



The Bluebirder

Late Summer 2019

Edition 2

It's hard to believe that summer is almost over and the baby bluebirds have all fledged. We've had a busy summer with getting new boxes located, working with Runway NWA to get 100 boxes completed for the special give-away, designing and installing new metal logos on our boxes, and planning exciting things for the fall. 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.



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

Have you ever wondered why some bluebird boxes always seem to be used, but others go unused during the season?

This question not only plagues bluebird societies but seems to be on the minds of private homeowners as well. The problem is there is no one simple answer.

What I hope to convey with this article is that, while box placement is a seemingly simple task, understanding box occupancy is far from easy. Boxes may go unused for a variety of reasons. There can be macro- and micro- environmental factors involved, individual variation in the birds themselves, as well as some human related factors.

To understand box occupancy at a macro-scale (e.g., the city of Bella Vista), we first need to understand that the overall bluebird population is not constant from one year to the next. Severe winter temperatures or a prolonged ice storm may cause local bluebird numbers to plummet due to mortality. This means that some of the variation in box occupancy may have nothing to do with box locations. It may mean that bluebirds numbers are down in general. A drop of 20% in the local bluebird population would probably go unnoticed by any of us just watching our backyards, but that may translate into 120 (20% of 600) additional BVBBS boxes not being used this year, which would surely be noticed by our monitors.

At a micro-scale (e.g., bird territory), things get trickier. For this, we need to realize that not all individual bluebirds are the same. They each have their own abilities to secure a territory, and they each have their preferences about box attributes and desired locations. Furthermore, it appears that they comparison shop the available boxes in an area pitting one box against others and selecting the one they believe to be the most suitable. Thus, when considering box occupancy at a territory level we need to consider the overall ecological dynamics of the immediate vicinity, which can vary year to year or even day by day.

For example, maybe this year's male territory resident is more (or less) aggressive than the old one that occupied the territory for the last couple of seasons, which may have changed the territorial boundaries, which may determine if a certain box gets used. Of course, it is possible that the male now claiming the box just isn't attractive enough to gain a mate, so it may go unused for that reason, too. Or maybe there are environmental considerations. For example, perhaps due to recent weather, the insect population in that immediate area has dried up or it has become too wet for adequate foraging. Each of these possibilities is just part of natural variation that occurs from site to site that has been taking place for as long as there have been bluebirds. **Continued page 2**

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Of course, there are always human factors that may influence nest site selection in unexpected ways. For example, perhaps a next-door neighbor put up a competing box, which has instead attracted the bluebirds over there. Or maybe he now mows twice per week instead of once as the previous guy did causing more disturbance. Or maybe automobile traffic patterns near a box have temporarily increased due to house construction down the way. As you can see, this list could go on and on with factors we may never fully understand.

The important point here is that just because a box is not occupied this season doesn't mean the box is in a permanently "bad location" and won't be occupied next season. The box may be sited in perfectly good bluebird habitat. No box is ever going to have 100% occupancy as there are just too many variables in play. Furthermore, moving boxes frequently to attain an increase in occupancy rate can cause the birds to expend energy in re-establishing territorial boundaries using up energy that could go into feeding offspring or defending against predators. We also need to remember that bluebirds use the boxes on their territories for winter roosting as well. So just because a box isn't used for nesting, doesn't mean it won't be selected as a safe-haven in the winter helping bluebirds survive periods of harsh weather as mentioned above.

Rather than moving boxes on a trial and error basis, a better alternative would be to systematically understand the most important factors affecting box occupancy, so that we can better understand what "optimal" bluebird habitat really looks like. By doing this scientifically we can work to minimize the number of boxes that are in unsuitable locations and then let nature take over from there. A little research in this area might yield some good results, so that BVBBS can spend less time with box maintenance and the birds can spend less time reshuffling and defending new territorial boundaries. This could be a win-win.



More on this to come!

References

Brinks, Mitchell A. [Development and Implementation of a GIS Model for Determining Optimal Nest Box Placement for Eastern Bluebirds](#) (Sialia sialis).

Pitts, T. David. 2011. [Studying Eastern Bluebirds – A Biologist's Report and Reflections](#). Redleaves Publishing.



Ken & Debbie Ness didn't get any birds to use their box, so they turned it into a planter. Nice!

Send Us Your Results

For our non-volunteers, we would like Bella Vista residents with bluebird nest boxes in their yards to let us know the number of bluebird chicks, and other bird species' chicks, that have successfully fledged (left the nest) this year. We like to keep track of Bella Vista's bluebirds and we'll report our findings in local publications. You can send your results either by email to bellavistabluebird@gmail.com, or in a text to **847-951-1743**. We'll reply to let you know we've received them. Please don't send your results both ways as we don't want to double-count. Thanks!



NABS Conference 2020

The Bella Vista Bluebird Society is an affiliate of The North American Bluebird Society (NABS). Their annual conference will be held March 11-15, 2020 in Kearney, Nebraska. It will be hosted by Bluebirds Across Nebraska (BAN) at the Holiday Inn Convention Center, 110 S. 2nd Ave. Reservations can be made at 308-237-5971. Mention NABS/BAN conference when making reservations to receive a room discount. The conference cost is not yet posted, but from two previous conferences it will likely be reasonable. Visit [NABS](#) for more information and updates.

Kearney is in south central Nebraska, approximately 325 miles northwest of Kansas City. It is a few miles north of the Platte River, where some 20 million birds belonging to 300 species stop on their migration north for nesting.

The event features speakers, birding field trips, workshops, exhibits, auctions, and dinners on Friday & Saturday with a cash bar. One of the speakers is Bernie Daniel, NABS

President, speaking on distribution and trends for the three bluebird species.

The field trips will give you one of the most impressive sights you have seen in birding. Unfortunately, no bluebirds because March is a little early for them. However, 500,000 sandhill cranes converge on the central Platte River to fuel up on grain from nearby cornfields. They roost overnight on the Platte River, where the water is only ankle deep, and trips are made mornings and evenings to watch thousands of them take off and then land. Another species you will see in abundant numbers is snow geese. About 2 million of them occupy the 80-mile trek along the Platte River. There will be birding trips to view prairie chickens, prairie dogs, pelicans, and numerous waterfowl species.

This might be a good trip to carpool if enough people are interested. Contact Jacqui Stockman at jsbluebirder@gmail.com if you are interested.

Nest Box Kits Donated to Scouts

Bella Vista Bluebird Society donated 10 kits, built by volunteer Ken Ness, to the Bella Vista Cub Scout Troop 3410 for their June meet.

Jerry Butler, monitor & trail boss, did a run-through of the instructions with his grandson, John Kensington Butler. He predrilled 120 assembly holes, assembled/disassembled 10 kits, added 60 ventilation ports and 40 mounting holes, and fine-tuned our build process document.

The Webelos Scouts' leader, Casandra Ford, organized other activities related to birds around nest box construction.

Butch Tetzlaff, opened the meeting with a mist net trying to capture a cardinal and a bluebird. Butch also showed an electronic bluebird box with temperature gauges, entry counter, and wi-fi, as used by real scientists. The scouts stood in line to peek at the resident bluebird brood almost ready to fledge. A highlight of the talk was Butch's description of research proving that birds use the stars for navigation.



The scouts were great, very keen on the build project. There were no established birders among them, but this may be a good start. They had a lot of question about birds and nesting bluebirds that were answered by Butch and Jerry.

House Sparrow Problem

Although the Bella Vista Bluebird Society (BVBS) has had problems in the past with house sparrows taking over bluebird nest boxes, when we switched to slotted boxes instead of hole boxes in some locations in 2018, we were successful in fending them off. House sparrows, we learned, do not like a slotted box if the size of the slot is between $1 \frac{1}{8}$ to $1 \frac{3}{16}$ inches.



House or English Sparrow

This year we encountered a problem with house sparrows invading slotted bluebird nest boxes at a residential apartment complex in Bella Vista in spite of the slot being the right size.

House sparrows, a non-native, invasive species will destroy bluebird eggs, and kill chicks and female bluebirds in the nest. Since our mission is “dedicated to increasing & protecting the *bluebird* population of Bella Vista, AR,” we want to do everything we can to prevent house sparrows from taking over.

We have Troy Shaffer, our trail boss at this location, to thank for his determination and dedication to this trail. Troy decided he’d like to try some documented solutions to discourage the sparrows. Here are the solutions he tried and the results. For more information see Managing House Sparrows.

- A) Sparrow Spooker (not our photo) – this mechanism uses mylar hanging down from the top of the box, which must scare off sparrows. Ideally it should be installed immediately after a bluebird has laid its first egg, but the problem with this solution in our case is a bluebird couldn’t build a nest, let alone lay eggs, without a sparrow building its own nest on top of the bluebird nest. When Troy put it up to try it without any nest built, neither a bluebird or a sparrow would use the box.
- B) Letting Light in the Box – the theory here is that house sparrows prefer a dark cavity and allowing light to get in a box will discourage them. Troy drilled a 2” hole in the top of the box and fastened a piece of Plexiglas over the hole. In this case, the sparrow would start to build a nest, with a smattering of nesting material found every week, and then abandon it over and over. It wouldn’t finish a nest, and a bluebird never attempted to build a nest once the house sparrow was in the nest.
- C) Monofilament/Fishing Line – For some reason, house sparrows, but NOT bluebirds, tree swallows or chickadees, tend to be spooked by fishing line draped over the entry to a box. Troy tried two different ways to use the line. He tried long pieces with small bolts tied to the ends to keep them straight, but they still tangled, and the bluebirds wouldn’t use the box. Then he stapled about eight pieces of fishing line to a small strip of wood and screwed the wood to the front of the box so that the line hung over the slotted opening, pictured below. This solution worked! After Troy put the fishing line strip on this box, bluebirds built their nest, hatched their eggs and fledged their chicks without being disturbed by house sparrows – quite a coup considering the number of house sparrow in this area. It will be interesting to see if this solution continues to work next year.

A



B



C



Here's Something You Don't See Every Day



Bluebird eggs laid in a chickadee nest! Usually a bluebird will wait until the chickadees are done using the box. Guess these bluebirds were anxious or couldn't find other accommodations. We know it's a chickadee nest by the type of material used, especially the moss, which bluebirds don't use.

Here's an example of a bluebird nest built on top of a chickadee nest. The chickadees put about 5" of moss on the bottom, and then used lots of fluffy stuff on top of the moss (this was early spring and a bit cold still.) But the bluebirds were anxious and didn't wait for the chickadees. When we took the nests apart, there was one chickadee egg in fluffy stuff. (Fluffy stuff is usually animal hair.)



Pudding

Fall is just around the corner and our birds will be looking for great food sources for the coming months. With cooler weather approaching, now is a great time to make and put out pudding without it melting. Here is the standard bluebird pudding, along with an alternate tried and true recipe to attract all birds.

BVBBS Bluebird Pudding

- 1 - 8oz jar of peanut butter
- 2 ½ cups lard
- 6 ½ cups cornmeal

Melt lard in the microwave. Then let the peanut butter melt in the hot lard, using more microwave if necessary. Add cornmeal last and mix well. Refrigerate overnight before feeding. Store in the freezer or refrigerator.



Alternate Peanut Butter Pudding

- 1 cup peanut butter
- 1 cup lard
- 1 cup clear corn syrup
- 1 cup flour
- 3 cups cornmeal

Melt the peanut butter, lard and corn syrup in the microwave until well blended. Slowly add in the flour and cornmeal and mix until well blended. Place in individual serving size pie tins and refrigerate overnight before feeding. Store in refrigerator or freezer.





Tree Swallows

By Leon Wehmeyer

Tree swallows are one of eight swallow species that exist in the U.S. Other species are bank, barn, cave, cliff (swallows of Capistrano), northern rough-winged, violet green, and purple martin. All these species spend some time in northwest Arkansas except for the cave and violet-green. All swallows have slender bodies with long, pointed wings. They are adept aerialists, catching insects in flight.

The tree swallow is a small handsome bird about the size of a bluebird. The adult male is blue/green on the back and white below. They have blackish feathers in their wings. The adult female is brown above with hints of blue/green. They are white below and also show blackish flight feathers. However, some females are nearly as blue/green above as the males.

Migrating and wintering tree swallows can form enormous flocks (called "Flights") numbering in the hundreds of thousands. They winter farther north than any other American swallows and return to their nesting grounds long before other swallows come back.

Until about 2000, tree swallows came through Arkansas only during migration. They did not nest here. From there the number of fledglings from our BVBBS boxes grew to 325 tree swallows fledged in 2013 and continued to

increase each year until 2016, when the highest number of 664 fledged. Then a decrease started, with 463 in 2017 and 397 in 2018.

Tree swallows are the only swallow in Arkansas that competes with bluebirds for nest boxes. Both the swallow and the bluebird are territorial and will defend their box against others of their species. To combat this we use twin boxes. The second box is placed about ten feet away from the original. The bluebird will take one box but will not allow another bluebird to use the other box but will allow a tree swallow to use it. This is because they are not competing over their food source. The same is true for the tree swallow, i.e. they will allow a bluebird in the second box but not another tree swallow. Thus, the twinned boxes can yield both bluebird and tree swallow nesting.



The tree swallow is a protected species and a useful one, but it like other birds are declining in numbers, so we are pleased to provide a little bit of help for this beautiful bird.

BVBBS Merchandise



Bella Vista Bluebird Society t-shirts and baseball caps are still available for purchase. The t-shirts are \$18 per shirt and are available in a variety of sizes and colors, and dark blue are now available. 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](http://TheBluebirdShed.com) in Bella Vista.



Bella Vista Bluebird Society Facebook Page



Since we created our own society Facebook group page, we now have 145 people following our group, have had 225 "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.

The Killing Cat

by Laura Claggett

There are many ways that adult and recently fledged bluebirds can prematurely lose their lives – flying into a window or building, colliding with a car, poisoned by pesticides, caught in severe weather, getting preyed on by a hawk or other birds of prey, or getting killed by a cat. Some of these, like severe weather – long cold snaps or heat waves – we have no control over, but one area we could more effectively control is the number of cats roaming the outdoors.



Research published in *Nature Communications* in 2013 estimates that domestic cats kill 1.4 to 3.7 billion birds in the lower 48 states each year! Cats are likely the single greatest source of anthropogenic (caused or influenced by humans) mortality for US birds and mammals.” And, we’re not just talking about feral cats.

Domestic cats are not native to North America; they didn’t exist here until the colonists arrived in the US. In fact, cats did not become abundant until the late 1800s when they were imported to help control rodent populations. According to market research and pet food trade associations, there are now over 50 million pet cats in the US, with only 35% kept strictly indoors. Estimates of homeless cats are between 60 to 100 million.

Cats are instinctive and skilled predators, whether feral or well-fed house cat. Coincidentally when I was working on this article a local resident happened to mention to me that she was going to stop putting out mealworms for the bluebirds in her yard. When I asked why, she said one of her house cats killed a female bluebird while it was at the feeder. Instead of not feeding the birds, the bigger win would be to decide not to let a house cat outside at all. Although she only happened to see her cat take a bird once, who knows if her kitty also killed the four bluebird fledglings she had in her yard this year, or other species who came to the feeder.

Since outdoor cats are a human-caused problem, we should find ways to solve it. The cats on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic, introduced in the 19th century, caused a collapse in populations of nesting seabirds. The project to remove them from the island began in 2002, and the island was cleared of cats by 2004. Since then, seven species of seabird that had not nested on the island for 100 years have returned.

I am not implying that we should eliminate cats. I’m a huge animal lover and I love cats. They can be sweet, cuddly, worthy companions. But as I’ve come to learn the harm that cats are doing to our environment, I don’t love them less, I just see that it makes better sense for us to keep our furry friends indoors. A modern way of providing them with the best of both worlds are “catios” (patios for cats).

Fortunately, there are still billions of birds in North America, and they reproduce well each year, which the Bella Vista Bluebird Society helps facilitate. However, birds can’t continue to absorb this level of predation indefinitely. Keeping cats indoors is also beneficial to our cats, because it means they will live safer, longer, happier lives themselves.

You can find more information about cats and birds at the links below.

References

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Loss, Scott L., et al (2013). [The impact of free-ranging domestic cats on wildlife of the United States](#). *Nature Communications*, 4:1396.

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Yandell, Kate (2013). [Cats pose an even bigger threat to birds than previously thought](#). Audubon.

Wasps – Why Are They In My Nest Box And What Can I Do About It?

Paper wasp queens collect plant particles, and mixed with her saliva she forms a thin, paper-like material. She uses this material to make an open-celled nest that she hangs from a single stem. Because of the fragile material, she needs to find a protected place to build her nest. And, when wasps build a nest in a bluebird box, birds have the good sense not to use it.



Here's what you can do about it:

- First – Use a long stick and knock the nest down. A paint stirrer would work well. If you check your box every week, the wasp nest doesn't have a chance to get big, and there's usually only one wasp working on it. Stand back from the box after you knock it down, and usually the wasp will fly out and go the other way. Paper wasps are not aggressive, but they can be if you knock their nest down, so if you're allergic get someone else to knock the nest out of the box.
- Second – This is the essential part so that wasps don't return. Take a bar of soap and rub it hard against the inside top of the box. The soap will prevent wasps from being able to adhere the nest to the wood. You can use Ivory soap (since it's free of dyes and heavy perfumes and is 99.44% pure), but some say any bar soap is OK. Since birds can't smell the perfume, and since the soap is on the top of the box and won't get on bird feathers, any kind of bar soap should work.
- Lastly – Do not spray bug killer in a nest box! Pesticides can also kill birds. And, wasps pollinate plants and we need pollinators.



Fireflies and Bluebird Event Draws Crowd

by Keith Bryant, The Weekly Vista (printed with permission)



Pictured: Jacqui Stockman (left), Harrison Ramey, Mike Abb and Grace Turley

A crowd filled Blowing Springs pavilion June 29th for the third-annual Fireflies and Tailgating event, put on by the POA's community involvement committee.

Cathy Wilmoth, recreation facility manager, said the POA served more than 500 hot dogs during the event and set up several activities for kids. Community Involvement Committee chairman Dylan Shaddox said that the crowd started early, with people showing up at 5:45 p.m. when the event was scheduled for 7 p.m. "It's really great to have the community come out and socialize," he said.

Kids were playing and everyone seemed to be having a good time, he said. One focus this year was on providing more activities before sunset,

including a movie, coloring table, croquet and temporary tattoos, to name a few.

The Bella Vista Bluebird Society was also onsite, giving out bluebird houses paid for by a donation from Runway NWA. Jacqui Stockman, the society's public relations board member, said that this was a good avenue to educate the public, and the 75 bird boxes they gave out will ideally get people excited about bluebirds.

The eastern bluebird, which can be seen in Bella Vista today, is a formerly endangered species, but man-made homes have helped the population recover, she said. It's also a great chance to get the word out about the bluebird society, she said. "I think this was absolutely fantastic," Stockman said.

Amanda Marley was one of the people taking home a bird box. Marley, who lives in Bentonville, said she came to the event with her parents, who live in Bella Vista, as well as her two children, 2 and 4. The kids had a great time and so did she, Marley said, and she'd be eager to come back next year. "It's been a lot of fun. We came out and got some hot dogs," she said. "This has been one of their first experiences chasing fireflies."

Shaddox said he was enjoying this year's event but already thinking ahead for the next one. "I'm already excited to plan for next year," he said.

Close Call

After checking on our nest boxes at the country club, we are happy to report that no boxes were damaged or destroyed by the recent storm that moved through the area. Although we did have a couple of close calls, as you can see from the pictures below.



The red circles indicate where two nest boxes are located.



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 and in the Subject Line add "Dear Bluebirder". We will answer your questions in our next edition!

As always, you can visit the BVBBS website for up-to-date information.

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

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