

The Bird Box

Summer 2015 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

The Joy of Bluebirding

A personal story and photos by Christine Boran



"And when he sings to you, Though you're deep in blue,
You will see a ray of light creep through,
And so remember this, life is no abyss,
Somewhere there's a bluebird of happiness.
Life is sweet, tender and complete,
when you find the bluebird of happiness."

~ Bluebird of Happiness, lyrics by Edward Heyman & Harry Parr Davies,
1934

This was my first ever experience with bluebirds. The photos below are from the first week of March 2006, Patrick County, Virginia. It was the same week we moved into our new home. I had no knowledge about bluebirds at that time; nor did I know what to expect from that point forward. I was smitten, though. A previous owner had installed this nest box in the back yard many years ago. There must have been an early nesting that spring, as hatching took place on or before we arrived on March 1st -- an unusually warm February, evidently!

Sadly, the two broods of bluebirds, hatched inside this sweet-looking old nest box, failed due to snake predation the first time; the second brood of babies died due to severe heat on July 1st.

I felt very sad and shed some tears. That is how it started for me. Discovering the 'Bluebird of Happiness' was tender until I found that losing young for these two reasons was not so very sweet and complete after all. It was then I decided I would do all I could to keep it from ever happening again. I rolled up my sleeves, slipped a ballpoint pen behind my ear, got on the Internet, and started to figure out what to do.

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My Battle With Predators

Article and photo by Doug Rogers, Editor

In the Fall Edition of The Bird Box, we ran an article by Christine Boran, State Coordinator, about her research on predator prevention. Christine has done extensive research on this topic over her years of monitoring. (By now you have read her article on page 1. She meant it when she committed to never having her baby birds eaten again.) She recommended the use of 8” snake guards, put diatomaceous earth (DE) in the bottom of the boxes to control blow fly larvae, and used pronged-out Noel guards to stop any snakes that made it past the snake guards.

For about five years my wife, Joanne, and I had been monitoring a trail at Darden Towe Park in Albemarle County. During that time we encountered only one black rat snake in one of our boxes; since that box was mounted on a 4” wooden pole, we replaced that pole with conduit, installed a 6” snake guard and had no further predation at that nest box – or any other nest boxes. (All of the others were on conduit poles.)

In 2012 we built a new trail on Pantops Mountain near our home. During the first two years, we had virtually no predation problems. However, beginning in 2014 we have had black rat snakes, house sparrow attacks, blow fly larvae, mites and babies that just disappeared from the boxes! I began to take Christine’s ideas seriously; however, I still didn’t *really* believe that a black rat snake could get past my 6” snake guards.

This one (below) did and ate five bluebird babies that were ready to fledge. I believe that Christine’s recommendation of 8” snake guards would have saved them.



The box is too far away from any vegetation for the snake to stretch itself to the box above the guard. It either flew up there or it found a way to get past the snake guard. My guess is it was the latter.

Another idea that Christine brought forward was the “Two-holed Mansion” box design to give a bluebird a chance to escape when attacked by a house sparrow while in the house.

I have now adopted almost all of Christine’s ideas. I use DE in all of my boxes as soon as the nest is complete. It has already earned its keep; in the first nesting I had blow fly larvae and found them all dead in the bottom of one box.

I have not gone to all 8” snake guards but I did add pronged-out Noel guards to all of my boxes and have had no snake predation since. Also, I have installed two “Two-holed Mansions” (built by Paul Davis) in the areas where I had house sparrows attack my bluebirds last year; there have been no attacks this year. I am trying two more two-holed boxes (built by Clark Walter) that are not built to the specs of the “Two-holed Mansions.” I have had no house sparrow attacks in those either.

Thanks Christine for your pioneering predator-foiling research!

Bluebirds in Historic Danville Green Hill Cemetery

Article by Lisa Coyne, Teacher Danville City Schools

It might seem that a historic cemetery in the middle of a city neighborhood would be an unlikely place for bluebirds but over the last several years, Green Hill Cemetery in Danville has become home to a thriving population. Along the winding path through the cemetery, five boxes have been the hatching place of dozens of baby bluebirds and most boxes have two successful nests each season. As a biology teacher, monitoring the trail at Green Hill has taught me things that I would have never learned otherwise. I had heard of citizen science projects but had never taken part in one myself until I became the monitor at Green Hill. I never get tired of seeing the babies – especially ones that have just hatched – and witnessing their transformation into fledglings in just a matter of weeks.

The trail at Green Hill, like most bluebird trails, has not been without its share of drama. One spring, sparrows attempted to take over Box 4 and for weeks I removed their disorderly nest material only to have them rebuild in just a few days. Finally they abandoned the box, but I learned why sparrows are such a successful invasive species – they just don't give up! When I teach my students about invasive species, sparrows are my example! Box 5 is located at the end of the trail near the railroad tracks, and for some reason, the pair that chooses that box almost always includes an aggressive male that does not like monitoring. If he is around when I am checking the box, he is likely to fly close overhead, encouraging me to leave. I have often thought that it takes a very brave pair of birds to choose a nest box so close to the noise of passing trains. It is easy to see why sparrows have never been a problem for Box 5!

So far this year, twenty-two baby bluebirds have fledged at Green Hill and the birds are hard at work on the second round of nests. I feel privileged to be a part of the bluebird-monitoring project and to have Green Hill as my trail assignment!

Another Nest Cam Report

By Kim Mayhew, Grade K Teacher

Looking at the nest and eggs of the Eastern Bluebird encouraged my students to look and listen for birds. Taking the nest out and letting the students see the eggs close up was very exciting for them. After seeing the birds on camera, the students became more interested in looking for birds and were fascinated with their behavior. After discussing how males will sing to their mate and how the males rapidly flutter their wings to show off their blue color, made the students want to look for these behaviors. There was a lot of laughter when we were talking about that.

The students began coming to school telling me about seeing birds and what they were doing. I think the blue birds nest not only encourages them to look for blue birds but to look and listen for other birds as well. When teaching taking care of the environment and recycling, having “their own birds” made a difference in their desire to do what they could to try to take care of the environment. Seeing the birds, and watching the life cycle of the bluebird helped the students remember it well.

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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.

Nominations for VBS Board and Officers Fall Election

Elections for the Officers and Board of Directors for VBS are held every two years at our biennial conference. This year's conference will be held in Charlottesville on November 14, 2015. A slate of candidates will be presented to the membership for election at the conference. Candidates can also be nominated from the floor prior to the election, or can declare themselves to be candidates any time prior to the conference. If you wish to declare yourself as a candidate for any of the slots, please contact Carmen Bishop at (703) 764-9268.

The nominees for election for the 2015-2017 term are as follows:

President – Cathy Hindman, Prince William County
Vice President Education – Vickie Fuquay, Danville City
Vice President Membership and Trails – Lexi Meadows, Pittsylvania County
Secretary – Anne Little, Fredericksburg City
Treasurer – Mary Lohman, Fairfax County
Board of Directors – Doug Rogers, Albemarle County
Board of Directors – Earl Morris, Roanoke City
Board of Directors – Christine Boran, Patrick County
Board of Directors – Paul Davis, Nelson County
Board of Directors – Ann Dunn, Albemarle County

Water Feature Inspiration

By Lexi Meadows

Earlier this year Bob Schamerhorn presented a program to Southside Bird Club called "Attracting Birds With Water". Bob engineered a fairly inexpensive way to build a water feature for your back yard. His design had lots of benefits including low maintenance and looking like the natural landscape. I loved that the water supply is underground and sealed off and it allows no critters or mosquitoes to call it home.

I purchased his book and began looking for the perfect "water rock". My water feature is now complete and many birds are enjoying it daily. Our lovely bluebirds use it often!

Bob's natural birdbath guide can be purchased online. For more information (photos and videos) go to www.iphotobirds.com



Call for Awards Nominees

Article by Anne Little, Photos by Doug Rogers

Our volunteers are the life-blood of VBS. Our members' work is done away from the limelight, in the quiet company of nature. We realize that extra effort deserves recognition. That is why we've instituted awards to applaud the hard work put in by our members. We need your help in recognizing our dedicated volunteers. The awards will be given out at our biennial conference in Charlottesville on November 14th.

Here is a list of the awards:

Barbara Chambers Memorial County Coordinator of the Year - This award is given in memory of Barbara Chambers and the energy and inspiration she brought to bluebird conservation. A county coordinator's job is to collect the data for the county and pass it on to VBS. This award is given to a county coordinator who goes the extra mile to organize, inspire and further bluebird conservation in his/her county.

Bluebirder of the Year – This award is given to the individual who promotes bluebirds through outreach to schools and community groups, promoting good bluebird management techniques, and helping others to love and care for the bluebird.

Volunteer of the Year – This award is given to an individual who helps promote and enhance VBS. By giving of their time and energy, this individual helps VBS and the bluebird to grow and flourish in VA.

The VBS “Heritage Award”- This award is not given every year by our organization. It recognizes an individual who has been a long time bluebirder. This is a special person who lives and breathes bluebirds, and has spent many years promoting bluebirds and the love of bluebirds.

Please contact Anne Little at thegate@cox.net to nominate someone for an award. If you are not sure what category that person should be nominated for, just submit the name with some information and we will take it from there. Nominations must be in no later than October 15th.



A Special Thank You

We want to offer a sincere thank you to our most recent Endowment and Sustaining members, Box Sponsors and other special donors. We'd also like to express our thanks to the ExxonMobil Foundation for their continuing support through the Mobil Retiree Volunteer Program. If we have missed recognizing you in this newsletter, please let us know and we'll be sure to include you in our next newsletter.

Endowment

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Carl Hansen
Ann Elise Sauer
Gary Knipling
Paula Parsons
Anna Goddard
William Carmines
Vivian Bruzzese
Bruce & Susan Jones
Ayuko Kimura-Fay
Carol Pruner

Sustaining

Suzanne Miller & Tony Quezon
Carol Sottili
Carmen Bishop
Eileen de Camp
Donna Finnegan
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Carl & Anne Little
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“Twee” Swallow in Trouble

Article and photo by Mary Foster

While checking one of my Bluebird boxes at my home in Pittsylvania Co on Saturday, I noticed that one of the baby Tree Swallows had a large insect sticking out of it's mouth! Upon closer inspection, I realized that it was some type of bee. It seems that one of the parents had fed the insect to the baby, but the bee actually bit the tongue of the baby bird on the way down.

In the state I found the young tree swallow, it would not have been able to eat anything else as the bee filled it's whole mouth. I pulled and pulled on the insect to try to remove it and even though it was dead at this point, its jaws were firmly clamped on the bird's tongue.

I finally pinched off the abdomen of the bee and put the bird back in the box for the time being. The next morning it was still alive and active, so my 92-year-old mother and I took the baby to the local wildlife rehabilitator who was able to remove the rest of the bee. She gave the baby a supplemental feeding and the baby was returned to its nest shortly!



A New Bluebird Nestbox Trail

By Matthew Bergstresser

Photos by Karen Bergstresser and Doug Rogers

My name is Matthew Bergstresser and I am a Life Scout with Boy Scout Troop 119 in Charlottesville. The troop, led by Mr. Chris Parks as Scoutmaster, has about 30 active scouts and meets at Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Charlottesville. For my Eagle Scout Service Project, I decided to build a bluebird nest box trail. Attending a presentation on the life cycle of the bluebird done by Doug Rogers, a Virginia Bluebird Society (VBS) member, had inspired this decision.

I have worked on many service projects in the past for school, my church and with Boy Scouts, but this was the first one that I lead on my own. I have done a number of things ranging from the Salvation Army toy lift and working at a local food bank, to putting together "care packages" for soldiers overseas.

As required by the Boy Scouts of America, I had to do the project following the Eagle Scout Service Project Handbook. Initially, approval had to be obtained from my troop's adult committee and the local Boy Scout district. The project also had to be of significant benefit to an organization - in this case the VBS. In order to get a VBS grant to help fund my project, I had to find some available public land and get approval to use it. I selected the walking trail alongside the John Warner Parkway and obtained approval from the city of Charlottesville.

I discovered that there is a lot of planning and organization that goes into completing a service project. I received a lot of useful information about bluebirds and bluebird boxes from Mr. Doug Rogers. Then I was able to actually start the work. I divided the workdays into three phases: one phase for cutting the wood and other materials for the boxes; one for assembling the boxes, and one for placement of the boxes in their permanent spots. I think planning and organization was key. With the help of a few adults and several of my fellow Boy Scouts, things worked out very well. We got the job done! In the end, I learned a lot from conducting this project and I hope that many people will enjoy these bluebird boxes and learn a little about birds and their conservation.



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Virginia Bluebird Society

Summer 2015

VBS Biennial Fall Conference

Join us on Saturday, November 14th in Charlottesville for the biennial Virginia Bluebird Society conference. Every other year, VBS invites members and non-members to a conference that's all about bluebirds and other avian life. The details are still being firmed up, but the conference will run from approximately 9:30 to 2:30, and include lunch. We are excited that one of our speakers will be Bob Schamerhorn, presenting "Attracting Birds with Water" (www.iphotobirds.com) and William Young, presenting "99 Reasons to be Fascinated by Birds."

Mark your calendars; more information will be forthcoming. See you all in November!

How To Join

Send your name, address, phone number and/or email address along with a check for \$10 for an individual with e-mailed Newsletter (\$15 for print Newsletter) or \$15 for a family with e-mailed Newsletter (\$20 for a print Newsletter) to:
Membership forms are available on the VBS website: <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org>

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