

# The Bird Box

Spring 2012 Newsletter of the  
Virginia Bluebird Society [www.viriniabluebirds.org](http://www.viriniabluebirds.org)

## 2011 Statewide Nesting Statistics

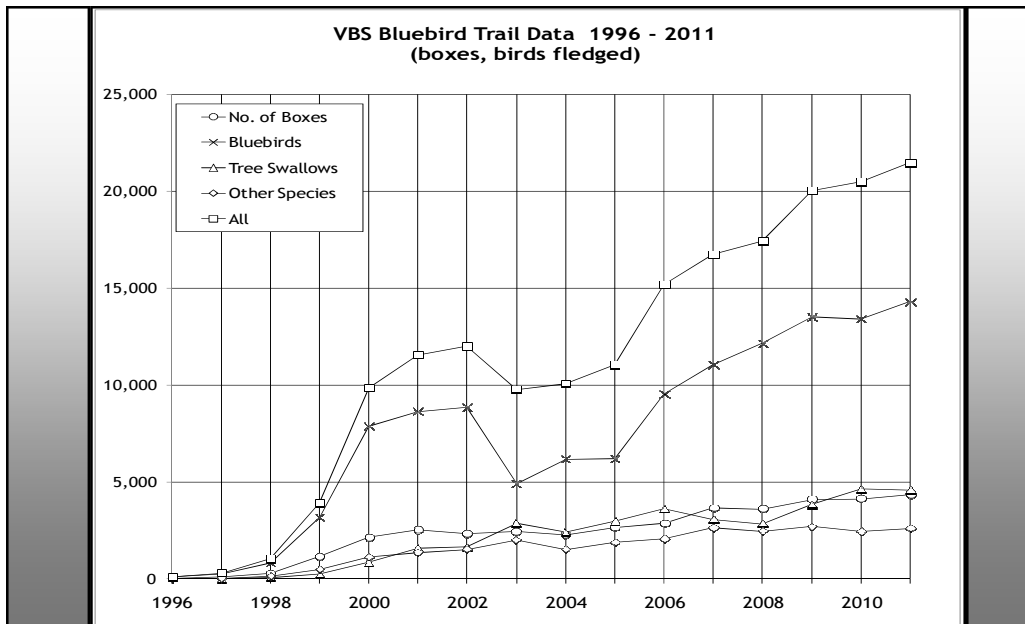
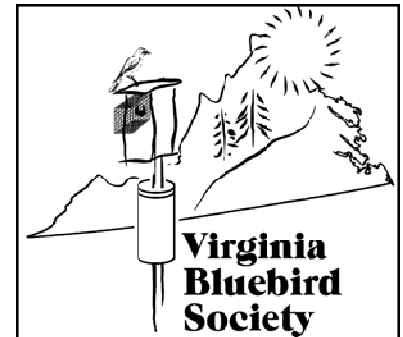
The year 2011 was another good one for birds nesting in VBS boxes. From a total of over 4,200 boxes, a total of about 21,400 birds of all species fledged. This number included a tad under 14,300 bluebirds and the usual runner-up, tree swallows, at almost 4,600 fledglings. And all of the other species (mostly chickadees and house wrens) totaled about 2,600 fledglings.

These numbers are shown in the chart below,

which covers the period that VBS has been collecting data, 1996 through 2011, sixteen years!

Enclosed in this Bird Box is a one-page county-by-county listing of data received for the 2011 nesting season. Also, this listing will be posted this spring on the VBS web site, and will include data not received in time for this newsletter.

*-Charlie Chambers, Data Manager*



## Are You Ready?

### Spring Checklist to Gear Up for the Nesting Season

- Trail leaders contact monitors; Coordinators contact trail leaders.
- Check each box & make any needed repairs or location adjustments.
- 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.
- Train new monitors.
- Replenish monitoring supplies and the trail notebook pages.

- 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 monitoring.
- Review VBS protocols used on our trails.

And thank you all very much 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*

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VBS State County Coordinator

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Newsletter of the  
**Virginia Bluebird Society**  
[www.viriniabluebirds.org](http://www.viriniabluebirds.org)

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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.

I've been told that I'm just the third president of VBS, following Anne Little and Julie Kuttruff. This makes me a little nervous to follow in the footsteps of some of the organization's founders and continue the pace of progress, but I know I have their support, as the founders' numbers are in my speed dial and their emails are in my address book. I appreciate and hope I won't disappoint their confidence. VBS is a great group of more than 500 dedicated volunteers, with a hard-working board and the wonderful, efficient administrative support of Cheryl Phillips. I look forward to serving this group. I want to continue the VBS programs that are in place. I have a few ideas, and I hope to hear from you with your ideas.

The Virginia Bluebird Society helps bluebirds and other native cavity nesting birds by responsibly increasing nesting habitat. Can we help our birds even more by improving habitat in other ways? I know members recognize the importance of quality habitat and great articles on the subject have been (and are) in this newsletter. In cooperation with other groups that champion the use of native plants and backyard habitats, perhaps we can increase the availability of food and shelter. In the summer, native insects that birds eat thrive on native plants, and in the winter, bluebirds need native berries such as sumac and holly. Our birds need clean water and we can work with groups such as soil and water conservation districts to

help them get it. While our primary focus is on the nestbox, we should also continue to look outside the box.

Members give so much of their time and money in establishing and maintaining bluebird trails. To continue to support member efforts, VBS needs support as well. If you haven't renewed your membership, please do so ... it is only \$10. Also, a gift membership is a wonderful way to introduce someone to VBS and bluebirds at any time of year. I wish you and your birds a safe and productive nesting season.

*Carmen Bishop*

## POW, Ticks Strike Again

Another tick-borne disease, Powassan virus, has been identified in neighboring Pennsylvania, but has not yet been diagnosed in Virginia. However, it is important to be

aware of this and other potential diseases transmitted by ticks.

Powassan is transmitted by deer ticks and groundhog ticks and produces an illness that is similar to West Nile Virus. Infection can result in severe illness and can be fatal in 10% of recognized cases. Symptoms occur 4-18 days after an infected tick bite and can include fever, headache, vomiting, weakness, loss of coordination, speech difficulties and memory loss. Residual neurological problems can occur in survivors. Powassan was originally discovered in Canada and is rare in the U.S., with previous cases found in the northern Midwest and New England. Additional information can be found at <http://www.health.state.pa.us>, search "Powassan".

*Mary Alice Koeneke*



One of Vickie Fuquay's bluebirds, enjoying berry-flavored suet nuggets



## Bluebirds "in the coal mine"

A recent report on the effects of mercury pollution on invertivores, invertebrate eaters such as bluebirds and other songbirds, has been published by the Biodiversity Research Institute and The Nature Conservancy. It is entitled, **Hidden Risk: Mercury in Terrestrial Ecosystems of the Northeast**, and is available online at

[http://www.briloon.org/uploads/cen-ter/hgcenter/hiddenrisk/HiddenRisk\\_lr.pdf](http://www.briloon.org/uploads/cen-ter/hgcenter/hiddenrisk/HiddenRisk_lr.pdf)

# Gardening for Winter Bluebirds

If you want to keep your bluebirds year round, here are a few ideas that just might keep them interested in hanging out on your trail or property. Obviously we all have the right habitat for the birds in terms of nest boxes and open space. But bluebirds that use the boxes and leave after the nesting season could be persuaded to hang around if you plant trees, shrubs, and vines that produce enough fruit for winter survival.

I have recently moved to Orange County from Fairfax County. Our peaceful farm has six to ten winter resident bluebirds that I wake up to nearly every morning. I see the birds sunning themselves on a phone line soon after the sun comes up. Pretty soon they are darting around looking for something to eat, generally hanging out on the tops of my bluebird houses or perching above my flower and vegetable gardens waiting to sight a tasty treat. While I am not exactly sure where the birds are sleeping (but not in the nest boxes), bluebirds are especially fond of heavy thickets and orchards that give them food sources and evening roosting sites. On that score, I was very lucky to stumble upon our current home place. The house is located in the open portion of 44 acres and is surrounded by orchard trees and heavy woodland thickets! Who knew? And while I have been gardening for wildlife for almost twenty years up in Fairfax, I could not have found a more perfect place to winter over bluebirds.

One of our biggest blessings on this property is the mix of woodland and pine trees. The previous owner had been a Virginia Forest Stewardship Landowner and had taken great care to cultivate native trees. Among the trees were those that produced fruits that tend to last throughout the winter months. On our property such trees included dogwood, sumac, sassafras, and eastern red cedar (juniper). Hawthorn, hackberry, and chokecherry are other good winter food sources for bluebirds. Mistletoe, should it be pre-

sent in your nearby hardwoods, is also a preferred food for bluebirds during winter. Wild grape, Virginia creeper, honeysuckle (though we usually see the invasive Japanese type, there are native honeysuckles), black berries, and pokeberries round out a nice selection of berries for your blues.

Another important feature of your year round landscape plan is to leave at least a portion of your yard or trail wild. Leaving a small brush pile, or even leaving the unraked leaves in a portion of your garden will attract over wintering insects. By leaving a nice insect habitat, you can provide the bluebirds a bit of winter protein during those warm spells (which we are mercifully having a lot of so far this winter) when the bugs come out.

I have had some success attracting bluebirds by providing broken peanuts in an open platform feeder. A number of companies sell Bluebird Treat and dried mealworms to provide in special dishes. I have never had much luck with either of those sources, but the birds do like those peanuts.

If you decide to plant trees, shrubs, or vines, it is important to know which plants are native to your region of the state. Virginia is a fairly large state with lots of variety in its five geographic regions. It is important to know, when planting, which plants suit your area and/or are native to the area before you plant. Tidewater plantings may not grow in the mountains, and vice versa. No need planting mountain laurel if you are just going to kill it in the process. A bit of research on your part will go a long way in helping you create your wildlife oasis.

Gardening for wildlife has taken on a life of its own since Douglas Tallamy's book, Bringing Nature Home was published several years ago. There are also some excellent resources that can be found on line. I recommend visiting the Habitat at Home link provided by the Virginia

Department of Game and Inland Fisheries at [www.dgif.virginia.gov](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov). Look for the icon of the cardinal perched on a dogwood branch. I found the PDF of the Habitat at Home brochure a wonderful resource for wildlife gardening. Another source of information about gardening for wildlife comes from the National Wildlife Federation at [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org). If you log on to the NWF site, click on the "Get Outside" link and look for "Outside Activities." You will find the "Garden for Wildlife" icon and can investigate whether or not you wish to register your garden as a Certified Wildlife Habitat. Finally, for those of you in Northern Virginia, the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia has a wonderful program aimed at supporting 30 specific species of wildlife in that region. Even if you don't live in NoVA, reviewing their web site will give you some great ideas about a home habitat. For those who do live in NoVA, you can even ask for a visit from an Audubon Ambassador. The Ambassador will come to your home and advise you on native plants that support wildlife in the region. Visit the ASNV web site at <http://audubonva.org> and look for the "Audubon at Home" link (which has a bluebird as an illustration).

If you have specific questions about gardening for wildlife, please feel free to contact me at [pam@mcmillie.com](mailto:pam@mcmillie.com). It is always fun to exchange information with fellow wildlife gardeners.

*Pam McMillie, Orange Co. Coordinator*



Photo courtesy of David Kinneer



### Live or Dried?

**Question:** Can you tell me if there is any difference in the nutritional value between live and dried mealworms?

**Answer:** The Answer Lady did not know so she went to Nature's Wild Bird Food online and here is their answer ... **dried mealworms are higher in protein than live mealworms with approximately 56.58% protein,** while live mealworms contain approximately 49.6% protein. Also, dried mealworms will keep in a container with no maintenance, hassle free, and last longer. Therefore, they are more cost effective!

Feel free to visit their web site for more information on dried mealworms,

[www.natureswildbirdfood.com](http://www.natureswildbirdfood.com)

*Do you have a question for The Answer Lady? Send it to Barb Chambers at [bj.chambers@cox.net](mailto:bj.chambers@cox.net) or call (703) 978-6609*



The Virginia Bluebird Society has quite a few members who are among the ranks of Virginia Master Naturalists. On February 4, the Old Rag Chapter of VMN held a wildlife habitat open house at Eastern View High School in Culpeper, and the VBS was represented there with an exhibit, manned by Anne Little, and a presentation on Bluebird Trails by VBS members Roger and Pat Temples of Greene County.

Eastern View High School was the perfect location for this event. As a LEED-certified facility, it is an environmentally friendly building, and it has well-designed habitats for wildlife. A school club, the Envirothon Team, is involved in many aspects of the habitat maintenance. At the open house they conducted tours of both the building and the outside rain gardens and natural areas, and led wildlife-related activities for children.

The theme of the open house was "Going Wild in Your Backyard." Exhibits and presentations gave participants ideas about how to attract wildlife to their properties, both large and small. Twenty-two exhibitors, representing conservation organizations

from around the state, provided information and answered questions for the crowd of over 250 participants. During the day, four one-hour presentations covered such topics as creating habitats using native plants, attracting butterflies to your property, identifying and managing wildlife (including nuisance species), and creating a bluebird trail. The Temples discussed the reasons for encouraging bluebirds to nest on your property, the proper design and installation of nesting boxes, and ended their presentation with the delightful DVD produced by the North Carolina Bluebird Society and recorded by the Cornell Birdhouse Network, entitled "Bluebirds: Inside the Nest Box." The video shows, via a camera mounted inside a nest box, the complete process of nest-building, egg laying, care and feeding of young, and fledging of bluebirds. A bonus for attendees to the bluebird presentation was a drawing for a nesting box, complete with a Noel guard and a baffle ready to mount on the winner's own pole.

*Pat Temples*



Both photos this page courtesy of Lexi Meadows

## Big Time Bluebirding on Historic Rivers Trails

Many members of the Historic Rivers Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists have been involved in bluebird box monitoring in the past, but in 2011, bluebirding went “big time,” in the words of Lois Ullman. I had monitored the New Quarter Park bluebird trail with Lois and other Master Naturalists in 2009 and 2010. Last year, when Lois and I became County Co-coordinators for VBS for James City County, York County (north) and the City of Williamsburg, we decided to get more chapter members involved in this fun, up-close and personal nest monitoring project.

We asked Anne Little, president of VBS, to make a presentation about bluebirds and nest monitoring at the Historic Rivers Chapter meeting in February. By the end of the month, trail team leaders for trails at New Quarter Park (Sara and Lois), Fords Colony (Sharon Ploecher and Jennifer Travino), and York River State Park (Les Lawrence and Ted Sargent) had teams in place and were making the rounds of their trails to check the location and condition of boxes. Many boxes were added and improvements made just in time for bluebird season.

The team from Ford’s Colony announced the arrival of the first bluebird

eggs, which they scouted on March 31. There were four eggs being brooded in one nest, so they must have been laid sometime earlier that week. At York River State Park, first eggs appeared during the week before monitoring on April 8. The following week, monitors from New Quarter Park found eggs in two boxes. The bluebirds kept lots of monitors busy as they watched eggs, then hatchlings, then nestlings come in quick succession. Empty nests were cleaned out and teams watched the cycle start all over again, as bluebirds lay 2 to 3 clutches a season.

In the midst of the first clutch flurry, Stephen Living, Biologist with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, asked if the Master Naturalist chapter would take over monitoring of the bluebird trail at Newport News Park. Susie Engle split off from the New Quarter Team and assembled yet another group of monitors to walk this trail. Many of the Newport News Park’s boxes were already occupied by then and the team cleaned and repaired others. With 4 trails and 22 Historic Rivers Master Naturalist watching, bluebird fever was in the air. Another chapter member who lives near Richmond monitored a trail at Deep Run Park in Henrico County.

After cheerfully reporting his bird numbers each week, York River State

Park trail leader Les Lawrence started his July 22 message, “And then there were none.” A few more birds were nesting at Fords Colony, New Quarter, and Newport News and the last of our trails reported empty nests by the second week of August.

A Labor Day picnic was planned to celebrate the end of our year, but damage to New Quarter Park by Hurricane Irene caused it to be canceled. Nevertheless, a good year was enjoyed by all, especially the 319 bluebirds, 25 chickadees, 18 tufted titmice, 4 wrens, and 16 other unidentified cavity nesters who took up temporary residence in our boxes.

They were lovingly doted upon for 553 hours by our chapter volunteers (that’s about one and a half hours per bird!) as well as curious others. A family from Yorktown joined in with monitors on the New Quarter trail. Park staff cheerfully assisted with time, equipment, and supplies at the three parks. And one Boy Scout, Chris Puffenburger, helped the New Quarter team by constructing Raccoon Guards for the New Quarter boxes. Finally, many Historic Rivers Master Naturalists have become members of the Virginia Bluebird Society and even attended the most recent meeting in Fredericksburg.

*Sara Lewis*



Chris Puffenburger (right) made and attached raccoon guards to bluebird boxes at New Quarter Park near Williamsburg. Also pictured (left to right): Sara Lewis; Lois Ullman; Molly Nealer, York County Recreation Supervisor; and Jan Lockwood, Master Naturalist and trail monitor.

## Monitors Move into the Community

Peggy Bruhn, Joan Renner and Brian Swanson, who have been monitoring boxes in their own backyards and/or on their neighborhood Heritage Hunt Golf Course Trail, have moved on to establish and restore bluebird trails across Prince William County. Kudos to these volunteers and the monitors who assist them!

In 2004, Brian Swanson was invited by the Virginia Bluebird Society to improve and coordinate a nest box trail on the campus of Northern Virginia Community College in Manassas. There have been a number of volunteers working the trail over the years, but in 2011, Dave Kleiman, Denton Larson, and Rich Luhring from Heritage Hunt were the principal monitors. Twenty-six bluebirds, 6 tree swallows and 28 house wrens successfully fledged.

In 2010, at the invitation of Vulcan Materials Company, Manassas Quarry Division, Joan Renner and friends were given a tour of the quarry where, years ago, a bluebird trail had been established. However, many of the boxes were falling apart, and in locations that were not optimal for bluebirds (mounted on fences, etc.). No one had been monitoring the trail for some time. Vulcan built new boxes for the 2011 nesting season. After seeing an Earth Day nest box display by Peggy Bruhn showing snake and raccoon guards, Vulcan plans to add predator guards and mount the boxes on poles for 2012. Last year, Joan developed a monitoring schedule which included Peggy Bruhn, Joan Gifford, Mary Knight, Karen Storie and Brian Swanson from Heritage Hunt. The trail fledged 31 bluebirds and 6 tree swallows.

In 2008, Peggy Bruhn received permission from Sister Pat to put up nest boxes on the grounds of the Monastery on Linton Hall Road where a teaching garden had been planted by Master Gardeners. She and Donald Bruhn have been monitoring these boxes. Last year, 31 bluebirds and 6 tree swallows fledged. Peggy writes, "For me it is a gift to go there every week and experience the beauty and peace of an ecologically sound island in the midst of the growth and development that continues to eat up natural spaces in Prince William County."

*Marci Swanson*

## A BLUEBIRD BOOK REVIEW

I was recently privileged to meet the author of the book I am going to recommend here. I attended the NABS 2011 Convention in Jackson TN and met Dr. T. David Pitts who was charged with arranging all the speakers. He spoke himself, on one of the evenings, about Mrs. Amelia Laskey, a person who had banded more than 10,000 bluebirds in the Nashville area from 1936 to 1973. She was a citizen scientist, probably one of the first, and her scientific reports are still cited.

Then, on the last day of the conference Dr. Pitts was there selling a book about bluebirds, and it turned out that he was the author! I bought it and found it to have the best information about bluebirds that I had ever encountered. I strongly recommend it to you.

***STUDYING EASTERN BLUEBIRDS, A Biologist's Report and Reflections***, by T. David Pitts.

Dr. Pitts is a PhD Biologist teaching in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Tennessee in Martin, TN. His book is an insightful telling of his 25 years of research in the NW corner of Tennessee from 1969 to 1993. The reflections are based on his 25 field notebooks, one for each year of study. They covered, among other things, banding, trapping, aging, the nest, incubation, over-wintering and my favorite, the percentage of bluebirds that lay white eggs, and why! I learned so very much from reading this book. It is my firm belief that it should be read and referenced often by every Eastern Bluebird monitor. The Table of Contents nicely organizes the topics that you might find of interest.

You might recall the article by Bob Peak in the Fall 2011 Journal, *Bluebird*, titled, "The White Bluebird Egg Phenomenon". Dr. Pitts was referred to in it. Now you need to read his book and get the whole story.

The book can be purchased from Amazon.com or from Dr. David Pitts himself if you email him at [dpitts@utm.edu](mailto:dpitts@utm.edu). Dr. Pitts self-published this book so that the information it contains would not be compromised by trying to appeal to the general reading public. It is for YOU!

*Barbara Chambers*



# 18<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL PURPLE MARTIN FIELD DAY

Date: Saturday, June 23, 2012

Time: Main presentation begins at 10:00am; if possible, please arrive before 10:00am.

Scheduled activities end by 2:00pm.

Location: A private farm in Louisa County, VA (central VA, about 40 miles west of Richmond)

This Field Day will be held at the farm of Mrs. Merle Wood and her son, Mr. Lance Wood. See the most effective techniques and equipment available for successful martin management. Establishing, expanding, and maintaining a healthy Purple Martin colony can be difficult without using the procedures demonstrated here. The Wood family has expanded their colony from four pairs of Purple Martins in 1992 to more than 130 nesting pairs! The featured speaker, Mr. Lance Wood, is an expert on birds and has published several Purple Martin articles in national publications.

The 10:00am lecture will cover these topics: how to establish and increase a colony of Purple Martins; advantages and disadvantages of different types of martin housing; protecting birds from snakes, owls, raccoons, House Sparrows, Starlings, wind damage, lightning, etc; and adding

starling-resistant entrance holes to martin housing. Enjoy watching hundreds of Purple Martins soaring and feeding their nestlings while the instructor teaches! The main event will be followed by opportunities to buy gourds and gourd seeds, and a session on growing gourds and modifying them to create Purple Martin homes, plus a demonstration of starling control equipment. Also, bluebird expert Ron Kingston of Charlottesville will answer questions as he leads a nestbox trail tour to view bluebirds, tree swallows, kestrels, and barn owls.

No registration. Event is FREE, but donations will be appreciated to help cover expenses.

Bring: Lawn chairs, binoculars, notepad, and camera. Drinks and snacks provided.

The hosts request that guests do not bring pets.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE**

[www.purplemartinfieldday.org](http://www.purplemartinfieldday.org)

For further questions, contact (434) 962-8232 or [kingston@cstone.net](mailto:kingston@cstone.net)



Photo of male and female Purple Martins by Marshall Faintich

## How to Join

Send your name, address, phone number and/or email 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 are available on the VBS website:

[www.virginiabluebirds.org](http://www.virginiabluebirds.org)

## Mark your Calendar

Today: Re-new your VBS membership if you haven't already.

Today: Send your data to Charlie Chambers. Data forms are available on the VBS website.

March 1: Inspect and repair your nest boxes for the upcoming bluebird season. If you are interested in monitoring a trail near you this season, contact your county coordinator (see our website) or Barbara Chambers.

March 3: Bluebird Training Day, Danville, contact Vickie Fuquay at [vickiefuquay@comcast.net](mailto:vickiefuquay@comcast.net)

March 10: VBS Board Meeting, DGIF Headquarters, Richmond. All are welcome. For more information, 703-764-9268.

April 1: Time to start monitoring your nest boxes, if you have not already started.

April 21: Annual Eagle Festival, Mason Neck State Park, 10 am to 4 pm.

April 22: Earth Day.

May 10-12: Great Dismal Swamp Birding Festival, call 757-996-3705

May 15: Bluebird presentation for Stonewall Home & Garden Club, contact Christine Boran at 276-930-9963 or [WoolwineHouse@gmail.com](mailto:WoolwineHouse@gmail.com)

June 23: Purple Martin Field Day, Louisa County, 10 am to 2 pm.

## **Bluebirds are coming to Buckingham County!!**

The first Virginia Bluebird Society's Bluebird Trail was put up at the James River State Park (JSRP) by the acting Buckingham County Coordinator, Paul Davis, and Virginia State Park Ranger, Bill Crawford. The trail consists of twelve nest boxes mounted on metal poles, with six inch stove pipe predator guards. Ranger Crawford will monitor the boxes until such time as one of the local scout troops is ready to take over the responsibility. The trail was funded in part by a grant from the Virginia Bluebird Society. Hopefully, the trail can be expanded in the future, as more people become involved with the project. The park is in a beautiful setting along the James River, in the southwest part of Buckingham County. Paul will continue to act as the Buckingham County Coordinator for the near term. He has teamed with Ranger Crawford to provide talks on Bluebirds, their nesting habits, and nest box monitoring to visitors at the JRSP.

## **Nest Box Signs are Available!!**

Please place your orders with Cheryle Phillips at [gcphillips1@verizon.net](mailto:gcphillips1@verizon.net), while supplies last. \$1.00 each.



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