



The Bluebirder

Late Spring 2019

Edition 1

Welcome to the first edition of the Bella Vista Bluebirder! The goal of the newsletter is to provide you with valuable information about the society, information on birds, feel good stories, and upcoming events and activities. We plan to have the Bluebirder to your in-box on a quarterly basis. If you have any ideas, interesting stories or suggestions, or have questions that you'd like us to answer via "Dear Bluebirder" please feel free to e-mail us at JSBlueBirder@gmail.com.

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So, You Think You Know Something About Bluebirds **By Butch Tetzlaff**

Because Eastern Bluebirds readily accept nest boxes for rearing their young, it is no surprise that scientists have taken advantage of this and turned them into one of the most well studied birds on the planet. Thus, it seems ironic that one of the things we are still learning about is their "personalities".

Since the origin of behavioral studies in the 1920's, it has been believed that "personality" was primarily a human characteristic. That is no longer the case. It is now been shown that animals as varied as birds, fish, crustaceans, and insects all display personalities in one form or another. As with most science, the most interesting part is not that birds have personalities, but how we go about discovering that they do. After all, asking your neighbor if he thinks the birds in his back yard have personality isn't really doing science; we need a little more proof than that! So that's what Jennifer Burtka and Jennifer Grindstaff of Oklahoma State University set out to do a few years ago.

They asked the question of whether nest defense behavior is a personality trait in bluebirds. Personality is defined as a persistent behavioral trait observed in different contexts where there is less variation in how an individual respond over time than there is variation in the population. To answer this question, the first thing they had to do was capture some adult bluebirds and place unique combinations of color bands on their legs, so they could definitively know they were watching the same birds over time at their nests. To test for personality, they then captured several House Sparrows, put one in a cage, and set the cage on top of a bluebird box for a couple of minutes. Then they waited to see what would happen. Some bluebirds would set on a perch near the cage and do nothing but make calls to the sparrow. Others would fly over the cage to attempt to dislodge the sparrow from the box. Still others would land on the cage to attempt to chase the sparrow away (the cage had enough room, so neither bird could be harmed).



What they discovered through repeated trials with different sparrows through the nesting season and over the course of a couple of years was that each individual bluebird had its own reaction tendency that persisted over time. In other words, if a bluebird dove over the cage upon initial exposure to the caged sparrow (as opposed to landing on the cage), this was the behavior that it tended to use to chase intruders away through its life.

Are parents that defend their boxes against intruders better parents? Or are they taking unnecessary risks? For that, more research will have to be done!

But the next time you are out checking your boxes, see if you can notice some differences among the birds at your boxes in how they react when you approach the box. We now know the “personality” they show is for real!

References

Burtka, J. L., & Grindstaff, J. L. (2013). Repeatable nest defense behavior in a wild population of Eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) as evidence of personality. *Acta ethologica*, 16(3), 135-146.



Bella Vista Bluebird Society is one of over 60 affiliates of the [North American Bluebird Society](#)

Timing of Hatching & Fledging

- Bluebird incubation takes 12-14 days
- After hatching, chicks stay in the nest 17-21 days before fledging (leaving the nest)

How to estimate when eggs are going to hatch?

Female bluebirds lay one egg a day. After she lays her full clutch, which is usually 5 eggs, she then starts to incubate the eggs. If you check the box on Monday and it has 1 egg in it, but the following week there are 5 eggs, it probably means that she laid a second egg on Tuesday, a third egg on Wednesday, a fourth egg on Thursday and the fifth egg on Friday. Incubation will start on Saturday. The reason she does this is so all the chicks will hatch around the same time. Count 12-14 days from Saturday (the first incubation day) to get your hatch date. Visit your box on days 12-14 to see which day hatching takes place.



How to tell when chicks are going to fledge?



When you know what day the chicks hatched, count 17-21 days to determine the fledge date. Be very careful on those days and open the box only a little bit when checking the chicks, as they are likely to fly out prematurely. Watching them fledge can be a bit of hit or miss though, since they can leave the box anytime during the day. One hint to know if they are fledging is seeing a baby bird with its head sticking out of the hole or slot checking things out, since this is the first time, they've seen what's outside.

There is a nice guide *From Egg to Empty Nest*, that gives a commentary and photos day by day for twenty days when the babies are hatching (*Monitoring Bluebird Nest boxes* also shows photos for 0-20 days). The first guide mentions that the female may wait about a week to start incubating the clutch if the weather is still cold, which would make incubation 21 days! Visit this link: sialis.org/runt.htm

“All bluebirders must feel like ‘one of the chosen ones’ when we are fortunate enough to have nesting bluebirds on our own property” – Lillian Lund, Sialia, 1984

Did You Know?

The Eastern Bluebird is a member in the genus *Sialia* of the thrush family. It is one of the few thrush genera in the Americas. Bluebirds are about 6" to 8" long, have a wingspan of 9" to 12" long, and weigh around 1 ounce. When in flight, they can reach speeds of 17 mph.



Facebook

By Laura Claggett

Like many of our volunteers, I vowed never to use Facebook, but as president of the Bella Vista Bluebird Society I could hardly hold back when we thought this might be another way to reach people. I cheated by having someone create my Facebook page for me, but I find myself getting more into it every day.

I stick pretty much to bird sites. I've learned things, been able to share some information, and helped solve a house sparrow problem. But I'm most enchanted by the amazing photography, both stills and videos, that people share – like baby bluebirds in the act of fledging, the vivid Baltimore Orioles, beautiful Rose-Breasted Grosbeaks, and, possibly my favorite of all, Scissor-Tail Flycatchers.

One video I viewed, that was not for the faint of heart, shows the brutal killing of baby chickadees by a house wren, something I've read that house wrens do, but had never seen. There is no blood, and no puncture wounds, just forceful jabs. After seeing that I'm confident that I know why I found 3 dead bluebird chicks in a nest box last week. Especially since the week after I removed the dead

birds, a house wren had started a nest in that box and this week it's a fully built wren nest. By the way, the person who posted that video had lots of warnings in her description so that someone didn't unknowingly watch it. I guess the researcher in me is fascinated by all kinds of bird behaviors, and I want to know what goes on in the wide world of bluebird nest boxes.

Here are a couple of Facebook pages that you might also find of interest:

Bella Vista Arkansas Bird Lovers – "A place for Bella Vista folks to share pictures, brag or ask questions about the beautiful birds we see here." Great local pictures and discussions, many on bluebirds.

Eastern Bluebird Landlords – "...for those who love Eastern Bluebirds. It is a safe place to learn about the birds, housing them, overcoming problems and ensuring a future for this beautiful bird." There are a lot of interesting situations, photos and videos.

One of the amazing photos from Bella Vista Arkansas Bird Lovers, printed above by permission from the photographer, Michele Lynn, a local birder.

[Bella Vista Bluebird Society Facebook Page](#)



Since we created our own society FB group page, we now have 103 people following our group, have had 221 "likes" on our event page, and have generated questions, comments, and have had pictures posted about bluebirds and other birds in general. This helps create more interest in the Eastern Bluebird and will help with our growth and mission.

Merchandise

New Bella Vista Bluebird Society t-shirts and baseball caps are available for purchase. The t-shirts are \$18 per shirt and are available in a variety of sizes and colors. The baseball caps are \$15 per cap and have an adjustable band w/metal clip in the back for perfect sizing! All our merchandise is available at [The Bluebird Shed](#) in Bella Vista.



Tidbit About Volunteers

By Leon Wehmeyer

Jim Janssen joined Bella Vista Bluebird Society in 1989. He was recruited by his neighbor Charles Nelson, who was the major driving force for BVBBS in its formative years from 1980 into the early 2000's.

Jim began as a monitor at the Bella Vista Country Club and in 1994 he became President. In 1995 he added the duties of Trail Boss for the BVCC and the Short Trails. He served as President until 2015 and continued to serve as Trail Boss of the Short Trails until 2016. As if being President and Trail Boss wasn't enough, Jim began box building in 1997 and continued through 2016 as the sole box-builder for BVBBS box needs. Jim estimates that he built 900 boxes during this period.

Jim was honored in 2005 by the "Daughters of the American Revolution" in recognition of outstanding achievement for environmental awareness.



Jim and Gwen Janssen

Gwen Janssen joined the BVBBS in 1997 as a monitor at the Highlands where she continued through 2015, a total of 18 years. For the last 10 years of that period, Gwen also served as historian and Jim's right-hand in all administrative duties related to Jim's position as President. In March 2019, the Janssens sold their home in Bella Vista and moved to Homer Glen, Illinois, a Chicago suburb.

Jim's first wife, Jacqueline, also started with BVBBS in 1989 and was active as a Monitor, Secretary, and other duties until her death in 2006.

We appreciate Jim's and Gwen's dedication and years of service to the Bella Vista Bluebird Society and know that they have helped tremendously in our Mission. We are sorry to see them go but wish them all the best in their new home town.

Lela Sanford joined in 1981, our second year in existence. She served as a monitor and later became our Vice President in charge of monitor recruiting, training, gathering reports, and whatever else the BVBBS needed. She served with us until 2016, her 103rd birthday. Lela died in 2018 at the age of 105.



Jim Janssen and Lela Sanford

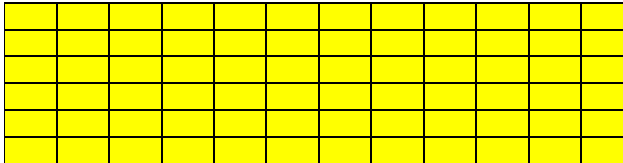
Build Your Own Wire Guard

By Steve Skaggs

Having adopted the [Janssen](#) Bluebird Slot Box as the current design for the Bella Vista Bluebird Society's boxes, a new wire guard design for the slotted entrance/exit opening was needed, as the popular Noel guard is designed for a box with a round entrance/exit opening. The following design is specific to the Janssen slot box, but it can be easily altered for similar slot box designs. Additional Janssen box designs can also be developed as needs indicate; additional discussion below.

This design uses 16-gauge wire mesh, the mesh being one inch by one-half inch, oriented and cut as follows (all diagrams not to scale).

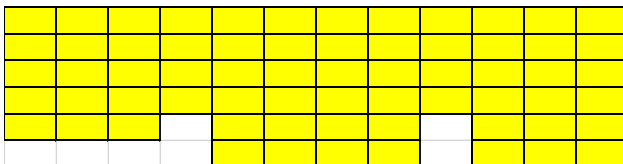
Cut a 12" X 3" section:



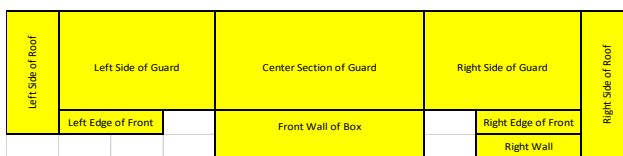
Make the following cuts:

- Cut out a 1" X 1" section, beginning 3" in from the lower right-hand edge (this cut-out separates the Right Side of Guard and the Right Side of Roof from the Front Wall of Box – more below)
- Cut out a 1" X 1" section, beginning 3" in from the lower left-hand edge (this cut-out separates the Left Side of Guard and the Left Side of Roof from the Front Wall of Box – more below)
- Cut out a ½" X 3" section, beginning at the lower left-hand edge (this cut-out allows the side-mounted door to swing down)

Here's what the cut mesh will now look like:



Here's the cut mesh, titled per the cutting directions, above, and per the bending instructions, below:



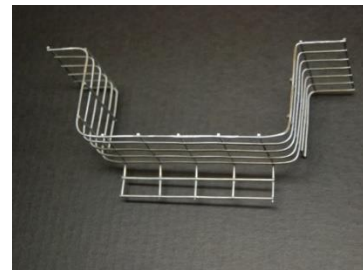
Place the mesh flat on a work bench, aligning the edge with no cuts towards the front, and the edge with the cuts towards the back. Make the following bends (note that a brick and a hammer were used in the making of these bends!):

- Bend the Left Side of Guard straight up to the right, at a 90-degree angle to the Center Section of Guard
- Bend the Right Side of Guard straight up to the left, at a 90-degree angle to the Center Section of Guard

The mesh is now shaped like a "U". Make the following bends (note that a vise and a hammer were used in the making of these bends!):

- Bend the Left Side of Roof down to the left, at a 90-degree angle to the Left Side of Guard
- Bend the Right Side of Roof down to the right, at a 90-degree angle to the Right Side of Guard
- Bend the Front Wall of Box down, at a 90-degree angle the Center Section of Guard

Here's what the finished guard will look like:



Now the guard can be attached to the box. This can be done either by stapling it to the box, using a heavy-duty stapler (the staples will still need to be tapped in with a hammer and a nail set), or by screwing it to the box, using washers for a larger contact area. Use enough of the fasteners, either staples or screws and washers, to securely fasten the guard to the box (this particular guard was attached using twenty Arrow T50 3/8" staples). Bear in mind that the guard may need to support/withstand the weight/strength of a hungry raccoon!

Here's what the guarded box will look like (nice box, Ken Ness!):



While the purpose of a guard is to make it more difficult, if not impossible, for a predator (e.g. snake, cat, raccoon), to gain access to the nest in the box by increasing the distance of the nest to the opening of the box, the placement of the slot in

conjunction with the relatively short roof overhang of the Janssen box may somewhat limit the effectiveness of this particular guard design (more to follow). Specifically, the depth of the guard is limited to the distance that the roof overhangs the front wall of the Janssen box, or approximately two inches. This is because the slotted entrance/exit opening is directly underneath the roof overhang, causing the roof overhang to act as the top section of the guard. The guard does not extend beyond the overhang – a greater overhang will allow a deeper guard, with the opposite being true. Greater overhang equals a deeper guard; lesser overhang equals a shallower guard.

Contrast the relatively shallow depth of this guard to that of a Noel guard. The typical distance from the top of the entrance/exit opening of a round-hole box to the bottom of the roof is approximately one inch, which allows the depth of the guard to vary from the length of the overhang. Thus, the depth of a Noel guard, which is typically six inches, can easily be increased or decreased within reason, as it is independent of the overhang. On the other hand, the depth of this slot box guard design is dependent on the overhang, as the roof itself acts the top section of the guard (noted above). Further note that while it would seem to be intuitive that a deeper guard is more effective at limiting nest

intrusions than is a shallower guard, it is unknown if studies have either proved or disproved this intuition. In any event, this slot box guard design can be altered to increase its depth if the as-designed depth proves to be of limited effectiveness in reducing nest intrusions.

Materials Used:

- 12" X 3" piece – 16-gauge 1" X ½" wire mesh
- 20 – T50 3/8" staples (alternatively screws and washers)

Tools Used:

- Marker – to mark wire mesh prior to cutting
- 4" Angle Grinder w/cut-off disc – to cut wire mesh piece from wire mesh roll, and to cut out sections from wire mesh piece (alternatively wire cutter)
- Brick – wire mesh bending/forming
- 5" vise – wire mesh bending/forming
- Hammer – wire mesh bending/forming; also used for setting staples (not needed if using screws and washers)
- Heavy-Duty Stapler – attaching wire mesh to box (alternatively screwdriver)
- Nail Set – setting staples (not needed if using screws and washers)



Dear Bluebirder....

Have questions about bluebirds, nest boxes, problems or concerns? Please write to JSBlueBirder@gmail.com and in the Subject Line add "Dear Bluebirder". We will answer your questions in our next edition!

Natural Nesting

Bluebirds often need to find their own natural nest boxes or in this case, cavities. Below are some pictures of the Eastern Bluebird that created its own natural home.



Titmouse Nest

By Laura Claggett

We seldom see titmouse's nests, even though they are cavity nesters, and mentioned in the North American Bluebird Society's factsheet *Monitoring Bluebird Nest boxes* (with photos on the last page). I was excited and surprised when a titmouse hopped out of a nest box I was monitoring this spring at the Brittany golf course. When I first noted the nest, as it was being built, I marked it down as a chickadee nest.

Looking at the photo below (left), I can see that the titmouse has woven moss into its nest, instead of making the bottom floor of moss, like the chickadee did with the nest on the right. The titmouse also used bits of other materials – whole or broken pieces of dried leaves, a dead beetle, a small piece of plastic, small pieces of wood, and lots of white bits of some kind of fibrous material.

Like chickadees, the titmouse also used animal fur to line its nest. [The chickadee nest on the right has a bluebird nest built on top of the fur-lined part of the chickadee nest. The bluebird nest had one egg in it. Bill Davis and I removed the chickadee nest from this box to discover it had a chickadee egg in it, which would not have hatched as it was not being incubated. We carefully divided the two nests and put the bluebird nest back in the box. The bluebird returned to lay four more eggs.]



The titmouse eggs (left) are also similar to chickadee eggs (right.) Because I had my camera closer to the chickadee nest, the eggs look larger, but in person they looked almost identically tiny in size.



I must say that I appreciated the help I got from the titmouse who hopped out of the nest and watched me from a nearby branch as I looked in the box, or I don't think I would have realized I was looking at the work of a titmouse and not a chickadee. At home when I'm gardening and get too close to the nest box, the resident chickadee flies to a nearby tree, and although I can't see her hiding in the leaves, I can hear her chattering at me. When I move away, she flies back to the nest. So, if you're not sure who's using a nest box, sometimes it's just a matter of observing the surroundings to see and/or hear the birds who are watching you.

Upcoming Events

Friday, June 7th 4:00 PM – Bentonville First Friday

We will have a booth at the Bentonville Square for their First Friday event titled "Living Local". This is a celebration of all things in NWA from our history, food, crafts, music and nature! First Friday is located around the Downtown Bentonville Square at the Walmart Museum (105 N Main St). If you're in the area, please stop by our booth and say hello.



Saturday, June 15th 6:30 PM – Blowing Springs Park

Please join us on June 15th at the annual Fireflies and Tailgating event. Mike Abb of Runway NWA has purchased nest boxes that will be given away during this event. We will be on hand with educational information, in addition to installing a couple of boxes that evening. The nest boxes will be distributed, one per family, on a first come, first serve basis starting at 6:30!

Saturday, June 29th 2:00 PM – Java Dudes Coffee Company

Java Dudes in Bella Vista is hosting us for a Birds and Coffee talk on Saturday, June 29th at 2:00PM. We will be on hand with educational information, including samples of bird nests, eggs and nest boxes. And of course, there will be great coffee!



If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for an article or an event, please contact us at JSBlueBirder@gmail.com. As always, you can visit the BVBS website for up-to-date information.

