

Vast New Territory to Tap for Bird Trails

Many readers of BLUEBIRDS FLY! have not learned of our 1996 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the U.S. Forest Service. It is a working agreement giving CBRP ready access to 20 million acres of land under a single ownership--much of which includes ideal habitat for bluebirds and other cavity nesters.

If you are looking for new trail establishment or expansion such

areas may be of interest to you. Foresters know of the agreement and are willing to point out suitable habitat and, just possibly, help in nestbox installation. "Such activities and projects would complement the missions of the Forest Service and the California Bluebird Recovery Program and be in the best interests of the public." The agreement calls for exchange of year-end project results.

We probably can assist you by referral to the proper staff person in your nearest forest headquarters. If you are located within monitoring-travel range of a national forest, it's a good time now to lay plans for routes for next season's new trails. Contact the chief Ranger or Biologist who can point out promising habitat areas for box locations and most probably be of great help to you.



\$2.50 per issue
suggested donation

BLUEBIRDS FLY!

California Bluebird Recovery Program's newsletter

— assisted by Mt Diablo Audubon Society
— an affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society

for the encouragement and conservation of cavity-nesters – especially bluebirds – anywhere in the West

Bluebird Convention Captivates at Cornell

New York Hosts Enthusiasts in July

report by Howard Rathlesberger

The North American Bluebird Society convention at Ithaca, NY, home of Cornell University was a great event (July 7-11). Visiting there enhanced our appreciation for all that the Cornell Ornithology Labs do in their various Citizens Scientist Programs, such as Project Feederwatch, The Back Yard Bird Count, The Birdhouse Network, and others. Take a look at their Web Page, www.Birds.Cornell.edu. Their motto is that you only need one birdhouse to get started. The Lab is located at Sapsucker Woods, a hardwood forest, wet lands, a delightful pond with trails and boardwalks everywhere, and Cardinals calling in the woods.

Ithaca is at the lower end of Cayuga Lake, one of New York State's Finger Lakes. One of their local projects we visited is a ten-year-old study of Tree Swallow dispersion situated on a small lake with adjacent ponds consisting of 100 5x5 boxes with 1 1/2" dia. openings (like ours) on poles protected by sheet metal inverted conical deflectors. Most of the boxes are in the water, so monitoring is done by canoe. Imagine their data base, 4-6 chicks per box in 100 boxes after ten years! Dr. David Winkler, director of the study, also follows the migration to Central America to monitor the birds they've banded in Ithaca.

Help Tally Effects of Fires by Completing Your Form 2 (inside).

Many of us are all too aware of the huge forest fires which occurred during the '03 season in various parts of the State. Some of our birders suffered not only real and personal property losses but, of our immediate interest here, numerous nestboxes and birds as well. The totals will never be known. We expect the Annual Reports, due at the end of the nesting season, will show greatly reduced figures from those areas compared with prior years. It will take efforts and reports from every monitor and trail to soften the expected losses in this year's figures, by reason of fewer boxes and fledges.

Be sure to complete your Form 2, inside this issue, as soon as it appears the nesting season has ended.

Beware Blowfly Larvae

Blowfly larvae are a common problem for nestlings. They are parasites to the nestlings and attach themselves to the nestlings to feed periodically. If there is a bad infestation, or if the nestlings are already weakened due to a lack of food or other conditions, the blowfly can prove fatal to the nestlings.

The best way to monitor for blowfly larvae is to have front or side opening boxes so you can see the bottom of the nest where the larvae usually are found. If you see a number of larvae, you can readily replace the old nest with a new nest of dried grass clippings. Some people have fashioned short (less than 1 inch) stands out of hardware cloth to place under the new nest so blowfly larvae fall out from the nest.

Also remember to leave your last nest of the year in over the winter in case it also has wasp larvae in the nest. These are parasites to the blowfly and emerge from the blowfly puparia in early spring.

(from New York State Bluebird Society BLUEBIRD NEWS June 2004)

When Swallows Swallow

An interesting fact: when the Swallows are doing their arial acrobatics and swooping of insects, they do not swallow them, but collect 50 or more, store them in their throats, and then go to a roost to swallow them or otherwise go to the nest to feed hatched chicks.

These birds have two agendas: first to hatch and fledge at least one clutch of eggs and second, eat enough insects to support a 100% feather molt prior to migrating back to Central America. This according to Dr. David Winkler of Cornell University.



If you suspect blowfly larvae:

Dr. Terry Whitworth, an entomologist in the state of Washington, has been studying blow flies for several years. If you feel your nestboxes may have blowfly larva, mail the nests by the fastest means to him: 2533 Inter Avenue, Puyallup, WA 98372. He would appreciate the material for studies, and you will receive a professional appraisal. Include your e-mail address for a faster reply.

California Bluebird Recovery Program

Founded in 1994, supported by Mt. Diablo Audubon Society and affiliated with the North American Bluebird Society, CBRP is "for the encouragement and conservation of cavity-nesters—especially bluebirds—anywhere in the West."

CBRP is non-profit, has no paid staff, and is supported entirely by the efforts of volunteers and donations accepted by the Mt. Diablo Audubon Society on CBRP's behalf.

CBRP members had located and reported on more than 4,000 nestboxes by the end of 2001, with more than 17,000 cavity-nesters fledged—nearly half of them western and mountain bluebirds.

CBRP welcomes membership from the public who wish to support its program, and especially seeks those who will place appropriate nestboxes in the proper habitat, faithfully monitor the birds' progress through the nesting season, and report yearly on the results.

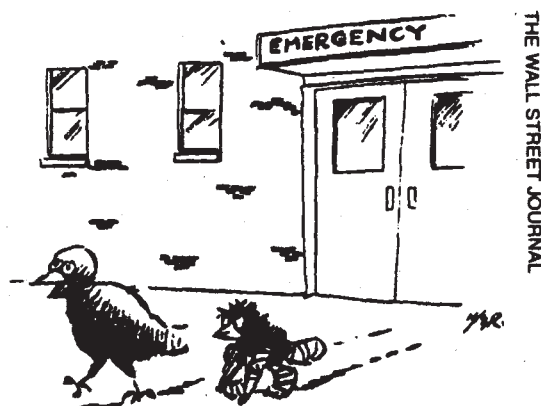
CBRP can furnish nestbox plans, a monitoring guide, forms for monitoring and reports, technical advice through a network of county coordinators, and sometimes the nestboxes themselves.

Membership, which includes this sometimes quarterly newsletter, is available for a donation of \$5 or more made payable to "MDAS-Bluebirds" and mailed to CBRP, 2021 Ptarmigan Drive #1, Walnut Creek, CA 94595. Donations are tax deductible.

California Bluebird Recovery Program

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"Sorry. I thought you were ready to be kicked out of the nest."

Notes from

Howard Rathlesberger

Please File Your Reports – ASAP

I believe we can safely say the breeding season is concluded. The results, I'm sure, will be quite varied. A few annual reports have trickled in and I expect to be inundated with a flood of reports before long. If you don't have an annual report form, cut out the one on page 9/10 of this newsletter and mail it in ASAP to your County Coordinator or Program Director Don Yoder.

As you can imagine, we have brought a lot of stuff back from the NABS convention. One outstanding book was Cornell's *The Bluebird Monitors Guide* (price: \$14.95). It has many personal accounts, lots of pictures, and interesting information galore. *The Bluebird Book*, by Donald and Lillian Stokes, is also wonderful. These two books complement each other and are available at many bookstores as well as on Amazon.com.

Now is the time to clean out the messy old nests, particularly VGSW, OATI, and CBCH to avoid attracting mice, bumblebee nests, etc. Last year we suggested saving neat clean WEBL nests. Take the nests out, shake all the chitin and loose debris out, clean the box sides and bottom, if needed, and return the nest to the box. Avoid breathing the chitin dust. It's a good idea to have some plastic shopping bags for the discarded material. Hope you've all had a pleasant summer.

Unsafe Nesting Material

by Dick Purvis

I have encountered three birds this year which were trapped by Easter grass and couldn't get out of the nestbox. Two of them were dead, having been abandoned by their parents after their siblings fledged. I would guess that only takes about three or four days of no food. The third one was in fine shape when I found him at 26 days of age. His parents didn't abandon him because he had no siblings and was an only child! I freed him and the parents accompanied him as he flew away.

Easter grass isn't the only type of nesting material which may trap birds. Mono-filament line is the worst offender in parks where there are fishing lakes. I have even had a dead adult trapped by monofilament. I have also had chicks trapped by fibrous natural materials. I think adding a small pair of scissors to the monitoring kit to work on nests and remove unwanted nesting material is a good idea.

The best prevention of the problem when a nest is overwhelmed with unwanted material is to replace the whole nest, remembering that it's not practical to pick up each chick after they are 16 or more days old. This year, I have replaced two or three nests that were 100% Easter grass.

We often come across unused nests in good condition so we should save them.

Sometimes I have made new nests with handfuls of dry grass which were readily accepted by the birds. They looked awful but by the next time viewing, they were in good shape.

Even without the Easter grass, once in a while a messy nest should be replaced because it can ensnare feet/legs, but maybe more importantly, the unsanitary conditions may cause some mortality among the fledglings. Foods such as elderberries seem to cause diarrhea so the parents can't carry out the fecal sacs.

~ Songbird Studies ~

Interest in the welfare of song birds is not limited to this country alone. Great Britain has become aware of the declining numbers, particularly of song birds that used to be present in their forests and backyards. The speculation has arisen whether decreased populations might be due to reduced population of bugs caused by farming methods (not specified in the report). CBS' Charles Osgood cited the problem, stating that investigations are underway. One method rather mimics the American Birding Association bird counts over a measured distance; the British project will measure the number of bug splats on license plates of vehicles driven a measured distance. *(No doubt their results will be reported in metric units--and make their results harder to interpret. PD).*

Why Do We Monitor Trails?

As you know, it hasn't been too many years ago that the bluebird population was in trouble. This North American treasure was headed for disaster.

Because of efforts all across the country by people like you and me the situation has turned around.

Why is it that so many people have taken to this one particular bird? I have often asked myself that question.

Each person that monitors a trail probably has their own special reason for taking up the crusade. For me, monitoring my trail means not only helping the bluebirds but also seeing blue heron and kingfishers by the ponds, hearing a barred owl when I'm running behind and the evening is getting late. It means watching a male oriole feeding his young, seeing a cedar waxwing fly to its nest with food for its nestlings, turkeys strutting by and deer gently grazing. Monitoring my bluebird trail gives me the opportunity to watch Canada geese families grow up.

I see frogs and turtles along the way. The frogs hurry to get out of my way while the turtles hide when I approach.

It means watching the trees and shrubs changing from their spring blossoms to their fall blaze of color. I watch the wildflowers grow until they turn to seeds and then the goldfinches and chickadees are there to take advantage of the food source. What do all of these things have to do with bluebirds?

Nothing but everything. When we walk our bluebird trails nature is all around us. No matter who we are; city residents, suburbanites or country dwellers, we all need some nature in our lives. Nature calms our souls, refreshes our minds, and brings enjoyment into our lives.

We humans are definitely helping the bluebirds but they, in return, are doing much for us.

(President's Message by Sandy Seibert, BLUEBIRDS ACROSS NEBRASKA

Volume 10 Number 3 Fall 2003)

Healthy Habits

Some pretty reasonable claims have been made that the outdoor exercise and fresh air that bluebird monitors obtain while covering their trails is excellent for their health, tones the muscles, and prolongs life.

Some anecdotal evidence comes to us from Ohio Bluebird Society's *Bluebird Monitor* of Summer 2004. A gentleman who has been monitoring for 16 years had open heart surgery in October 2002 and is well on his way to recovery. He turned 93 in December 2003, and he is now gearing up for the 2005 nesting season to begin!



Upcoming Study from Cornell Labs

If you harbor some syndrome inducing serious pursuit of numbers and statistics, here is a brief introduction to a study to be introduced before the spring 2005 nesting season by Cornell Laboratories Birdhouse Network. This may interest you more if your nestbox trail is located a reasonable distance from your home. It will require daily monitoring of your boxes, recordkeeping, and a chance to participate in a new study.

Questions arise as to reasons for non-hatching of eggs and perhaps which eggs are the real subjects of such inquiries. You will need a soft felt tip pen to carefully mark each egg in the clutch on the day that it is laid: one dot on the large end of the first egg; two dots on the second egg the next day, etc. The protocol is still being formulated by Cornell, but the hope is to gain some understanding of egg failure: whether due to high temperatures, infertility, seasonal differences, or various other reasons. The dots on the unhatched eggs found in the nest after fledging occurs will reveal the date an egg was laid, if your records are conclusive.

As we said, this is only a brief alert; there is more info to come before the next nesting season.

If you'd like to get early information on the dotted egg program, send an e-mail to: Tina Phillips, The Birdhouse Network cbc6@cornell.edu or to Caren Cooper cbc25@cornell.edu

Being Prepared for Emergencies Beyond Your Scope

Accidents occasionally occur which put hatchlings at risk: damage to the nestbox, or loss of or non-performance by parents, for example. The youngsters may need emergency feeding as well as housing and the challenge to support them is beyond the scope of the monitor's authority.

Consequently, it's a good idea to keep the name of a trusted rehabber by your telephone. ("Licensed, Experienced, Qualified, Caring.") They can step in to respond in such emergencies.



Using your power as a consumer to protect wildlife

Whether you go around the corner or around the globe, you could stumble upon products made from medicinal ingredients derived from endangered species. Sometimes you may not even know that what you buy contains anything questionable.

So it's up to you to read labels, ask questions, request documentation. The more we reduce the market demand for these products, the more we can reduce the pressure on animals and plants. *(reprinted from World Wildlife Fund FOCUS, May-June 2004.)*

Why are bluebird eggs blue?

There is a technical answer
and a romantic answer.

by Megan Miller

Like so many strange and wonderful things in nature, the color of bluebird eggs is driven by genetics. Blue genes, you might say. (Or you might not. Perhaps we'd better just continue...)

A young female bluebird hatches with the ability to start producing ova. Interestingly, she only has one ovary – the left one. It is believed that the right ovary, while present, does not develop in order to save weight in flight. As the bird matures, she begins to produce the yolk that will enshroud and nourish the embryo as it ultimately incubates beneath her.

When sexually mature at about one year, the female bluebird may mate with more than one male per breeding season. The ova are fertilized and travel through the oviduct. Albumen (egg white) is added in layers, and chalazae form. Chalazae are specialized "ropes" of albumen whose function is to stabilize the egg within the shell. The shell is created last, also in layers, and during its formation glands add the familiar blue pigment. The pigment, known as biliverdin, is created from bile.

Here's where genetics step in: not all Eastern Bluebirds are capable of adding the pigment. It is estimated that as much as five percent of Eastern Bluebird eggs emerge white.

Shell color does not indicate whether or not a female chick will herself be a white-egg layer or a blue-egg layer, as white-egg layers do not regularly pass the gene anomaly to their offspring. Nor does shell color predict the birth of a white bluebird (sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it?). White eggs and blue eggs both generally contain healthy blue birds.

Albinism does occur in bluebirds, however. One well-documented case was sighted in Maryland in 1999, although some reports say that it was not a true albino as it had dark eyes and legs. Albino birds are at special risk in the wild – they are easily seen by predators and tend to have impaired hearing and eyesight, and feathers of lesser quality.

But to return to the question, "Why are bluebird eggs blue?" Some authorities say that the blue color blends well and helps hide the eggs in the dappled light of a nesting cavity. A seven-year-old authority of my acquaintance says they're blue because there are so few of them. Whatever the reason, blue eggs are another reason we love bluebirds.

(This article was written for Texas Blues, the newsletter of the Texas Bluebird Society. Megan Miller lives in Crawford Texas.)

Don Yoder's

NOTES FROM THE FIELD...

Bob Franz, Ventura, writes the following reports.

One of my nestboxes is hung from a tree in a park near some picnic tables. On June 26 I observed 4 nestlings, however a week later there was a small swarm of bees going in and out of the nestbox so I didn't tempt fate and I left it alone. In succeeding weeks the swarm got larger and larger until it covered the whole front and bottom of the nestbox. At this point I hesitated to call the bee removal guy since I couldn't salvage anything anyway. I decided to let them be. Ooh. Periodically I would check and the swarm remained. Then on August 25, I checked again - and the box was gone! I looked on the ground I saw only a small piece of honeycomb. Then I walked over to the creek and there it was half submerged with only the back visible. Since it looked fairly intact, I retrieved it to confirm. Yes, the nestbox appeared to be OK, but when I opened it, the inside was packed full with layer upon layer of honeycomb. I removed it all with a stick and brought the nestbox home to clean and dry out. I hope to put it back into service - but not at that site.

&

There is a small park in the city of Brea in which I monitor four bluebird nestboxes. Over the years I've grown friendly with the park maintenance workers and they seem interested in what

I do for bluebirds. Last year, one of the workers told me that a co-worker had found a nestbox, taken it back to their servicing facility, hung it in a tree inside the facility, and that a bluebird had been seen in the area.

Naturally this piqued my interest so I drove to the facility, about one mile from the park, to check out the nestbox. There it was, tucked in a short potted tree at the back of the large concrete service area. After checking in at the office to get a temporary pass, I strolled to the nestbox and carefully removed it. I could hardly believe my eyes, there was a female quietly nestled on her nest. She didn't panic so I returned the nestbox to the tree. I checked it again the next week and found 5 eggs. Then I started to wonder how all this had happened. Surely she did not find the nestbox after they moved it a mile from where it was found. Was she inside the nestbox the whole time from the time the workers found it until placing it in the tree? This part of the story ends well as this single-mom - I never saw a male - nurtured 5 young birds by herself until they all fledged. I removed the nestbox to make sure nothing happened to it. But that is not the end of the story.

Noting that last year's location was too hard to get to and was surrounded by concrete and truck traffic all day, I reinstalled the nestbox this spring in a tree in the parkway area in front of

the maintenance buildings. I made a random check on February 23, and there was an adult in the tree! I checked a few more times in March but saw no bluebirds.

I checked again on April 1st and found two eggs with a pair of adults agitating in the tree! This clutch grew to five eggs and there are now 5 nestlings. Remember that this site is a full mile from the closest area with nesting bluebirds and it is on a very busy street with only small strips of grass to provide food. They are amazing!

&

A few weeks ago I opened a nestbox to find a dead male WEBL at the back of the nest with his mate nestled against him while incubating four eggs. This is just one example of how strong the instincts are for birds to reproduce. Has anyone else had a similar experience?

◆◆

Christine Tischer, Orange, observed some noteworthy developments in nestboxes in which nests are built using grass cuttings or eucalyptus leaves. Chicks in such nests appear less healthy than those in other nests "possibly due to the high moisture content in the box that results as this type of vegetation deteriorates and/or molds." A nest of six 15-day-old chicks succumbed to such damp conditions. She also experienced both egg and nestling losses due to rat predation. Parasite losses of '02 were avoided this year by application of Diatomaceous Earth (*See Editor's article page 6 of prior issue of Bluebirds Fly*).

Christine is also a bander and enjoys recovering birds that have bands already attached. Two WEBL banded in '02 were found this year, one of them in the same box as originally tagged. Well and good, and she also encountered 31 TRES wearing bracelets, the oldest of which had been attached 5/15/95, by **Jan Wasserman**, Ventura. <bandlady@west.net.>



Susan Bulger, Orange, lost some WEBL parents, so called on a rehabilitator to care for 24 youngsters; 2 didn't make the grade but 22 survived and fledged to the wild new world.



Howard Rathlesberger, Woodside, reports: Back at home here our nesting season is still going strong. Today, 7-19-04, **Max Grandfield** reported newly hatched WEBL chicks in Box #4 of Trail 1 at Filoli. This is a bit northeast of the gate house at Filoli Northgate. There are also chicks in Box #2 right adjacent to the gate house. These two boxes are not at all 100 yards apart, as we always assume they should be.

The season has been good even though interrupted by many unexpected nest abandonments some of you have experienced. Another achievement for the season is the second year of feeding mealworms to WEBL's on the Williams' property on Jane Drive, Woodside. Feeding to a second brood of chicks the adults were assisted by, at least, one immature bird from the first brood. They had no nestings at all last year, but this year they

came back. Great fun watching these gorgeous birds.

Keep up the good work! Many thanks for your wonderful interest and assistance.



Jean & Gene Caggiano, Ventura, reported both good news and bad. The bad news – some newly hatched (five days old) babies were lost to a sparrow. At first they thought the culprit was a snake or rat, but the babies were found on the ground, about five feet from the nest.

The good news – the pair came back to their box and started nest building. There are now 5 eggs and the female bird is brooding. They expect babies in about 5 to 7 days. There is still a sparrow nearby, but the male Bluebird seems very vigilant, and so are the landlords! Gene has a large net bag to nab the sparrow, if it becomes necessary. "We do what we have to do to protect our Blues," say the Caggianos.



One of our goals in publishing a newsletter has been to encourage and afford a means for monitors and trail managers to share problems and experiences gained along the trail.

*The following observations come from **Phil Persons**, Santa Barbara, after reading articles in our previous *Bluebirds Fly*.*

Regarding the report from the Aldriches of Tuolumne, it does seem that the timid ATFL can't compete with the more aggressive WEBL. In this past season alone, all of my 3 trails had ATFLs deprived of nesting opportunities by WEBLs. In

three boxes on two trails, WEBLs built nests atop incomplete ATFL nests. On one trail, a WEBL pair repeatedly drove ATFLs away from nearby boxes, even after the WEBLs were incubating their own clutch.



Christine Tischer's note on grass cuttings as nest material was interesting. On checking one of my boxes this year, I found two dead WEBL hatchlings swarmed by ants. The surviving two young seemed OK. I cleaned up the mess, treated the support pole with Tanglefoot, DE'd the box interior, and built a new nest of very dry, two-year-old grass clippings (no toxics used). One week later, all (I mean *all*) of the grass had been removed and the two young were crouching on the bare floor. They both subsequently fledged. I do wonder what about that grass was so unacceptable to the parents?



Sometimes big figures run in bunches – trouble is that some of them are reports of losses rather than birds fledged. **Bob Franz**, Orange, reports lower bluebird totals fledged than in '03 largely because he found 95 dead nestlings in first through third broods. And if that isn't trouble enough, 76 bluebird eggs disappeared, with losses occurring throughout the trail containing 208 nestboxes.



Also in Orange, **Joe Lapoint** had a moderate increase in numbers of bluebirds fledged over last year, notwithstanding an added box to expand the trail.

Joe also discovered that some things learned and taken for gospel sometimes get proven wrong. Four youngsters fledged practically at the same time from one of his boxes. Three flew off into the distance, but one stopped at the base of a nearby tree. It stayed there and stared, appearing not quite ready to face the world – even as Joe walked quite close to it. Joe brought the box to the bird, picked it up, inserted it through the hole, and rehung the box. At that point the bird started broadcasting his displeasure at being again so enclosed and attracted his parents who arrived with food. Apparently, additional proteins charged his battery and the youngster was gone at the next box check. Joe's discovery: "I'd always been under the belief that young could not be returned to the box once they had fledged, but apparently exceptions occur."



Now contrast reports just received from Amador: **Bill and Doris Allison** report "A record year for both bluebirds and tree swallows." Their production numbers are enviable.



Wishing for some of those figures, **Dianne McCleery** says "The worst year yet. Very small clutches. Nesting started early and finished early. On the positive side, we didn't lose any chicks to heat." (*Is that a real estate difference: Location, location, location? P.D*)



Their birds didn't have a roof over them and **Merle and Patricia Ruggles**, Placer, didn't

get bluebirds, but success did produce 2 dove nests with 2 youngsters each, all of which fledged.



Richard C. Brewster, Orange, has a nestbox near his home that had 5 eggs in each of 2 broods, fledged 5 each, and "no deaths, no left over eggs." His trail with 30 boxes in a nearby park was almost as productive, with only 3 boxes that did not attract occupants.



Far too few reports come from Alameda County but those we get carry a lot of weight. Case in point: **Irvin Tiessen** gave us very succinct figures and notes he compiled from his 206 nestboxes on 10 properties.

Altogether, he covers 16 square miles. Confidentially, we know he uses an ATV to get around to many of them, but nonetheless, it takes a lot of travelling to develop such complete records. The 10 properties are under several ownerships, each of which applies their own type of land management practices, mostly benefitting grazing livestock wildlife, and the public. As might be expected in varied types of habitat, comparisons of production between this year and last presented both increases and decreases. Overall, 10 different species produced 688 new birds, 339 of them WEBLs, for an increase of 8%. Starting with a feeling of exultation at the prospects early in the season, his spirits dropped together with the number of live birds and disappearing eggs as the year progressed.

"It was a strange season," Irv

declares. Together with a change of ownership of a couple of properties, altering his access privileges, he feels it's about time to trim down the number of boxes and the travelling they require for proper monitoring. "But," he adds, "Maybe I can add a few in other places." He's been coaxing a couple of prospective members with building and hanging boxes in widely separated locations with very promising habitat. Again this year, we know that a lot of work has been underway to keep those new youngsters flying.



(More from Don Yoder on page 12)



Howard Rathlesberger also reports the addition of 3 new banders in his Woodside (San Mateo County) area:

Max Grandfield
650-591-6485
Granny4nan@AOL.com

Hans Arps
650-348-2781
Harps5008@AOL.com

Lane Eubank
650-962-8102
EubankL@Medimmune.com

California Bluebird Recovery Program

ANNUAL REPORT

Name: _____ Year: _____

Mailing Address: _____

Physical Location of Trail (or Name): _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____ County: _____

Boxes: 1-Standard: _____ ; 2-Larger than Std: _____ ; 3-Smaller than Std: _____ ; Total: _____

Box pairs (2 boxes within 15 feet of each other): _____

			1st Brood	2nd Brood	3d Brood	Total
Species:		# Nests with 1 or more eggs				
		# Nests hatching 1 or more				
Box Type #:		# Nests fledging 1 or more				
Banding		# Eggs laid				
Adults:	Chicks:	# Chicks hatched				
		# Chicks fledged				
Species:		# Nests with 1 or more eggs				
		# Nests hatching 1 or more				
Box Type #:		# Nests fledging 1 or more				
Banding		# Eggs laid				
Adults:	Chicks:	# Chicks hatched				
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		# Nests hatching 1 or more				
Box Type #:		# Nests fledging 1 or more				
Banding		# Eggs laid				
Adults:	Chicks:	# Chicks hatched				
		# Chicks fledged				

The Debate on Cleaning Nest Boxes

by Dr. David Bird

excerpted from Backyard Bird News, Early Winter 2000

Should you or should you not? Clean out your nest boxes, I mean. This is a perennial debate among bird lovers. Perhaps cavity-nesting birds prefer boxes that contain old nesting material. Or maybe leaving it in for next season will lead the birds to reproductive failure. There are various reasons, however, why birds might prefer either scenario.

First, reuse of an old nest can save time and energy. Second, birds might be able to avoid selecting an unsuccessful nesting site if they choose one that looks like it was used last year.

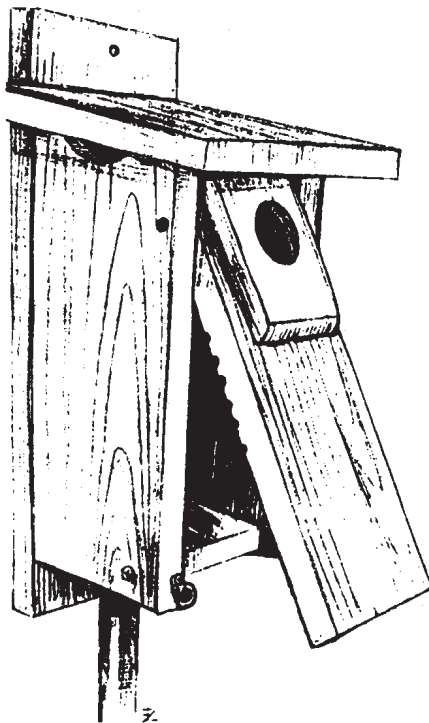
On the other hand, old nests might have been plundered by predators last year, who are just waiting for the new occupants to set up house. Also, if a site has been used, the previous owners might show up, leading to nasty competition and perhaps nest destruction or delayed breeding. The biggest disadvantage though might be the presence of nest-swelling ectoparasites just waiting to infest the incubating adults or their nestlings. These include blood-sucking mites and fleas...

...Eastern bluebirds readily use wooden nest boxes, so Wayne Davis, Paul Kalisz, and Rick Wells of the Univ. of Kentucky in Lexington set up pairs of nest boxes on 50 power poles, one box empty and another containing a bluebird nest that had fledged young the year before.

The results were quite clear. Of 41 bluebird pairs using the paired boxes, 38 chose ones with an old nest and only 3 nested in a clean one. In 4 other sets of boxes, a pair of house wrens,

white-breasted nuthatches, Carolina chickadees, and tree swallows, respectively, chose boxes that had old nests. A pair of tree swallows used a clean box.

According to serious purple martin landlords like Harry Wright who manages hundreds of martin nests at Purple Martin Junction in Griggsville, Illinois, martins, too, prefer houses containing old nests.



As to why the bluebirds prefer boxes with old nests, Davis and associates offered a couple of explanations. First, bluebirds like deep nests that make it hard for predators to reach in and grab eggs or young. Perhaps the bluebirds like having the old material so that they can rework it and dig a deeper nest cup. Then again the researchers found no difference in the depth from the entrance hole to the top of the old nest.

Their second explanation was

related to ectoparasites. The larvae of blood-sucking blowflies inhabit bluebird nests and can be quite harmful to bluebird young. But the birds have an ally in the parasitic wasps that also inhabit their boxes and kill the blowfly larvae. Although adult blowflies overwinter outside the boxes, the parasitic wasps hang out in the boxes. By removing old nests in spring or fall, you are also throwing out the wasps, which ultimately leads to greater blowfly larvae numbers and hence lowered nestling survival. So the eastern bluebirds might prefer boxes with old nests simply because they want the parasitic wasps that come with them.

...The bottom line to all this? The only effective way to completely eliminate parasites from nest boxes is to clean out the nests and thoroughly clean the box interior with a light bleach-water solution just prior to nesting season. Deciding which chemicals are safe for the birds and the environment raises a whole new issue.

I recommend that you do not bother cleaning out your nest boxes each fall or spring except under two circumstances. If the nesting material is badly soiled, then chuck it out. If it feels damp, consider the possibility that your nest box is not rain-proof and it should be repaired or replaced. In the case of eastern bluebirds, clean out the box only if the old material has accumulated to the point where the nesting cavity has become too shallow and thus vulnerable to predators. ☹

Notes from Afar

We find it very interesting to follow the projects and progress of other affiliated birders' groups across the country; we will share some of those reports in these pages from time to time, and trust you will enjoy them also.

One such comes from Mountain Bluebird Trails, headquartered in Ronan, MT. The roots of this organization go back to 1973 when the late Art Aylesworth put up his first five bluebird nestboxes. As we have so often experienced, nothing happened in any of them the first year. The next year, some tenants did arrive and, always hopeful, Art talked about bluebirds to his many business contacts.

More nestboxes were built and installed on trails that people who had *caught the bug* began to monitor.

In the first seven years, over 1,000 Mountain Bluebirds were fledged from nestboxes maintained by *the devoted*. Growth has been constant and up to a year ago, records will show that 259,463 birds have been fledged in the 29 years since Art put up his first five boxes – 155,886 just in the last nine years.

The same newsletter has another article that reports the sighting by one birder of 250-300 male Mountain Bluebirds landing in a field near his home.

*(from Mountain Bluebird Trails
President Bob Niebuhr, Summer 2003)*



We are always looking for reports from you about your trail(s), trials, and activities. If you conduct or participate in fairs or displays, nestbox building demonstrations, or other events that bring interest in birding to the public, please send us some notes or details. We'll try to include your reports in these pages. Send them to Program Director Don Yoder, or directly to our new editor, Patsy Kahl, for inclusion in BLUEBIRDS FLY newsletter. Patsy's email is kahl@woodsideca.com and all your input will be appreciated.



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