



# The Bluebirder

Spring/Summer 2021

Edition 6

**S**pring and Summer bring new beginnings and a new start to bird life. This season we start out with a nest monitoring research project, all of our nest boxes being GPS tagged and mapped, and an interview with our President. Read on for more great information!

As a reminder, 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](mailto:JSBlueBirder@gmail.com). Also be sure to like us on Facebook!

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## **Bluebird Research: Electronic Nest Box Monitoring** by Butch Tetzlaff

Eastern Bluebirds are one of the most studied of all bird species in North America, especially during the breeding season.

From March through August, many professional and amateur researchers keep a close eye on nest boxes watching parents build nests, feed nestlings, and care for juveniles. The activity is non-stop. However, for the other six months of the year bluebird boxes consequently, very little research has taken place regarding bluebird activity and their boxes during the "off season", even though we've all seen bluebirds hanging around our feeders and nest boxes in the winter months, too. This begs the question of whether birds periodically check the boxes for intruders, maintain the inside, or use the boxes as shelter from inclement weather. Because birds can be very secretive about their box usage, and because birds do not need to engage with nest boxes very often during the non-breeding season, it doesn't really pay researchers to have someone sit and watch for box usage for hours on end like it does during the summer. In the summer, for example, scientists may sit and count feeding

trips by both adults to determine how often they feed, when they feed, the types of food they bring, and learn about how each of these is affected by the presence of a predator or local food abundance.

So, is there another way to learn about box usage during the non-breeding season without spending a lot of man-hours doing it? It turns out there is, but it requires a high-tech option.

People have used Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chips and readers for many years for a wide variety of purposes. One of the most common is a simple door entry system where you scan your ID badge to unlock the door to your building. The reader recognizes your identification number as a resident or current employee, unlocks the door, and allows you to pass through. Those ID cards and readers are specifically built for interaction with people, so they tend to be rather large. However, the technology has also been miniaturized, in fact, it can be made so small that birds can now use it too. For birds, the ID tag is a little glass ampoule about the size of long-grain piece of rice. These are

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attached to a plastic color-band. To read the ID tag, nest boxes can be retrofitted with an RFID reader that will record the date, time of day, and the ID number of each tag passing in and out of the box.

Our own Jerry Butler, funded by the generosity of the Bella Vista Bluebird Society, has created a few prototypes of these boxes that Dr. Jen Mortensen

and I are testing in the field this season. If all goes well, we should be able to know when and how often the birds are visiting next boxes throughout the year.

Wish us luck, because as far as we know, this will be the first study of its kind on any bird species. Thank you BVBBS!



### **It's a Bird, It's a Plane**

No, it's a flying squirrel! Not only will flying squirrels nest in bluebird boxes, they will sometimes will eat bird eggs, baby birds and adult birds.

Flying squirrels are small and can fit into both our slotted and hole boxes. According to Keith Kridler, co-founder of the Texas Bluebird Society, they can enter a box with a slot as small as  $\frac{7}{8}$ " (our slot openings are  $1\frac{1}{8}$ " ), and a hole box as small as  $1\frac{1}{4}$ " (ours are  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " ).

Southern flying squirrels are nocturnal, so we might not ever see one. They are the smallest squirrel at 8-10 inches. They are found in mixed forest, like ours, especially where nuts, such as hickory and oak, grow. (On March 10th, local resident Mark Swart posted photos he had taken of a southern flying squirrel in Bella Vista on the Positively Bella Vista Facebook page.)

An article published in 2019, [Southern Flying Squirrels as Major Predator of Avian Nest Boxes](#) by Brett A. DeGregorio, et al, found that flying squirrels were "responsible for the vast majority (84%) of bird-nest depredations at nest boxes."



*Flying squirrel nest - Photo by Keith Krindler*

So how do we prevent flying squirrels from preying on our bluebirds? The only remedy I've seen to prevent flying squirrels is to move bluebird boxes 100 feet or more away from wooded areas, but in Bella Vista that can be hard to do.

Read more about [Flying Squirrels in Nestboxes](#) or see more [Flying Squirrel Photos](#)

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### **Thank You**

The Bella Vista Bluebird Society has much to be thankful for. We are thankful for:

All our volunteers who work hard making, monitoring, and maintaining our nest boxes,

everyone who donates to our cause and join as members,

and for our kind and generous company sponsors: The Bluebird Shed, for selling our volunteer-made cedar bluebird houses, to TH Rogers, for donating and discounting cedar; to Lowe's, for donating and discounting screws, T-posts, and PVC; and to the Bella Vista POA for donating storage.



## **Nestbox Pairing/Twinning**

**by Randy Hamm**

Since you are reading this newsletter, chances are bluebirds are among your favorites. However, that doesn't mean you don't appreciate the many other species common to Northwest Arkansas. One of the most beautiful and fun to watch among our avian neighbors is the tree swallow. These sleek, iridescent blue-green and white beauties resemble tiny dive bombers as they swoop and glide to snatch insects in flight.

But a problem often arises when tree swallows compete with bluebirds for nest boxes. You put up a box in your back yard, hoping a pair of bluebirds will build a nest and raise a family, only to find the tree swallows get there first. They are happy to use the same size box and entrance hole diameter as the bluebirds. And, since tree swallows are quite aggressive, they will fight off any bluebirds who attempt to occupy the nest box. When this happens season after season, it can be discouraging for the bluebird fan.

There is an easy solution.

Both species are quite territorial and won't allow another of their own kind to nest nearby, but these two varieties will tolerate neighbors of the other species. So, the solution to tree swallows nesting in boxes intended for bluebirds is often to install another box a few feet away. This practice is referred to as pairing or twinning.

Nestbox pairing is a common practice of those monitoring bluebird trails. Here in Bella Vista, you

may have noticed pairs of nest boxes along the golf course fairways and wondered why they were so close together. Typically, a second box is added when tree swallows use a single box for several seasons in a row. After being paired, it is common to find the tree swallows continuing to nest in the original box while a pair of bluebirds sets up housekeeping next door.

On the Berksdale golf course, where I serve as a trail boss, we're up to 20 pairs of twin boxes. They have been quite successful over the past few years, housing bluebirds in at least one of the boxes in areas where tree swallows dominated before.

As to how far apart the twin boxes should be placed, expert advice varies. Most suggest a range of 10 to 24 feet between the boxes, though some have had success with two boxes mounted back-to-back on the same pole. Any farther than 24 feet, and the tree swallows may occupy both boxes. We typically place the twin boxes about 15 feet apart at Berksdale to accommodate mowing equipment.

So, if you love bluebirds but tree swallows are keeping them from nesting in your box, try adding a second box and enjoy watching both species at the same time.

For more information:

[Getting Started with Bluebirds](#)

[Nestbox Pairing](#)

[Life on Distant Hill Blog...Bluebird vs Tree Swallow](#)



*Picture of twin box placement*

## Cowbirds



Photo by Bet Zimmerman Smith

[Brown-headed Cowbirds](#) are another native, and therefore protected, species that will sometimes lay an egg or two in nest boxes. Cowbirds don't build their own nests. Instead, they lay their eggs in other birds' nests and let the host bird raise their young.

A female cowbird isn't much bigger than a bluebird, so she can fit in our nest boxes (see photos of the male and female cowbirds at the link above). Because they are a native bird, we must leave the egg and let nature take its course.

Although cowbird eggs look similar to house sparrow eggs, house sparrows do not exhibit this type of behavior - laying an egg and leaving it. If a house sparrow wants to lay eggs in a nest box, it will destroy the bluebird eggs and/or chicks first.

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## Here's Something You Don't See Everyday

Leucistic Bluebird (pronounced loo sis tick)

Unlike albinism, leucism is a partial loss of pigment.

Read more about it at [White Bluebirds](#)



Photo by Sonnie Riley

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## Oddities

If you get oddities in your nest box, like the seven eggs in the nest on the left below (four small and three big); or way too many eggs, like the nest on the right, **please contact** Laura at [bellavistabluebird@gmail.com](mailto:bellavistabluebird@gmail.com), or Butch at The Bluebird Shed, [butch@thebluebirdshed.com](mailto:butch@thebluebirdshed.com). In the two cases below, two female bluebirds laid their eggs in the same nest. These are rare occurrences that we would like to observe more closely.



## **An Interview with our President Laura Claggett**

by Jacqui Stockman

*JS - How long have you and your husband Rich lived in Bella Vista and where did you arrive from (if not here your whole lives)?*

LC - Rich and I moved to Bella Vista in 2013. We meet in high school and lived in Illinois until 2013. The job market was good in the Chicago area, but we didn't love the taxes, traffic, or weather. In Northern Illinois it seemed like we had two seasons, uncomfortable summers, and never-ending winters. I really love the long spring and fall seasons here, and we hope they stay mild, winters.

*JS - When did you first become interested in bluebirds?*

LC – Rich and I started bird watching in the mid-80s as a hobby that we could do together. At one time we called ourselves biking birders, or maybe it was birders who bike. We'd load up our binoculars, bird books and lunch and take off for the canal trail along the Illinois River, or other rails-to-trails bicycle routes in Illinois and Wisconsin.

In two years, we will have been married for 50 years, and traveling and birding were some welcome distractions over the years. Bird watching also gave us some focus to our wanderings, as we eventually visited all 50 states and almost 40 national parks in the U.S. and Canada.

We recorded our first Eastern Bluebird at Moraine Hills State Park in Illinois, 1994; our Mountain Bluebird sighting was at the Badlands National Park in South Dakota, 1987; and we saw Western Bluebirds at the Grand Canyon, Arizona, 1993.



*Laura and Rich on bicycles at Mackinac Island*

When we visited Bella Vista as a potential place to live, I remember seeing and commenting on the many bluebirds flying around. When we saw them on the street where we bought our house, I knew we had to have a bluebird house. We had thought about putting up a bluebird nest box in Illinois, but we never saw them in our area.

*JS - When did you become involved as a volunteer with the BVBBS?*

LC– In 2016 Myrlene Zimmerman and I were in the same book/lunch group, and one day she mentioned monitoring bluebird boxes. When I heard her talking about it I said, "I want to do that!" I might have said it loud because I think I remember she jumped. I just thought it would be interesting to see eggs & chicks close up in person.

Lucky for me there was an unexpected opening at the Brittany Golf Course, and I got in almost at the beginning of the 2016 season. At the end of the following season, 2017, I almost quit. My trail that year had a lot of nest invasions by house sparrows, so I experienced many broken eggs, dead tree swallow chicks, and a beheaded female bluebird sitting on four dead chicks. I remember Leon Wehmeyer, the president then, telling me not to get emotional, but he took action to have some slotted boxes made, and Jim Sours installed them at Brittany before the 2018 season. In 2018 I saw one house sparrow at Brittany, but much to my relief it didn't hang around long.

This is my third year as president, and I keep monitoring because I learn so much, plus I dearly love to get up close and personal with the birds. I had a female sitting on six eggs this season, and instead of flying off the nest when I opened the box, she just shifted over so I could see her eggs. Six eggs are uncommon, and when I mentioned it to our local bird expert, Butch at The Bluebird Shed, he said it was probably an older female (bluebirds can live 6-10 years in the wild), which might have been a reason for her unfazed behavior. And who knows, maybe she recognized me!

*Continued on page 6*



*JS - What volunteer positions have you held prior to your current Presidential position?*

LC - Ages ago I was a big sister for about five minutes. I also volunteered at a senior assisted living community in Illinois. In Bella Vista I volunteered at the library for five years, until bluebirds took over my life. My biggest volunteer gig was serving on the board of the Chicago chapter of the Special Libraries Association, and eventually being president of the group in 2000. We had about 800 members, and since everything library ruled my life then, I was totally in my element.

*JS – Can you share some of your funny and rewarding bluebird moments you have had throughout your years as a volunteer?*

LC – I’ve had lots of interesting and rewarding moments. Looking into the soulful eyes of female bluebirds as they sit on their treasured eggs. Watching a Carolina Wren scold me on a nearby branch as I checked out her very messy nest, that at first I wasn’t even sure it was a nest. It looked like someone had picked up a bunch of leaf litter and shoved in the box. But the wren’s presence clued me in and then I gently felt the five tiny eggs at the bottom of the mess.

I got a big surprise last year when I opened a box and saw 10 bluebird eggs! I had to count them a couple of times so I could be sure of what I was seeing. I handed the monitoring of that box over to our researchers. Turns out two females had laid the eggs and they were both incubating them. When the eggs hatched, both females and a male were all feeding the chicks. Amazing!



*Chickadee nest  
Photo by Keith Krindler*

And I’m always delighted when I open a box and see a chickadee’s moss-covered nest with fluffy stuff in the nest cup and tiny speckled eggs. It looks so cozy. I remember having the first chickadee nest in my home box and I thought, where did the moss come from. Then I looked around and there was moss literally everywhere. I can’t explain why, but to me moss looks so cozy.

*JS - Besides BVBBS, what are your other interests, and do you volunteer with any other organizations?*

LC - As mentioned earlier, I volunteered at the Bella Vista Library, and might do that again. It was and is a really great group of folks. I read, a lot. When the weather is nice, I like to be outside digging in the dirt. As soon as the weather gets sunny and warmish, I’m outside doing stuff in the yard. I just love seeing new plants poking up out of the ground.

I helped design and I manage all the content for the [bvbluebirds.com](http://bvbluebirds.com) website. Website design and development was one of things I loved best in my library career, but I wouldn’t mind if someone wanted to take over the bluebird site. If anyone has the experience and would be interested in managing the site, my contact info is under the About Us tab.

*JS – Thanks for your time today Laura. It was a pleasure learning more about you and your volunteer involvement with our organization. I’m also glad you put in that last minute little plug looking for a new volunteer to manage our website!*



*Female bluebird on nest  
Photo by Linda Lou Oliphant*

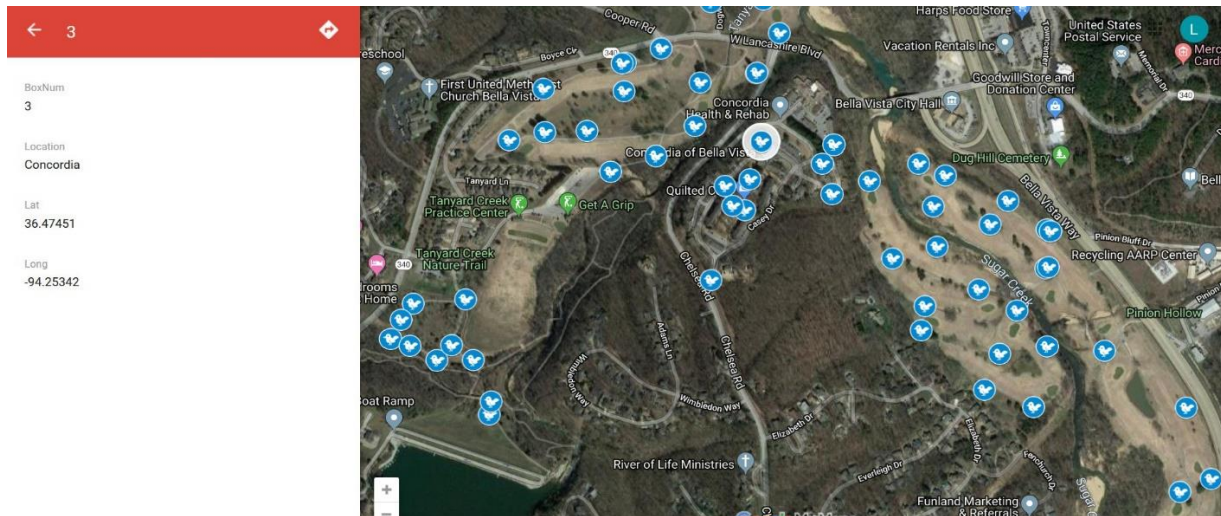


*Laura with a truckload of nest boxes  
Photo by Harrison Ramey*

## BVBBS Box Locations and Google Earth

If you're not familiar with the map of our trails, go to [Trail Maps](#), and click on the link to **BVBBS Box Locations**, or on the picture of the map.

It's a great tool that Butch Tetzlaff created using GPS coordinates to identify each box. We use it, and refer people to it, regularly.



*Blue dots indicate locations of all BVBBS nest boxes*

Since bluebirds can be territorial and usually won't let another bluebird nest within 300 feet, measuring distances using Google Earth before locating a box can be very helpful. Google Earth has a ruler that you can set to feet, yards, miles, etc. We used the Google Earth ruler tool when we set up our Lake Avalon trail last year.

Sometimes when we visit an area to install boxes it can be somewhat deceptive and look like it can have more boxes than it should. By using the Google Earth ruler, we were able to comply with the bluebirds' unwritten law and placed the boxes at Lake Avalon at least 300 feet apart. Our reward was getting 100% concurrent occupancy in all six boxes.

We can also upload BVBBS Box Locations to the desktop version of [Google Earth](#). By doing that it can help BVBBS volunteers locate the best places to move or install new boxes in relation to the boxes already on the map.

For instructions on uploading the BVBBS Box Locations to [Google Earth](#), go to [Trail Maps](#) and click on **KML Download/Google Earth Upload**.



**Concerning Other Species**  
**by Monty Carter**

The Eastern Bluebird is certainly one of the most beautiful songbirds in our region, with a temperament we find endearing, who also provides hours of joyous entertainment. Sadly, this love for our bluebirds has, in some cases, manifested as disdain for other cavity nesters who compete with our beloved bluebirds. I've seen many posts or comments, indicating a level of open hostility towards other species. The most common of these are about tearing out nests of another native cavity nester.

When we put out a nest box, hoping to attract a family of bluebirds, it's not the same as setting out a doghouse for our pet. We don't get to choose who uses it or dictate what happens inside. We're seeking to provide aid in the conservation of our feathered friends. But not just one species, any native bird that chooses our backyard as their home is well deserving of our help.

I, like most of you, think the bluebird is certainly a pleasure to watch from the back window; however, I wish to suggest equal joy can be gained from watching the fierce little wren (house or carolina) raise her brood, or the spirited chickadee watching over his family while feverishly bringing in caterpillars from the yard. Every species has its own personality and has every right to compete for the nest box we've provided.

Unfortunately, some in our communities need to be reminded that all native birds are protected by law. Even when they're in a nest box we provided. It's still illegal to harm, harass, or destroy them, their eggs, or their nest.

Therefore, let me make this simple recommendation. When it comes to the competition and interaction between native species, don't feel you need to police them to help your personal favorite. They've been fighting it out among themselves for a very long time before we ever considered getting in their way. They always flourished under that system, until we started destroying their habitat.

Habitat loss is the true enemy we're fighting with that box in the yard. So, mount that nest box, protect it with a baffle, and grab the binoculars for a wonderful show every day, no matter the species that makes your yard their home.

Note from the BVBBS: The only species we want to remove from our nest boxes, and that is legal to do, is a house sparrow. See this Factsheet for color photos of the birds, nests, and eggs of species that use bluebird nest boxes – [Monitoring Bluebird Nestboxes](#), and this Factsheet for [Sparrow Control](#).

Photos of other species can be found at [Eggs, Chicks, Birds](#).

This article was excerpted with permission from the author from *Nest Box News*, publication of the [South Carolina Bluebird Society, Summer 2020](#), p.14.

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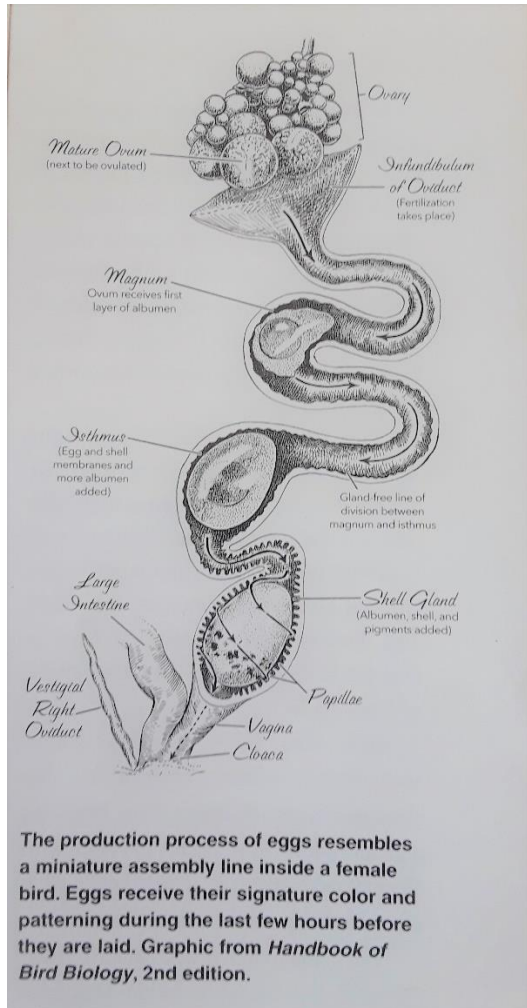
**Bella Vista Birders**

Bella Vista Birders is a bird watching group that was founded in February 2019 by Gail Storm & Butch Tetzlaff. They have seasonal gatherings, meet and greets that include talks about bird watching, and they also go on field trips to places with good birding opportunities. If you're interested in becoming a BV Birder, contact Gail Storm at [bvbirders@gmail.com](mailto:bvbirders@gmail.com).





## Why Do Birds Lay One Egg A Day?



Excerpted from *The Beauty and Biology of Egg Color* by Pat Leonard, *Living Bird*, Summer 2017, v 36 #3, pg. 45

An egg's story begins in a female bird's single ovary. When an ovum is released into the oviduct and fertilized, it is just a protein-packed yolk. The albumen—the gelatinous egg white—is added next. The blobby mass then gets plumped up with water and encased in soft, stretchy membrane layers. The first globbs of the calcium carbonate shell are then deposited on the exterior, with the mineral squirting from special cells lining the shell gland (uterus). Pigmentation, if any, comes next, with an overall protein coating added before the egg is laid. It takes about 24 hours to build a single egg.

## BVBBS Merchandise



Don't forget, the Bella Vista Bluebird Society t-shirts and baseball caps are still available for purchase. The t-shirts are available in a variety of sizes and colors, and dark blue are now available. The baseball caps have an adjustable band w/metal clip in the back for perfect sizing! All our merchandise is available at [The Bluebird Shed](http://TheBluebirdShed.com) in Bella Vista.





Photo by Carl Ball

**Dear Bluebirder....**

Have questions about bluebirds, nest boxes, problems, or concerns? Any comments or suggestions for an article or an event we should attend? Write to us at [JSBlueBirder@gmail.com](mailto:JSBlueBirder@gmail.com) and in the Subject Line add "Dear Bluebirder". We will answer your questions in our next edition! As always, you can visit the [BVBS](http://BVBS.org) website for up-to-date information.

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**Bella Vista Bluebird Society Facebook Page**



Since we created our own society FB group page, we now have 357 people following our group, have had 447 "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.

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**Coming Soon**

**Birds, Bees, Bugs, Butterflies, and the Native Plants that Support Them - Coming in the Fall/Winter issue of *The Bluebirder*, courtesy of the NWA Master Naturalists.**



Common Eastern Bumble Bee on Liatris Photo by Kitty Sanders



Tiger Swallowtail on Verbena Photo by Kitty Sanders

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To become a member or donate to the BVBS, go to [Make a Donation or Become a Member](#). If you are interested in becoming a BVBS volunteer, you can email us at [bellavistabluebird@gmail.com](mailto:bellavistabluebird@gmail.com), or fill out and send our [Volunteer Application](#).

The Bella Vista Bluebird Society (BVBS) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organized for wildlife protection & preservation. For more information go to our website [bvbluebirds.com](http://bvbluebirds.com) or email us at [bellavistabluebird@gmail.com](mailto:bellavistabluebird@gmail.com).

Dedicated to increasing and protecting the Eastern Bluebird population of Bella Vista, Arkansas

**BVBS Board**

Laura Claggett – President	Leon Wehmeyer – Past President	Lorna Sterrett – Treasurer	Buzz Schoenhard – Secretary
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