with 7-½ foot pole, snake guard, and cat guard. Offered by VBS as a fund-raiser for our grant program. Please contact Anne Little, 540-207-4298, thegate@cox.net, if you are interested in purchasing a box. Only 15 left. Nest boxes are also available from Barbara Chambers for the Northern Virginia area, 703-978-6609, bj.chambers@cox.net.

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 – Inspect and repair your nest boxes for the upcoming bluebird season.

March 5 – VBS County Coordinator meeting for Northern Neck and Fredericksburg area. Home of Beth Elkins. For more information, 540-775-2464, beth_elkins@yahoo.com.

March 12 – VBS Board Meeting, DGIF Headquarters, Richmond. All are welcome. For more information, 540-207-4298.

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 16 – Fredericksburg Earth Day Celebration, Old Mill Park.

April 23 – Mason Neck Eagle Festival, Earth Day Celebration, Lorton.

May 6-8 – The Garden Fair of the State Arboretum of Virginia.

May 12-14 – Great Dismal Swamp Birding Festival, Suffolk.

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



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MATERIAL**