

eBird Box Bird Box

Spring 2019 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org



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Cornell Young Birders Event

By Baxter Beamer, Recipient of 2018 VBS Scholarship

Before I summarize my experience at the Cornell Lab I would like to thank the Virginia Bluebird Society for their generous assistance for my attendance at this event. This incredible experience would not have been possible for me without your generosity. My most heartfelt thanks to you!

I can still recall the sheer excitement I felt when I read that I had been accepted to the Cornell Young Birders Event. Each July, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York, hosts a four-day event where aspiring young ornithologists (rising sophomores through seniors) can discover possible career paths in ornithology. Eighteen young ornithologists from around the world (in 2018, seven nations were represented) were invited to get an inside look into the Cornell Lab, hear presentations from professionals, and go birding with the world-class birders behind eBird. What's not to love?

This event exceeded my wildest expectations in every possible regard. The presentations were eye opening and truly showed how the mission of the Cornell Lab is to save the environment through birds. "If we pay attention to birds, we will gain an insight into the rest of the natural world," said Dr. John Fitzpatrick, the executive di-

rector of the lab. I took that to heart throughout the event as well as when I came back. The bird diversity around Ithaca (and the ability of the directors of the event to find these birds) was fantastic. We observed 145 species including Mourning Warbler, Upland Sandpiper, Trumpeter Swan, and Black Tern, in just two full late summer days. Perhaps the most memorable

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Left: Black Tern dive

Right: Virginia Rail

Ithaca, New York

Photos by Baxter Beamer



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Cornell Young Birders Event

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aspect of the Event was the tour of the Lab museum. The collection holds more than four thousand species of bird specimens from around the world. Not only did we have the opportunity to tour the museum and handle specimens at our whim for two hours, but we had the opportunity to see extinct specimens such as Ivory-billed Woodpecker and Passenger Pigeon. An incredible experience, but somber as well.

In conclusion, the Cornell Young Birders Event was a transformative experience for me. It threw fuel on the already raging fire that is my passion for birding and gave me a taste what a high-level career in this field is like. I now have friends from around the world who share my passion and I met some of the foremost ornithologists in the world. The



Cornell Young Birders Event will stay with me for the rest of my life. Thank you for helping to provide me with this fantastic opportunity.

Left: Snow Goose

Right: Magnolia Warbler

Ithaca, New York

Photos by Baxter Beamer

Scholarship for the Future

Last year we awarded a one-time scholarship to Baxter Beamer to attend the Cornell Young Birders Event. The Virginia Bluebird Society hopes to offer more scholarships for students in the future. I believe he used the money for a good investment in our birding future. We need young folks to be involved in our mission.

Cathy Hindman
President
Virginia Bluebird Society



For more information about eBird, a project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, go to:

<https://ebird.org/home>

For more information about the Cornell Young Birders Event, a hands-on field trip for a select group of teen birders, go to:

<https://ebird.org/news/the-cornell-lab-young-birders-event-2019>

The Hazardous Horse Tail Hair Tale

By Kaycee Lichliter, Shenandoah Audubon Blandy Bluebird Trail Manager

One evening as Glenny Comer and I were monitoring boxes on the Bluebird Trail at Blandy Experimental Farm, Glenny had exited from the Gator to look in a box as I waited with the trail book to record his findings. I watched him as he peered into the box. He hesitated, looked intently, and was silent. To me, time just stops while waiting for a verdict, or a surprise, or the go-ahead on something fun; I think I was holding my breath too! Then Glenny yelled for me to hurry, come and look!

As I peered into the box, I heard screaming. Now, I've never heard a bluebird *scream* and didn't know they could, but that's how I describe what I heard. The box held three baby bluebird nestlings, one of which was in the back corner, head buried in grass, up-side-down, with its feet sticking up in the air. Well, we'd never seen anything like this before! I told Glenny to hold out his hands and I quickly retrieved the nestling in distress. Taking it from the box I found it to be entangled in horse tail hair! Instantly this took me in memory back to bird banding and the challenge of untangling birds from the mist nets. I unwound the hair from the nestling's tiny wings, feet and legs and gently placed it in Glenny's big warm hands. I proceeded to remove the two remaining nestlings one at a time from the box, remove the horse tail hair from their little bodies, and place them in Glenny's hands.

As Glenny safely held the nestlings, I took a closer inspection of the nest. The parent bluebirds had used horse tail hair to line their nest cup! I removed the hair lining of the cup, leaving a perfectly round soft nest cup of grass and replaced it back in the nest box. Then one by one each nestling was replaced safely in the nest. When parent birds return to their nest to feed their nestlings, they aren't selective in who they feed, giving equal amounts of food in rotating turns. They just shove the food in the first open begging mouth. So knowing that, I strategically placed our distressed little nestling on top of the pile and up front so it would hopefully get the next food delivery. We closed the box, moved from the area, and documented our findings and activity.

Being the worrywart that I am, I returned to the box the next day to find all three nestlings alive and doing well! All inspections up until the "critical nesting period," the timeframe when the nestlings are old enough to jump from the nest but not old enough to fly, found them to be in good condition. After the critical nesting period was over and the birds were predicted to have fledged from the nest, the box was again monitored. Sadly, one nestling was found deceased. However, happily, two were presumed to have fledged.

Although the outcome of this nesting attempt was somewhat disappointing, that's the way it happened, so that's the way the story is told. There are several points to glean from this tale. One, with our bluebird nestlings, everything doesn't always work out how we hope but we always strive for the best. Two, if you monitor nests, especially near where horses are kept, please note if horse tail hair is added to nests, remove it if possible. I partially attribute the survival of the two nestlings in this story to close monitoring and removal of the horse tail hair. Three, birds will do the craziest things! For example, we've found toxic cigarette butts in Tree Swallow nests, birds that normally add white feathers to their nest cup linings. So, as we have learned that birds will sometimes add odd items to their nests that they find close by in the environment, let's work together for a cleaner environment for the health and safety of our birds and other wildlife.

Look Out! Spring is Here

During March, inspect nest boxes and make repairs. This is a great time to review monitoring information on the Virginia Bluebird Society web site at <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org/about-bluebirds/>. After the freeze date for your area (mid to late April) and as the weather warms, remove any insulation added last year. Start monitoring on April 1.

THE 25th ANNUAL PURPLE MARTIN FIELD DAY

is coming to VA!

Date: Saturday, June 22, 2019

Time: 11:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Location: Central Virginia (Louisa County)
(about 40 miles west of Richmond)

FREE! See www.purplemartinfieldday.org for details.

Clark Walter – An Invaluable VBS Partner

By Doug Rogers, VBS Board Member

VBS members and volunteers monitor, record data on and maintain 5,000 nest boxes statewide. There is an ongoing need to build new nest boxes and refurbish old ones every year. To meet this need, VBS has grant programs to assist with the cost. And to make good use of our limited grant resources, we need to find creative people who will build nest boxes at a cost that fits within our guidelines.

Clark Walter more than fits the bill. Clark is a man of “retirement age” who describes himself as a “turbo-charged overachiever” who does things he “shouldn’t be doing.” He and his wife, Connie, are avid bicycle riders who ride on average over 4,000 miles per year. They have ridden their bikes in 49 of the 50 states; Maryland is the one remaining state.

In 2011 Ann Dunn (County Coordinator for Albemarle and Fluvanna) went to a Virginia Master Naturalist (VMN) meeting to talk about monitoring Bluebird nest box trails. Ann met Clark there. Following that meeting, Clark started building nest boxes for the VMN members – he built about 65 that year. Since the year 2011, he has built between 2,000 and 3,000 bluebird nest boxes and has sold them to VBS members at his cost, with nothing added on for his labor. He currently sells a complete nest box set-up (pole, snake guard and Carl Little box made from western cedar) for \$33.00. He calls himself a “compulsive designer and builder.”

When he started building nest boxes using the “Carl Little design,” (This is the design on our web site) he thought Carl Little was some long-dead VBS member. In 2013, to Clark’s surprise, Carl appeared at his shop, introduced himself and said, “I’m here to pick up 65 nest boxes.”

While participating in a Bike Florida event in central Florida in 2016, and while biking at approximately 20 mph, Clark crashed on a wooden bridge. He has no memory of the crash and suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Against his doctor’s (and his wife’s) orders, that September and October, Clark built (and sold at his cost!) 765 nest boxes and 450+ poles and snake guards. He has no memory of doing it. When his neighbors saw all of the metal poles, stovepipes and wood being delivered to his shop, they asked, “What are you building?” Clark told them he was building a “nuclear submarine.”

Although he is now fully recovered from his TBI, Clark has downsized a bit. He is currently taking orders for only (?) 200 to 300 nest boxes per year. Orders must be received before September. First come, first served.

Many of the 16,000 to 18,000 bluebirds that fledge from our boxes each year will have done so from one of Clark’s boxes. We all admire and appreciate his altruism and energy. The VBS is indeed fortunate to have this relationship with Clark Walter and consider him an invaluable VBS partner.



Carl Little, left, and Clark Walter, right, in Walter’s workshop



Stacks of materials, cut and drilled, ready to be made into bluebird boxes.



Stacks of finished boxes

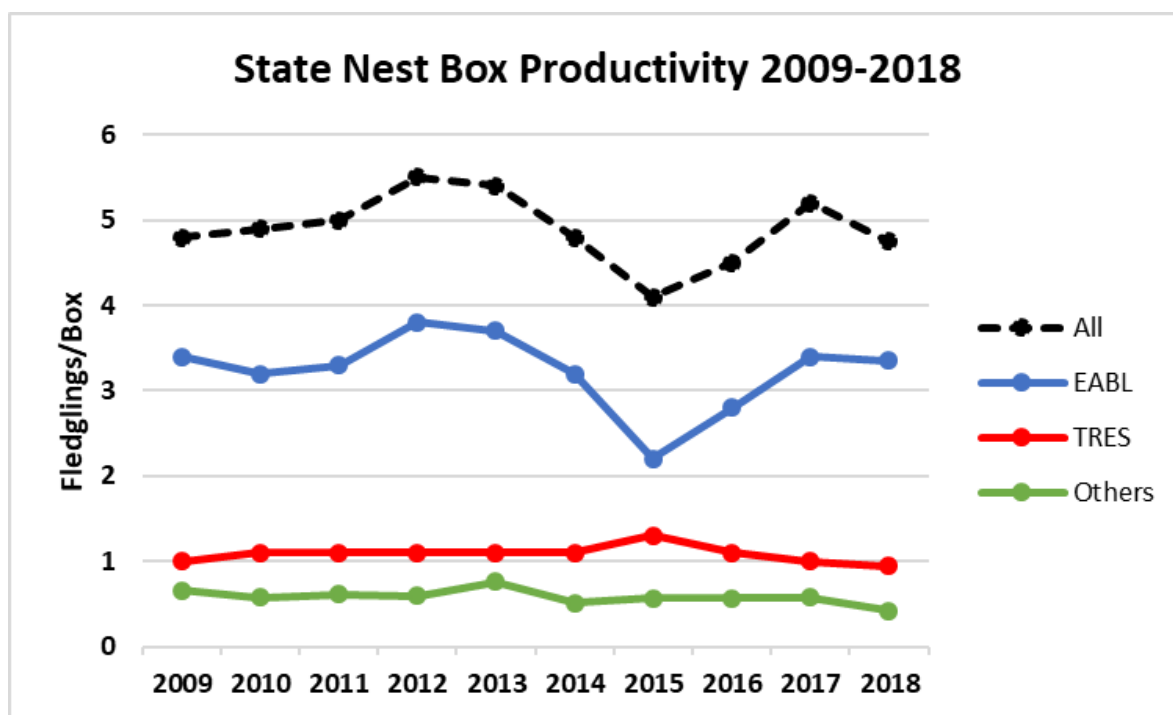
Photos by Doug Rogers

VBS Nest Box Productivity

By Ann Dunn, VBS Data Manager

Given a remarkable weather pattern in Virginia 2018, characterized by repeated periods of often record-breaking rain, our cavity nesters survived surprisingly well. We received reports on 4589 nest boxes from 410 trails located in 48 counties/cities throughout the state. Distribution by species was as follows: Bluebirds 70%, Tree Swallows 22 %, Carolina Chickadees 3%, House Wrens 5%, and the remainder a smattering of Tufted Titmice, Carolina Wrens, and Brown-headed Nuthatches. Detailed results may be found on the Table on page 6, Virginia Bluebird Society Nest Box Activity 2018.

The figure below compares 2018 trail productivity, as measured by the average number of fledglings per box, with previous years.



There was a statewide drop of 9% in all species productivity compared to last year's very robust season. The decline in Bluebirds and Tree Swallows was negligible, but the decline in the "Others" group (Carolina Chickadees, plus the above-named Wrens, Titmice, and Nuthatches) was more pronounced at 28%.

Several counties, viz. Warren, Fauquier, Rappahannock, Albemarle, Greene, and Roanoke, were notable in having large drops in productivity (15-32%) from 2017. These drops were attributed to the heavy rains with the consequent drop in insect numbers and creation of difficult hunting conditions.

Twenty-eight of 48 sites submitted records on breeding dates. Of these, the Virginia first bluebird egg prize goes to James City (March 24) and that of last bluebird fledging goes to Rappahannock (September 27). The average first egg date for the state was April 7 (five days later than that of 2017). The average last fledging date was August 21 (the same as 2017), making an average duration of 135 days for Nest Box Breeding Year 2018.

In remembrance of this past wet season, check your boxes before the new season begins, look closely for any signs of dampness, and repair/replace as needed. Despite the heavy rains this past season, there were surprisingly few complaints of excess water in nest boxes. Those that did mostly came from sites with old boxes. Our new "Carl Little" models as constructed by Clark Walter apparently weathered the storms very well! Make sure that yours can do as well.

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If you have a new email address, or have recently changed it, please let us know.

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We welcome your written items and artwork (photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box*. Email your materials to Judy Hall.

The Bluebird Advisor

By Christine Boran and Anne Little



The Bluebird Advisor

Reprinted from Spring 2010 issue of *The Bird Box*, written by the late Barbara Chambers, State Coordinator (and one of the founders of VBS)

A Noel Guard and a Snake Guard, Too?

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

A: 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!



Noel guard mounted on bluebird box; note the nesting material.

Photo by Christine Boran



Bluebird box with Noel guard on the entrance, and snake guard on the pole.

Photo by Christine Boran

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 next newsletter's Bluebird Advisor? Send it to woolwinehouse@gmail.com

Mark Your Calendars

- March 9** VBS Board Meeting in Charlottesville area. All county coordinators are welcome to come. Contact Cathy Hindman for location and to RSVP.
- May 11** North Carolina Bluebird Society Annual Conference; see <https://ncbluebirdannualconference.org/> for information.
- May 30** Deadline for submitting articles, photos, ideas, and artwork for summer newsletter
- June 22** Purple Martin Field Day; see www.purplemartinfieldday.org for details.
- November 16** **Save the Date!** VBS Bi-Annual Meeting/Conference in the Fredericksburg area. More information will be posted in the summer newsletter.
- March 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 May 30 to be considered for the summer newsletter. Please include your location, identification of people and birds in photos, and name of photographer.



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