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Cover photo: Kathy Miller generously donated the use of this image of a male Eastern Bluebird on winterberry. In addition to being a fine photographer, Kathy is a teacher, musician, and award-winning author (Chippy Chipmunk Parties in the Garden and Chippy Chipmunk: Babies in the Garden). You can learn more about Kathy and see more examples of her photographs at www.celticsunrise.com.
Winter Message To Our Affiliate Organizations
Phil Berry

The Winter Blues are here! I speak of the Eastern Bluebirds in my yard, of course, not the other kind of blues. With the trail out of business until late February, I am down to taking care of five birds from our backyard box from this past breeding season. I have representatives of all three broods on hand, but don’t ask me which came from which brood. They are a joy to have around and they remind me that it won’t be long before the 2012 breeding season begins. They will soon be off to look for mates and begin their lives as fathers and mothers.

We are still adding new Affiliates to our ranks, with the latest being the Bronx River Audubon Society in Scarsdale, New York. We expect several new Affiliates within the next couple of months. I am going to be updating information on the website over the next few weeks. If your Affiliate has any new information you want posted, please let me know at pbsialia@gmail.com and it will be added.

Please make plans to join us in Newport Beach, California October 4–6, 2012, for the 35th annual North American Bluebird Society Conference, hosted by the Southern California Bluebird Club. A brochure and essentials to make your reservations may be found at www.socalbluebirds.org. For a great video of what they have planned for us, go to www.youtube.com and search for “bluebird conference”. This is going to be another one you do not want to miss. We are encouraging you to bring your children or grandchildren to learn about the Western and Mountain Bluebirds. Many of us have never seen either one of them. Also new to many of us is the idea that nestboxes do not need posts to support them! Hanging boxes in trees seems to be another way to get the job done. They have a unique lifter to get it done.

With the holidays over, don’t let time get ahead of you. It’s time to get those boxes ready for new tenants for the Spring breeding season. It will be here before you know it. Early to mid-February in the southern states and mid-March in the northern states is the beginning of a new year for bluebirds. Let’s be prepared. Let’s make it our best bluebird year ever!
As I prepare this message today in mid November it is not hard to think of winter and all it brings – we’ve just had our first true snow and wind storm of the season complete with power outage! The birds are frantic at the feeders and a pair of deer just stopped for lunch, pawing at the snow for the remnants of leaves from the cherry trees that now lie bare but with buds that hold the promise of spring. Many of you will also be curled up in the warmth of your homes, possibly having the good fortune of bluebirds visiting your feeders, and enjoying yet another wonderful issue of *Bluebird*.

I feel as though I am writing to friends – those I have actually met, and many whom I feel a kinship with through my role as Chair of the Membership Committee. Your names are so familiar and now I address you as your new President.

For those of you who do not know me, I live in a rural area near the small town of Osoyoos in British Columbia. (If you are checking a map, it’s about five miles from the U.S. border with Washington State.) I live on seven acres along with my mother Marion, a Golden Retriever named Seeker, and three horses. While building my home in 1994 there were both Mountain and Western Bluebirds sharing the property so it was only fitting that homes be supplied for them too. I joined the Southern Interior Bluebird Trail Society that spring and have served on the Board in various roles. My first introduction to NABS was attending the 1998 conference in Regina. Since then I’ve only missed two of these wonderful annual events. I joined the NABS Board in March 2007 and became Chair of Membership in October that same year.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Jonathan and Lynne Ridgeway for their service as past President and Secretary. And from all of us, a heartfelt thank you for their hard work and hours spent on our behalf. They leave NABS in a much better standing than when they took office. I look forward to working with them in their continued role as Directors for the next year.

We have a very strong Board of Directors that meets once a month via conference calls. I would like to acknowledge our new Secretary, Kathy Kremnitzer, and thank her for accepting this role. (Please see a brief introduction to Kathy and other Board members elsewhere in this issue.) I look forward to a continued good working relationship with our Board members. There are lots of exciting things happening on several fronts for NABS in the coming year. Some items, such as the education materials, have been ongoing for some time but should be out in time for the spring nesting season – just as the Hotline really ramps up for Bob Benson or the queries pour in to Dan Sparks, our StoreFront and website “info” person.

We have plans for increasing the close relationship with our Affiliates that have been forged by Phil Berry and his predecessor, Brian Swanson. Phil and Farrell Roe are pursuing the possibility of a trail monitoring handout being customized and available to our Affiliates with NABS financial support. Barbara Chambers as Nominating Committee Chair is lining up the election slate for October 2012. There will be more information forthcoming on each of the candidates in future issues. This is just a taste of what your Directors have been doing and what’s in store.

I hope you are as enthusiastic as I am about the future of NABS. If you have any ideas you want the Board to consider, please don’t hesitate to send them along and any comments either positive or negative are also sought. Remember, it is you and your participation that will keep NABS strong.

Looking forward to a busy and prosperous 2012 with opportunities to meet many more of you either in person or through correspondence.

Warmest wishes,
Sherry
250-495-7891
goldstrm@vip.net
Winter is traditionally a time of reflection. It’s a time to bundle up, hunker down, and reflect. My wife and I recently bundled up for a winter road trip to visit friends and family. We drove through the San Luis Valley, a high-elevation (7500 ft) desert in southern Colorado where I had spent several summers studying birds in the isolated wetlands. Bounded on the east by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains (dominated by 14,345-foot Mt. Blanca) and on the west by the San Juan Mountains (origin of the Rio Grande River, which flows south from here to divide the U.S. and Mexico), the valley covers 8000 square miles — an area the size of Connecticut — but is home to fewer than 50,000 people, concentrated in a handful of towns. It’s one of the quietest, coldest (!), and most beautiful places I know, and that makes it an ideal place for reflection.

Reflecting on the past few years made me realize how very grateful I am to past-president Jonathan Ridgeway, for taking a chance on an unproven editor a few years ago — I hope it’s worked out as well for NABS as it has for me. My thanks also to Lynne Ridgeway for her skilled proofreading — no matter how careful I am, I always miss something, but Lynne catches it every time. And my thanks to all the writers and photographers who have so kindly contributed material to Bluebird.

For this issue, my thanks in particular go to Charlotte Adelman (for bringing her new book to my attention), Dave Kinneer (for his endless generosity in providing images), Brenda Martin (editorial assistance), Kathy Miller (for the image on the cover), and Jim Semelroth (editor of the California Bluebird Recovery Program’s newsletter, for granting permission to reprint one of their articles).

Looking forward: As always, please consider submitting an article or photographs. We’re not expecting Pulitzer prize-winning material, just anything you think might be of interest to other bluebirders. Suggestions, criticisms, rants, and kudos are always welcome, too.

Stay warm,
ENJOY OUR WESTERN BLUEBIRDS!

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Andrew Mackie is a font of information! He is the Executive Director of the Land Trust of the Upper Arkansas in Salida, Co. You will benefit from his years of environmental management and scientific research.

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www.laurae Erickson.com/radio/podcasts/FTB.html

MEET A HERO OF CONSERVATION!

Steve Simmons from Merced, CA, will talk about his work with nine different species of cavity nesting birds. Steve has built and monitored 800 nest boxes a season and banded over 40,000 birds. He has received several notable awards for his work.

Watch his video on You Tube.

Steve Simmons, Flying M Ranch

Come and enjoy our beaches and bring your children
A BETTER WORLD FOR BLUEBIRDS IS A BETTER WORLD FOR ALL.
Letters to Bluebird

The Nestbox Color, Ventilation and Heat Shield Testing article by Neil Yeager [Fall 2011 Bluebird] was very interesting, but going by the pictures in the article an important issue was ignored—side and front air vents. We often have summer temperatures of 110 degrees F and higher, but in some twenty years on my 100-box line I have never lost young birds due to heat problems, and all of my boxes are natural weathered gray. I believe this is due to adequate venting and the almost daily winds that we have here in NE Oklahoma.

Bob Walshaw

In reference to the article by Neil Yeager in the Fall 2011 issue, I would like to see him include a slot box in his tests. No matter the color or material, there is a natural vent at the roof of the nestbox which provides at least 3 to 4 times the volume of vent as a box with the one entrance hole. I have used the “Hughes” slot box painted a light green exclusively and have almost 100% fledging from the live hatch. I don’t provide vent holes on the sides at the top although they would be okay if the sides of the roof overhangs enough.

Paul G. Thode, Vice President
East Central Illinois Bluebird Society

The family of Lance Krog would like to thank the North American Bluebird Society for the wonderful memoriam for our son and brother in the Summer 2011 issue of Bluebird magazine. Scott Gillihan did a marvelous job of describing not only his love for bluebirds but for purple martins and his dwarf nigerian purebred goats. The two had never met but Lance’s love of nature and the outdoors was portrayed very well.

His legacy will be carried on through the friends he met in organizations such as yours.

Dale and Karen Krog; Tracy, Minnesota
Carla and Steve Thein; Owatonna, Minnesota

Send your letters to
NABSEditor@gmail.com
or
NABS Editor
5405 Villa View Dr.
Farmington, NM 87402

Report of the 34th Annual Meeting
Farrell Roe

We were pleased and proud to have the 34th Annual North American Bluebird Society meeting in Jackson, Tennessee. This was a new experience for us. Many members of Bluebirds Across America have been working with bluebirds for over 30 years but have not really been active at the NABS level. Some are members of The Telephone Pioneers of America and served as the NABS host committee. This was our chance to contribute and to meet with members of the Society. We were impressed! You are just like us in so many ways.

Not really knowing that our hospitality was at a level to please, we received and welcomed many compliments from those attending. The Doubletree Hotel responded to our every need and sported a good Southern menu for us. We want to take this opportunity to thank our dinner speakers, Dr. Jerry Jackson, Dr. Dick Preston, and Dr. David Pitts, and our Saturday afternoon speakers, Dr. Bob and Judy Peak and Dr. John Bass. President Jonathan Ridgeway invited Nathan Lewis from Memphis to speak at the Membership meeting. This was a real treat; Nathan, age 13, delivered his PowerPoint presentation, “Bluebirds in my Backyard”. He had collected data on 15 nestboxes over 2010-2011 and fledged 141 birds! It was a real joy to see evidence of youth involvement in our movement to provide for bluebirds and other cavity-nesting birds. You can bet on Nathan to be a great example to other youth.

We were treated to local, nationally known talent: Don Horne’s Highway 54 Band, guitarist Stan Perkins, and The W S Holland Band. We were proud of them and well entertained.

The tours included Cypress Grove Nature Park, the Casey Jones Museum, Shiloh National Military Park, and local bluebird trails. We even found bluebirds nesting in one of the cannons at Shiloh!

When you combine this year’s Jackson conference and the next two — 2012 in Newport Beach, California and 2013 in Aiken, South Carolina — what do you get? You get a geographical picture of the vision of Bluebirds Across America, a coast-to-coast Bluebird Trail. I’ll see you in California.

Farrell Roe of Bluebirds Across America served as local host chairman.
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—Julie Zickefoose
Meet the NABS Board

The NABS elections in October 2011 brought some new officers to the organization. In order to better acquaint the NABS members with their new officers, here are brief biographies of Farrell Roe, Kathy Kremnitzer, and Barbara Chambers.

Farrell Parker Roe – 2nd VP-Community Relations
BS Cumberland University, Lebanon, Tennessee Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas

Married to Jane Helen Leslie for 59 years this November, they have six children, 15 grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Farrell retired from AT&T after 43 years of service and has been a Colonel with the Tennessee Army National Guard for 42 years. He is also the Past District Governor and International Foundation Representative of Optimist International.

Farrell grew up, the seventh of ten siblings, in rural West Tennessee. His job with the telephone company gave him an invitation to join the Telephone Pioneers of America and from there he got into the “Bluebird business”.

About 20 years ago Farrell joined NABS after a few years of community service as a Pioneer and exposure to others building and monitoring bluebird nestboxes. As President of the Telephone Pioneers, Farrell started the Bluebirds Across America project. The BAA envisions U.S. Highway 70 as a coast-to-coast bluebird trail. The project was later incorporated into the organization that exists today.

When the 34th annual NABS meeting was only 7-8 months away and with no location set to hold the conference, Farrell and Bluebirds Across America offered to host the 34th meeting in Jackson, Tennessee in September 2011. NABS thanks Farrell and the Tennessee folks for their hard work and for putting on a wonderful gathering of bluebird enthusiasts in such a short time frame. Farrell came onto the NABS Board in May of 2011, was elected to a three-year term in September, and serves as our 2ND VP – Community Relations.

Kathy Kremnitzer – Secretary
Kathy has been a bluebird lover for more than 20 years. She monitors several trails in Frederick and Washington Counties in central Maryland, where she lives with her husband, Dan, and her Scotty, Sam.

She has served on the Board of Directors for the Maryland Bluebird Society since 2005 and as their secretary since 2006. She currently holds the position of President in addition to serving as county coordinator for Frederick and Washington Counties, and is also editor of the Society’s newsletter.

She believes in the importance of involving young people with nature and in wildlife conservation and sponsors a student bluebird club at the elementary school where she works. The club is very popular among 4th and 5th graders, though students in all grades including Kindergarten participate in the weekly “Bird Word” and “Mystery Bird” contests.

Kathy served on the NABS Board of Directors for a year before being elected to the current position of Secretary. She is a member of the Nestbox Approval Committee and also offers assistance to bluebirders through the NABS Hotline.

Barbara Chambers – Director
Barbara is one of the five founding members of the Virginia Bluebird Society (VBS). She has been monitoring bluebird trails since 1994, which precedes the VBS by about five years. She and her husband, Charlie, have been monitoring their own trail on a golf course for 15 years. Barbara is the State Coordinator of volunteers for VBS and is responsible for bringing new counties into the organization. There are now 60 counties sending their monitoring data into VBS and it continues to grow.

Barbara has also been a MAPS bander and a long time birder. She has held many offices in VBS and started their newsletter and edited it for six years. She has been a Director on the NABS Board for a number of years and Chairs the Speaker’s Bureau and the Nominating Committee. Barbara also Co-Chairs the Nestbox Approval Committee.

She and Charlie have three grown children and three grandkids.
Bluebird

NABS Awards 2011

Each year, NABS honors the dedication and hard work of bluebird conservationists by presenting them with NABS awards. The following individuals received awards at the Annual Conference of NABS hosted by Bluebirds Across America in Jackson, Tennessee, in September.

Katherine Phelps of Plympton, Massachusetts received the NABS award for Outstanding Contribution to Bluebird Conservation. Katherine was honored for her work in promoting conservation while creating new habitats for bluebirds and other cavity-nesting birds at Ocean Spray Corporate Headquarters in Lakeville, Massachusetts.

When Katherine reached a corporate milestone of 25 years of employment, rather than have a traditional celebration, she asked to restore the old nestbox trail on the Ocean Spray corporate campus with 25 new nest boxes, which she donated. Eastern Bluebirds (her favorite bird), titmice, chickadees, and Tree Swallows are just a few of our native cavity-nesting birds that benefited from the new trail. Her donation inspired Ocean Spray to create a new Wildlife Committee at Ocean Spray Headquarters. This committee’s charter is to “make Ocean Spray a showcase by improving our corporate habitat for the benefit of people, birds, and wildlife and to be a part of the company’s sustainability strategy, supporting those initiatives.” She educated the company and others with exhibits at the 40th Anniversary of Earth Day in 2010. Katherine was honored for raising awareness of the need for corporations and private individuals to use the local landscape to promote wildlife conservation.

Jim Burke of Aiken, South Carolina was presented the NABS Award for Outstanding Contribution to Bluebird Conservation. Jim was honored for his many efforts to promote bluebird conservation, which include creating bluebird trails, and organizing and educating monitors to oversee the trails. He tirelessly educates the public about the need for bluebird conservation, speaking to garden clubs, golf courses, and other organizations interested in joining this vital conservation effort. His community outreach has included participating in the City of Aikens Earth Day Celebration and the Master Gardeners Day at the Aiken County Farmer’s Market, and speaking and exhibiting at the Aiken Garden Show. He personally helped in the preparation of 281 nestboxes to go out on the numerous bluebird trails.

Jim spearheaded the effort to form the new South Carolina Bluebird Society, dedicated to the conservation of the Eastern Bluebird and other native cavity-nesting birds. He is presently the President of the SCBS, working hard to spread the word on how all residents of South Carolina can help the bluebird survive.

Bluebird

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Winter 2011-12
Steve and Regina Garr of Jefferson City, Missouri were presented with the John and Nora Lane Award from NABS for outstanding work in the field of Bluebird Conservation. Longtime NABS member Ron Kingston received the award on their behalf in Jackson. Greg Beavers, NABS Treasurer, presented the award to the Garrs at the Missouri Bluebird Conference on October 1. Steve Garr has worked tirelessly since 1979 educating the public through his newspaper columns, magazine articles, television appearances, and personal appearances at various conferences and events on how to help the bluebird. He personally erected and monitored many nestbox trails in both Tennessee and Missouri. He co-founded two NABS Affiliates: Tennessee Bluebird Trails (2000) and the Missouri Bluebird Society (2006). Besides doing field work, Steve volunteered for NABS by serving on the Board of Directors and as Vice President and President (2000–2006). Regina Garr has been an enthusiastic partner in all of his conservation work, helping spread the bluebird conservation message. Even though Steve has had a Life Membership in NABS for decades, he continues to support NABS with additional Corporate memberships. He and Regina have donated NABS memberships for door prizes at countless seminars on bluebird conservation — giving many people their start in an association with NABS and organized bluebird conservation. Steve and Regina Garr continue to promote bluebird conservation on all fronts: education, in the field, and in leadership roles in the organizations that promote bluebird conservation.

The John and Nora Lane Award was created to honor Canadian conservationists John and Norah Lane, who were among the first people to sound the alarm about declining bluebird populations. The Lanes’ bluebird trail consisted of 4,750 nestboxes and stretched almost 2,500 miles.

NABS President Jonathan Ridgeway presents the President’s Recognition Awards. Brian Swanson, NABS Director and former First Vice President of Affiliate Relations, was recognized for “Constant Excellence, Always with Warmth, Charm and Grace.” Tena Taylor’s award was “to acknowledge her many years of exceptional dedicated service for NABS as a Director and as a vital participant on the Membership Committee.” Photos by Dave Kinneer.
Juvenile Bluebird Siblings Assist in Parenting and Fledging

Leif Marking

I have read and heard stories of juvenile sibling bluebirds helping the parents by bringing food items to second- or third-brood nestlings, but I’ve never had an opportunity to witness this activity until the 2010 nesting season. Fledging is perhaps the most exciting action of bluebird reproduction for the parent bluebirds as well as for one who monitors these activities. Numerous times in the past I have attempted to photograph or video the actual fledging process when the nestlings leave the nest box on their maiden flight into their new and unknown environment, but they have somehow always evaded my presence and cameras.

The secret of success in this effort is to keep good records, so you can anticipate fledging date. Biological variability must be accounted for, since fledging generally occurs 17 to 19 days after hatching. Box 6 had four bluebird nestlings that were scheduled to fledge on August 1, which was 18 days from hatching. I placed my camouflaged blind about 12 feet from the occupied box four days prior to the expected fledging to allow time for the adults to become familiar with, and accept, my presence. The next morning I was in the blind with my camcorder at sunup to take advantage of early low-angle incident sunlight and to make sure the nestlings were not ready to fledge. The parents were busy hauling nutritious insects to the youngsters, who met the adults just inside the entry.

On days 16 and 17 a juvenile bluebird, apparently a sibling from the first brood, accompanied the adults in the feeding and visiting process. The nestlings continuously chirped in the presence of the breadwinners and actually displayed their speckled breast and beaks as they took turns to consume the variety of insects provided. The juvenile sibling was easily discernible with the speckled breast and back and seemed to carry in as much food as the adults, but it never entered the cavity entirely to remove fecal material in a manner like the parents.

Day 18 was a Sunday and we had an important obligation to be present at a church service. During the sermon I prayed the nestling bluebirds would not fledge that morning, and when I returned to the site at 11 AM, fortunately my prayers were answered. After about 20 minutes in the blind the nestlings perched in the entry, consumed more insects, and threatened to leave their home only to return inside to allow a sibling to repeat that activity. The four nestlings were both anxious and reluctant to leave the security of their home, but by noon all had fledged and I had successfully videoed their first flight and the presence and activity of a juvenile sibling bluebird. I’m confident that the juvenile sibling shared its survival techniques with that sibling brood.

Then a week later Box 4 was approaching its predicted fledge date so I again placed my blind four days in advance to repeat the process of recording the fledging process. This box was located about 400 yards from the previous box and located in an agricultural setting. Interestingly, on days two and three of my watch, two juvenile bluebirds participated in the feeding process.

This puzzled me a bit because Tree Swallows, not bluebirds, had produced a brood in this box during the first nesting season. These two juvenile bluebirds were very active and seemed to compete for the opportunity to feed the nestlings. Unlike the first juvenile observed, these two entered the cavity on occasion, but I didn’t observe them removing fecal material. Since these two juveniles acted and performed differently than the previous one, I assumed they were from a different brood. Also, those adults must have produced the two juveniles in a nearby cavity for them to be siblings of the three nestlings yet to fledge.

Day 18 resulted in heavy rain all morning, and I trusted the nestlings would not venture into their new world during such conditions. After the rain subsided about noon I proceeded to take my recording equipment to the blind only to find the nestlings had fledged despite the inclement weather. So once again the nestlings eluded my efforts to record their fledging, however I gained additional information that fulfilled my curiosity regarding juvenile assistance and parenting.

Leif Marking is a retired U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employee who now devotes much of his time as the Bluebird Project Manager for the Brice Prairie Conservation Association, monitoring 195 nestboxes. As a board member of the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, he serves as the Nestbox Design Chairman. He is also a member of NABS and the Minnesota Bluebird Recovery Program. In his spare time he enjoys photographing and camcording bluebird nesting activities.

Bluebird

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Winter 2011-12
Mouse Rockets
Georgette A. Howington

The memory of my first encounter with a deer mouse in a nestbox still makes me laugh. It was years ago when my dear friend, Don Yoder, the founder of California Bluebird Recovery Program (CBRP), and I walked the bluebird trails together. Don, as was his habit, tapped softly on the box with the end of his walking stick politely announcing his presence. He then unscrewed the side of the box, slowly opened the door, and before I could blink, a brown blur rocketed full thrust out from the entrance hole landing on his hat. Beady moist eyes stared back at us. Big hairless ears quivered, her white underbelly heaved and tiny fingers gripped at the shirt cloth as she scrambled down Don’s arm flailing herself wildly into the cover of dry, yellow grass.

Don didn’t clean out the box. He said that it more than likely housed a litter and we would clean it out in the fall. That was Don. He didn’t kill anything unless it had a vampire grip on his body. Deer mice and all the other little rodents, he said, provided food for snakes, owls, skunks, coyote, and hawks, plus they were very cute.

Since then, mouse houses in nestboxes are no surprise to me, plus I have experienced a few more mouse rockets! While I do not like sharing nestboxes with mice because the secondary cavity nesters have a housing shortage, I choose not to destroy mice litters. Instead I wait until the pups are gone and then remove the nest as Don would have done.

Don was extremely careful to adhere to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on how to safely discard of deer mice nesting material. The reason for this is that the deer mice are the main carriers of the Hantavirus infection. In California between 1993 and 2010 there were 42 documented cases. That’s 2.5 people per year so it is not an epidemic by any means, but as monitors we need to be aware and protect ourselves.

Hantavirus is contracted by breathing in contaminated dust particles of dried urine, saliva, or droppings. One can also become infected from fresh urine or droppings, or by being bitten by an infected mouse. The virus causes a severe pulmonary infection in humans.

If you do find a mouse in one of your nestboxes, be sure to follow these safety precautions:
• Put on your mask. Monitors should always keep a mask in their kit and wear it when cleaning out nestboxes.
• Use rubber, latex, or nitrile gloves. (I normally use leather gloves to monitor, but keep disposable gloves for cleaning.)
• Do not stir up dust by sweeping. Instead, lift the nest out using a spatula or paint scraper and set it on the ground some distance from the box.
• Spray inside the box with a light bleach solution (one part bleach to nine parts water — I carry a spray bottle in my pack when I monitor) and wipe out the box with paper towels moistened with the bleach solution. Place those in a plastic bag and tie off the bag when done, or place them in a paper bag to be burned later.
• Before closing the nestbox, be sure the inside is completely dry because the bleach solution could be harmful to birds.
• Bury any dead mice.
• Disinfect gloves and tools with bleach solution and soap and water before reusing.
• Wash hands thoroughly. If on the trail use a disposable disinfectant towelette. I keep some of these handy in my pack.

On the trail, we monitors find ourselves in the throes of many different situations and challenges. While respecting the value of life, let’s be sure to be cautious and protect ourselves from being injured. The next article I write will be about the time I clipped some lovely red leaves for a floral design, brought them home, and later ... found out they were poison oak. But that’s a story for another day.

Longtime San Francisco Bay Area resident Georgette Howington is a certified horticulturist specializing in California native plant communities and wildlife habitat. An avid gardener, garden writer, and poet, she is a passionate advocate for preservation of wildlife habitat. In 2001, Georgette met CBRP founder, Don Yoder, and a longtime partnership ensued. She currently serves as the Alameda and Contra Costa Counties Coordinator.

This article originally appeared in a slightly different form in Bluebirds Fly!, the newsletter of the California Bluebird Recovery Program. It is reprinted here with permission.
On a cool morning in early March, with the morning mist still suspended in the air, we carefully opened up nestbox Number 11 to find a nearly completed Eastern Bluebird nest of neatly woven dried grass. As we closed the box and turned to leave, a pair of bluebirds landed on a nearby loblolly pine branch, obviously the pair who had claimed the box.

We were only 20 feet from the paved employee parking area at the Bridgestone Americas Tire Operations, Aiken County Plant, in Graniteville, SC, where I was checking their bluebird trail with Bridgestone’s Jimmy Vaughn, Environmental Engineer and Debbie Reed, Senior Human Resources Representative. As we drove around the 585-acre facility, viewing the remaining nestboxes, we discussed Bridgestone’s interest in bluebirds.

The Bridgestone plant is one of the newest, and most technologically equipped, tire-producing facilities of the company’s 18 manufacturing facilities. Ground breaking for the facility was in August 1997 and the first tire was manufactured in August 1998. The facility produces more than 26,000 passenger and light truck tires each day.

I asked Jimmy and Debbie why Bridgestone decided to establish a bluebird trail at its Aiken facility. They explained that “Bridgestone worldwide encourages habitat restoration. Since 2006 Bridgestone Aiken County Plant has continued its participation in the Wildlife Habitat Council’s Wildlife at Work and Corporate Lands for Learning programs. These programs focus on including Team Members (employees), the community, conservation organizations, and government agencies in the long-term, active management of company property to improve wildlife habitats and raise environmental awareness.” The establishment of a bluebird trail was a natural extension of this program since many of the 585 acres at the facility are open, grassy areas. Much of the site was disturbed during the 1997-98 construction, but almost all of it has been restored to productive wildlife habitat.

The bluebird trail was established in 2006, when Bridgestone invited a local Girl Scout Troop to participate in constructing 17 bluebird nestboxes, learn about bluebirds, and help install the boxes at the plant. I had the opportunity to talk to the girls about bluebird conservation and biology. Each girl also built a nestbox that they could take home to further encourage them to get involved in bluebird conservation. Once installed, the nestboxes were monitored by Bridgestone Team Members (employees). Team Members volunteered to help with nestbox monitoring. Teams, typically comprised of two Team Members, were responsible for monitoring their box weekly throughout the nesting season (March-August). Monitoring was done during breaks or before or after work.
This past February, Bridgestone decided to get another Girl Scout Troop involved to help construct additional bluebird nestboxes to replace the existing boxes and expand the trail. Each girl was again able to take a nestbox home. Prior to assembling the boxes, Jimmy Vaughn presented information about Bridgestone’s commitment to the environment and development of habitat at the Aiken plant. Roger Brock and I spoke to the girls about bluebird biology, the importance of providing nestboxes, and NABS.

Debbie Reed now serves as a Director of the SCBS and she and Bridgestone are active supporters of SCBS.

Debbie told me that future plans at the Aiken plant include creating other nestbox monitoring programs for Purple Martins, American Kestrels, and Eastern Screech-Owls. The relationship between Bridgestone and SCBS is an example of how industry and local citizens can work together, not only to provide jobs and products that we need, but to benefit our wildlife resources for future generations. We applaud Bridgestone’s environmental efforts which serve as a model for future cooperative ventures between SCBS and other corporate partners.

Ron Brenneman and his wife Dori have been the owners of Birds & Butterflies, a retail birding and nature shop, in downtown Aiken, SC for the past 15 years. Ron is a Certified Wildlife Biologist who worked for more than 20 years for Clemson University, International Paper Company, and the National Wild Turkey Federation. The Brennemans are natives of Pennsylvania and have lived in South Carolina for the past 23 years. They are members of NABS and SCBS.
Winter Project: Nestbox Liners
David Hampton

Making bluebird nestbox liners from cereal box cardboard is not an entirely new idea. But maybe this would be a good time of the year to review their virtues and possibly add a bit to the technology. Sound good?

We all monitor our bluebird boxes regularly, but opening the door and peering into the darkness to count accurately the number and color of the eggs and the number of chicks can sometimes be challenging. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could pull out the whole nest and its contents and examine it in the clear sunshine?

Every so often we like to take interested friends to our trail and let them or their children see what baby bluebirds look like close up. Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to safely show the whole nest to them and let them see the babies open their mouths wide, or to show them the construction of the nest from coarse grass on the outside to the ever-finier grass of the cup? Or to show the partridge or chicken breast feathers protecting the eggs in a Tree Swallow nest or even the green moss of the chickadee nest? Sure it would.

But alas, sometimes we look in and see a nest and chicks soaking wet from wind-driven rain! Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to slide out the whole nest and its contents and transfer the eggs or chicks into a new, dry liner containing a well-made, dry, abandoned nest that you saved from last year for just this situation? It is so satisfying.

Any other benefits from cereal box nestbox liners?

Sometimes even bluebirds make a skimpy nest or have to lay the eggs before the nest is really finished. The result could be that the eggs or the fledglings fall out when the door is opened or that the chicks get their legs pinched when the door is closed. The cereal box liner has sides two inches (5 cm) high so that even if the nest is shallow, the chicks have four walls around them keeping them safe within and free from drafts.

And of course the liners are cheap to make. You get the material for free when you or your neighbors finish eating your Quaker or Kelloggs.

Now, how do you make them?

In addition to a flattened cereal box, you will need: a good ballpoint or fine felt pen, scissors, a ruler, and an ordinary office stapler.

First make a pattern based on the dimensions of the floor of your own nestboxes (see diagram on opposite page). Draw the pattern on thicker cardboard, maybe from a frozen pizza carton. With a ruler, draw the folding and cutting lines. Cut out the pattern and use it to trace onto the cereal box cardboard.

A few details:
1. Almost all of the 60 nestboxes on my trail are Gilwood design, so this pattern is for Gilwood. However, similar patterns can be made for any design. You begin with the floor dimensions.
2. Cereal boxes have a shiny coating on the outside (advertising side). This coating is remarkably moisture resistant. So face the advertising side inside the liner. On the average, my liners last about three seasons.
3. When you staple the ends together, make sure the smooth part of the staple is inside the liner and the sharp points of the staple are outside. It’s to protect the residents.
4. And finally, in Canada, all printed matter on packaged merchandise must be bilingual. So if you want your young bluebirds to learn some French while at home, use the French part of the cereal box too.
I

def you ever watch your birdfeeders, as I do, you have probably noticed chickadees and nuthatches fly down
to snatch a sunflower seed then fly away. This happens all day long. I always wonder why, if they are eating
all those sunflower seeds, the birds are not bigger. Sometimes I am lucky enough to see them perch in a tree,
hold their sunflower seed between their feet, and chisel away at the sunflower hulls with their bills to get to the
hearts.

My neighbor puts out corn for the squirrels and turkeys, who visit several
times a day during the winter. The Blue Jays caught on to this and come
as well. They will cram as many seeds into their crops as they can fit. My
neighbor always complained about the Blue Jays and wondered what they
were doing with all those seeds.

The other day I came across an article in which the author talked about
the act of hoarding seeds. Chickadees, magpies, crows, ravens, jays,
nuthatches, and several woodpecker species are masters of hoarding.
He went on to say he had seen a chickadee caching seed on the roof of
his shed by sticking seed under a loose shingle. Eventually, he saw the
chickadee caching his seed in more natural locations, including a dead
branch tip.

The caching behavior by Black-capped Chickadees has been intensely
studied. It’s known, for example, that Black-capped Chickadees cache
both for long-term storage and more immediate “snacking,” and they
can store tens of thousands of food items during a single winter.

So, before winter really sets in, put out the seeds, grab your cameras, and watch the hoarding begin!
Plastic PVC pipes have been used as mining claim markers for some time. Claim-holders used these 4-inch diameter white-colored plastic pipes because they are light, inexpensive, and easy to see. If uncapped, they are also bird-killers.

Small birds, mostly cavity-nesters, frequently investigate these pipe-openings, often after first perching on top. Once they enter a pipe, the birds become trapped: the narrow width doesn’t allow for wing-opening, and the sides are far too smooth to allow climbing out. The pipe becomes a deadly trap.

For example, two inspections in Nevada of 1,177 pipes in 2008 and 2009 revealed 957 dead birds. A November 2011 follow-up survey of 854 pipes revealed 879 dead birds. Ash-throated Flycatchers and Mountain Bluebirds dominated the mortalities, but other victims included woodpeckers, shrikes, wrens, sparrows, Green-tailed Towhees, and even Western Screech-Owls.

The Nevada practice of using open pipes was made illegal in 1993, but the law apparently wasn’t effective. The passage of a subsequent measure in 2009 required removal of the pipes, with a two-year grace-period. That grace period ended in early November 2011. Open-ended pipe-markers could no longer be used, even though the mining claim itself might still be valid.

Agencies and volunteers quickly began pulling out the pipes, often in an organized fashion. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Nevada Department of Wildlife started extracting the pipes along with the Nevada Conservation Corps (an AmeriCorps program). The Las Vegas-based Red Rock Audubon Society has sponsored volunteer pole-pulls. Their slogan: “Pull, baby, pull!”

There is no way of knowing how many pipes are out there. According to Christy Klinger of the Nevada Department of Wildlife, the number is probably in the hundreds of thousands. The BLM issued more than a million mining claims across the state since 1976, and nearly 200,000 remain active today.

“There may be problems in California, Utah, Idaho, and elsewhere in the West, but Nevada could be the worst,” adds Klinger.

There are almost 3.4 million mining claims on BLM lands in eleven western states and Alaska.

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This article originally appeared in The Birding Community E-Bulletin, a free newsletter that delivers news about birds and bird conservation each month to your email inbox. Past bulletins can be found on the National Wildlife Refuge Association website (www.refugenet.org/birding/birding5.html). You can subscribe to the bulletin by sending an email to either Wayne R. Petersen (wpetersen@massaudubon.org) or Paul J. Baicich (paul.baicich@verizon.net).
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Quick Takes on Bird News

Extinct Woodpecker Lives Again on Film
The last confirmed sighting of the largest woodpecker that ever lived, the Imperial Woodpecker of Mexico, was in the 1950s. A victim of overharvesting of mature forests and uncontrolled shooting, this magnificent woodpecker is probably lost to the world as a living species. However, a recent discovery of shaky 16mm film footage lets us catch a glimpse of what we’ve lost. In a 1956 expedition to find the species, amateur ornithologist William Rhein managed to film a female Imperial Woodpecker foraging and flying — the only known photographic record of the species. A Cornell Lab of Ornithology Living Bird article, along with the film itself, can be found on the Cornell Lab’s website, www.allaboutbirds.org; a more technical article is available on the American Ornithologists’ Union’s website, www.aou.org.

Fallen Wood Duck Nestboxes Trap Turtles
We all know the futility of putting up bluebird nestboxes and walking away, never to monitor them for House Sparrows or other hazards. Now Denis Conover of the University of Cincinnati has found a hazardous situation involving Wood Duck nestboxes. The nestboxes, which are installed at the edge of ponds or in wetlands, are susceptible to falling into the water when the support post rots. Once the box is in the water, small turtles swim inside for shelter from predators. But if the water level subsequently drops, the turtles are trapped and die. Given the rarity of many North American turtle species, amateur and professional wildlife managers need to be especially diligent about maintaining Wood Duck nestboxes.

Wood Duck Portrait Selected for 2012-2013 U.S. Federal Duck Stamp
Joseph Hautman, an artist from Plymouth, Minnesota, won the latest Federal Duck Stamp Art Contest with his acrylic painting of a male Wood Duck. Other cavity nesters that have been selected for the stamp include Hooded Merganser (2005-2006) and Common Goldeneye (1998-1999). Waterfowl hunters, conservationists, stamp collectors, and others purchase the stamp to support habitat conservation — 98% of the proceeds from the $15 Duck Stamp go to the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which supports the purchase of habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Conservation of Canada’s Boreal Forest Wetlands
Canada’s boreal forest covers 1.4 billion acres (5.8 million square kilometers) and is home to billions of birds of more than 300 species, including many cavity nesters. The rivers, lakes, and wetlands of this vast area support that abundant bird community by providing vegetation, fish, and swarms of insects to feed the birds. A recent report by several not-for-profit organizations highlights the importance of the boreal forest wetlands, and the hazards they face. The full report is available online at www.borealbirds.org.

Nestboxes Aid Recovery of Endangered Hawaiian Thrush
Nestboxes installed for a small cavity-nesting bird of Hawaii have started to pay off. The Puiaiohi, a federally endangered species found on the island of Kaua’i, is vulnerable to predation by introduced rats. The nestboxes provide protection from the rats. Earlier this year, a pair of Puiaiohi successfully nested in one of the nestboxes. In addition, nesting material was found in other nestboxes, raising hopes that other Puiaiohi are investigating the boxes and will nest in them at some point. The population of Puiaiohi (also known as the Small Kaua’i Thrush) has been devastated by the rats, habitat destruction by introduced pigs, avian pox and avian malaria spread by introduced mosquitoes, and habitat alteration by introduced plants.
Wild Bird Expo
The Wild Bird Expo is an annual trade show in Mexico, Missouri for vendors and retailers in the backyard-bird business. Bird organizations are welcome, too, so at the 2011 Expo in October, NABS members Jerry and Susie Montgomery set up a booth to share information about NABS and bluebirds with the more than 600 attendees. Thank you Jerry and Susie!

The Beauty of Starlings
Admittedly, the introduction of European Starlings to North America was an unmitigated ecological disaster. Even so, when an online video of a swooping flock of starlings (in Ireland) started being passed around the internet recently, a lot of North America bird enthusiasts couldn’t help but ooh and ahh at the beauty. The video, shot by young artists Liberty Smith and Sophie Windsor Clive, captures thousands of starlings as they swoop and swirl before settling for the night. The phenomenon, known by the equally beautiful name murmuration, looks for all the world like a school of fish moving in unison. The video can be viewed at the artists’ website, http://islandsandrivers.co.uk/

Green Bay Goes Green to Control Rodents
The city of Green Bay, Wisconsin, hopes to use American Kestrels to control mice in its downtown area. The city will install 10 nestboxes for kestrels in time for spring nesting in 2012. A pesky population of mice in the Bay Beach Amusement Park and nearby areas has survived for years despite the best efforts of city officials and a pest-control professional, so the city is turning to the small falcons, which include mice in their diet.
Bluebirds Everywhere

“Bluebirds Everywhere” is a feature that celebrates the widespread and creative uses of bluebird images and the word itself. We invite you to submit your own images and ideas — simply e-mail them to NABSeditor@gmail.com or mail them to NABS Editor, 5405 Villa View Dr., Farmington, NM 87402. Let’s see what bluebirds you can find!

Many of you are already familiar with the Blue Bird bus company, makers of many of North America’s school buses. But instead of the typical yellow school bus, Tena Taylor spotted this very blue Blue Bird, a public bus of the University Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi.

Marcella Hawkins submitted this photo with the note, “I’ve always wanted to stop and take a picture of this sign – AND find out where this was located. It finally happened. This Bluebird Inn is just west of Berlin, Ohio – in Amish Country.”

One of the most popular soccer teams in the United Kingdom is the Cardiff City Football Club of Wales. The team should be popular with NABS members, too, because the players are known as the Bluebirds. This image from outside the Cardiff City Stadium shows the team’s logo, which also appears in a crest on the players’ uniforms. Photo from flickr.com/joncandy, printed here under the Creative Commons license.

Settled in the 1830s a short distance from St. Louis, this town of 9,000 has adopted the Eastern Bluebird for its town seal. The bluebird appears on all official documents. The town carries the bird theme even further, with many of the local recreational facilities named after birds (Cardinal Park, Woodpecker Trail, etc).
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Bet Zimmerman

Doug and I spent a decade exploring the continent in our 28-foot Class C motorhome. We dubbed it “The Pleasure Palace” because it was so much cushier than the sleep-on-a-pile-of-rocks camping style of our younger years.

When Doug died suddenly last summer, I realized my world would never be the same. One of the many changes was that camping in that RV was no longer an option. The behemoth was unwieldy and required regular maintenance that I couldn’t handle. Plus it just wouldn’t be any fun without Doug. But I didn’t want it to just rust away in our backyard.

I offered the RV to Doug’s family. When they declined to adopt it, I thought of selling it outright. But that would mean dealing with repairs, marketing, potential liability issues, and more hassle than I felt I could handle at this juncture.

I called ADS and peppered them with questions. They were patient, kind, and informative. They explained that they don’t just auction off the vehicle wholesale – they try to maximize the selling price. When financially beneficial, they repair and refurbish it. This is important because the selling price determines the tax deduction that can be taken under newer IRS rules. More importantly, it directly affects how much money the charity receives.

ADS told me I would get to select the recipient charity. I looked at their long list of local, state, and national organizations. None really resonated. I wanted a smaller organization to which such a donation would make a significant difference. I also wanted an organization that had some connection to the life Doug and I shared.

Then I got to thinking…could NABS become one of their charities? Many of our members enjoy the outdoors and might also have RVs, boats, motorcycles, or cars they might want to donate to help native cavity nesters.

I spoke to Jonathan Ridgeway and the NABS Board about it. We learned that ADS protects client charities with strong liability insurance coverage. Their contract complies with the IRS guidelines and state statutes. It contains language to protect the charity’s reputation and its board members. They also advertise for client charities at no charge. The Board agreed to move forward. NABS is now listed as a recipient charity on the ADS website.

After weeping my way through cleaning out the RV, ADS came and picked it up during a torrential downpour. I thought perhaps the sky was crying for the life being left behind. But I was also happy to know that perhaps a new family would now be able to enjoy the great outdoors in that camper.

Within a few weeks, ADS had a buyer. They called me to discuss the offer. I thought the RV was worth

Doug called this photo “How I spent my summer vacation.”
winter 2011-12

more. They said not to worry, they would keep trying. Inside of a month, they got the price I had recommended.

Thousands of dollars will now be added to NABS’s resources. I am confident the money will be well-spent on education and research to benefit native cavity nesters and their landlords. It is reassuring to know that our loss is their gain, and that Doug can continue to help fill the skies with blue.

Bet Zimmerman maintains a 100-nestbox bluebird trail in northeastern Connecticut and an educational website on cavity nesters at www.sialis.org

Doug in front of The Pleasure Palace. The camper was recently donated to NABS via Action Donation Services. Find out more about the donation program at www.actiondonation.org

Conservation begins at home, or so it should. Making sure your home is welcoming to native plants and animals is a simple way to help support their populations. Unfortunately, our backyard landscapes have been overrun by non-native ornamental plants. Beautiful to behold, but in many cases their showy blooms and exotic fruits, seeds, and leaves provide little nutrition for native birds, butterflies, and other animals because they are adapted to native plants. Put simply, native animals need native plants.

The authors of this new book have devised a clever solution to help gardeners select native plants for their landscape. On page after page, they present popular non-native ornamental plants, followed by several native alternatives — plants that are similar in size, color, water requirements, and sunlight needs, but have the added benefit of providing food and cover for native birds and bugs. Even the gardener benefits, as native plants (once established) require less maintenance than do non-native ornamentals. Fond of the (non-native) Shasta daisy? Try the native Philadelphia fleabane instead. Fancy the lovely (but non-native) bluebell? Replace it with the native American bluebell or great blue lobelia. This lavishly illustrated book makes it simple by providing color photographs or botanical illustrations of each plant, along with information about its features, cultivation, and attractiveness to butterflies and birds.

Although this book was written for the Midwest, many of the natives it recommends are found in other parts of the continent, or have closely related counterparts. As a result, the book is useful to gardeners well beyond the Midwest. Use it to plant a native landscape — good for the plants, good for the animals, and good for you.


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Why do birds start incubating before they’ve finished laying eggs?

Many bird species lay just one egg per day. But they don’t start incubating full time until they are done (or nearly done) laying the entire clutch. In the meantime, the eggs that were laid first are at risk — the longer an egg sits without incubation, the more it is exposed to microbial infection and predation, and the more likely it is to develop improperly due to improper temperatures. Birds with large clutches, like the cavity-nesting Wood Duck, which lays one egg per day for 10–14 days, face a real challenge in keeping all the eggs viable and safe and on the same developmental schedule.

As it turns out, Wood Ducks don’t need to worry so much about microbial infection. The egg whites of cavity-nesting ducks contain an extra enzyme not found in the egg whites of ground-nesting ducks. It is believed that this extra enzyme acts to suppress bacterial infection in the more-humid environment of the nest cavity. Also, even though a Wood Duck hen does not start full incubation until after laying the next-to-last egg, all of the eggs hatch within a few hours of each other — a neat trick that is apparently facilitated by the chicks chirping to each other from within their eggs and adjusting their development to match that of their siblings.

Most likely, Wood Ducks commence incubation before the clutch is complete in order to shorten the overall incubation period — the sooner the eggs hatch and the young can get out of the nest cavity, the lower the risk of predation or brood parasitism (when a different hen “dumps” her eggs in an unguarded nest).


How do brood size and fledging date affect survival of young Purple Martins?

If you’re a young Purple Martin, your odds of surviving your first year of life are greatly enhanced if you hatch early in the season and have few siblings. Why? For one thing, it’s often the older, more experienced mothers that breed early in the season, and those mothers are better at taking care of their young. Also, more food is available early in the season, so early broods are better fed. And if you hatch early in the season, you have more time to mature and gain flying and foraging experience before taking off for your winter vacation. You’re better fed, healthier, and more experienced — that adds up to a higher survival rate in the first year.

Similarly, if you have a lot of siblings, your parents may not be able to provide you with adequate nutrition. As a result, you’ll leave the nest as a smaller, weaker fledgling compared to birds from small broods. Smaller and weaker adds up to a lower survival rate. On the bright side, coming from a large family is only detrimental during your first weeks out of the nest — if you can learn enough and eat enough to survive until fall migration, your odds of survival are the same as those of birds from smaller broods.

The real risk is migration. More than 80% of the mortalities among first-year birds occur during migration and on the wintering grounds. To effectively conserve migratory species, we need to better understand the threats they face from habitat loss, pesticides, etc., in Central and South America.


Are eggshells colored to benefit the embryo?

Conventional wisdom suggests that eggshell pigmentation is a benefit to the parents (e.g., as a signal to the male about the female’s fitness), or it serves to conceal the egg from predators by camouflage. But a recent paper has turned this thinking upside-down, or rather, inside-out: What if eggshells are pigmented for the benefit of the developing embryo?

The eggshell color and its intensity, and the prevalence and distribution of dark spots, scrawls, and other markings affect the amount of light and the particular wavelengths reaching the embryo. Even the thickest, darkest eggshells allow some light to pass through.

Benefits of sunlight to the embryo could include temperature regulation (darker-colored eggs would be warmer), accelerated development (eggs exposed to light develop quicker), enhanced brain development, and control of surface bacteria and fungi. A pigmented eggshell could provide protection
from infrared and UV-B spectrum light (which can damage DNA and lead to malformed embryos), and selective passage of UV-A spectrum light (which can repair damage caused by UV-B light).

In addition, the transmission of daylight followed by the dark of night would help an embryo develop its circadian rhythm — the day/night cycle that plays a critical role in hormone activity. Embryonic brain cells that play a role in development of the circadian rhythm are sensitive to blue light, which could explain why cavity-nesting bluebirds lay blue eggs.


Can bluebirds help farmers?

Winegrowers now have a reason to add blues to their reds and whites. A recent study in California wine country has demonstrated conclusively that bluebird populations in vineyards can be increased by the addition of nestboxes, and that those bluebirds will consume insect pests that attack the grape crop.

The idea of employing the services of birds to benefit agriculture is really an old one. From 1885 to 1940, the U.S. Department of Agriculture studied and promoted “economic ornithology,” which championed the idea that, not only could agricultural practices coexist with the natural world, they could actually benefit each other. Sadly, this approach fell out of favor with the advent of cheap and plentiful chemical insecticides, such as DDT.

This study gives hope that modern farmers will recognize and embrace economic ornithology, and welcome bluebirds and other birds to their fields.


Why don’t woodpeckers suffer brain damage?

Anyone who has ever watched a woodpecker drumming on a tree trunk has asked this question. While drumming, a woodpecker may strike the tree 20–30 times per second, over and over again, up to 12,000 times in the course of a day. The bird impacts the tree with a deceleration of up to 1200 g — it only takes 95 g for a human to suffer a concussion. In theory, each time the bill hits the tree, the bird’s brain impacts the inside front of the skull, with the potential to cause damage to the brain.

To find an answer, some biomechanical researchers pulled out all the technological stops: they used high-speed video, a force sensor, a scanning electron microscope, a micro-CT scanner, and a complex computer model. Their results, together with what was already known about woodpecker skulls, gives us a reasonably complete picture for how a woodpecker’s brain is protected from injury:

- The bill is tough but also slightly elastic, which allows it to flex a tiny bit and thereby absorb some of the force of impact with the tree.
- The strong skull is made of dense bone, with abundant amounts of “spongy” bone cushioning in the forehead and at the back of the skull.
- The brain fits tightly inside the skull and moves very little, so there is no opportunity for it to slam against the inside of the skull upon impact.
- The brain is fairly smooth, and broader from “ear to ear” than from front to back, meaning the force of impact (at the front of the brain) is spread across a wider surface, which softens the impact.
- The extremely long tongue forks into two thin bony structures (the hyoid apparatus), which wrap up over the back of the skull and are anchored at the base of the upper bill. Upon impact with a tree, some of the force is transferred from the bill to the hyoid apparatus, which disperses the force of the impact away from the brain.
- The lower bill is slightly longer than the upper, so the lower strikes the tree first and diverts much of the impact away from the brain.

Understanding the way a woodpecker protects its brain from injury can help in the development of better protective headgear and other equipment for sports, industry, the military, and other applications.

Affiliates of the North American Bluebird Society

The North American Bluebird Society serves as a clearinghouse for ideas, research, management and education on behalf of all bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting species. NABS invites all state, provincial, and regional bluebird organizations to become NABS affiliates in a confederation of equals all working together toward a common goal, a further partnership in international bluebird conservation. No cost is associated with affiliating with NABS. Your affiliated organization will be recognized and listed on the NABS website and in Bluebird. If your organization has a newsletter, please forward a copy to our headquarters. To find out more about becoming a NABS affiliate, read our Affiliate Letter. Notice: If you are listed below, please check listing to see if it is current. If not, please contact web@nabluebirdsociety.org and NABSEditor@gmail.com with correct information.

**Alberta**

**Calgary Area Nestbox Monitors**
Ron Reist
5720 59 Ave.
Olds, Alberta T4H 1K3 - CANADA
403-556-8043
rreist1@shaw.ca
www.canadiannaturenetwork.ca

**Ellis Bird Farm, Ltd.**
Myrna Pearman
PO Box 5090
Lacombe, AB T4L-1W7 - CANADA
403-885-4477
403-887-5779
mpearman@telus.net
www.ellisbirdfarm.ab.ca

**Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society**
Gwen Tietz
PO Box 401 Stn Main
Lethbridge, AB T1K-3Z1 - CANADA
403-553-2780
mtnblue@telus.net

**Bermuda**

**Bermuda Bluebird Society**
Stuart Smith
145 Middle Road
Southampton SN01, Bermuda
441-734-9856
smitty@ibl.bm
www.bermudabluebirdsociety.com

**British Columbia**

**Southern Interior Bluebird Trail Society**
Sherry Linn
18588 Old Richter Pass Rd
Osoyoos, BC V0H-1V5 - CANADA
250-495-7891
goldstrm@vip.net
www.bcbluebirds.org

**California**

**California Bluebird Recovery Program**
Dick Blaine
22284 N. De Anza Circle
Cupertino, CA 95014
408-257-6410
dick@theblaines.net
www.cbrp.org

**Palos Verdes South Bay Audubon Society**
Nancy Feagans
2010½ Fullman Lane
Redondo Beach, CA 90278
310-483-8192
nancy@pvbs-audubon.org
www.pvbs-audubon.org

**Southern California Bluebird Club**
Bob Franz
5121 Hamer Lane
Placentia, CA 92870-3650
714-528-5082
bluebirds.bob@gmail.com
www.socalbluebirds.org

**Colorado**

**Colorado Bluebird Project**
Audubon Soc of Greater Denver
Kevin Corwin - 720.482.8454
9308 S Wadsworth Blvd
Littleton, CO 80128
303-973-9530
303-973-1038 f
bluebirdproject@denveraudubon.org
www.denveraudubon.org/conservation/bluebird-project/

**Florida**

**Florida Bluebird Society**
Bill Pennewill
P.O. Box 1086
Penney Farms, FL 32079
floridabluebirdsociety@yahoo.com
www.floridabluebirdsociety.com

**Idaho**

**Our Bluebird Ranch**
Leola Roberts
152 N 200 E
Blackfoot, ID 83221
208-782-9676
Rocky Mountain Blues
David Richmond
HC 67  Box 680
Clayton, ID 83227
208-838-2431
fowest@custertel.net

Illinois
Jo Daviess County BBRP
Dick Bach
9262 Fitzsimmons Rd.
Stockton, IL 61085
815-947-2661
kiritemoa@mwci.net
www.jdcf.org/guardians

East Central Illinois Bluebird Society
Loren Hughes
1234 Tucker Beach Rd
Paris, IL 61944
217-463-7175
lghughes@joink.com

Southern Illinois Audubon Society
Laraine Wright
P.O. Box 222
Carbondale, IL 62903-0222
618-457-8769
imabirdr@earthlink.net

Indiana
Indiana Bluebird Society
Ken Murray
PO Box 134
Rensselaer, IN  47978-0134
219-866-3081
ibs07@rhsi.tv
www.indianabluebirdsociety.org

Brown County Bluebird Club
Dan Sparks
PO Box 660
Nashville, IN 47448
812-988-1876
360-361-3704 f
b4bluebirds@yahoo.com

Iowa
Johnson County Songbird Project
Jim Walters
1033 E Washington
Iowa City, IA 52240-5248
319-466-1134
james-walters@uiowa.edu

Iowa Bluebird Conservationists
Jerad Getter
PO Box 302
Griswold, IA 51535
712-624-9433 h
712-527-9685w
jgetter@hotmail.com

Bluebirds of Iowa Restoration
Jaclyn Hill
2946 Ubben Ave
Ellsworth IA 50075-7554
515-836-4579
jacllynhill@netins.net

Kentucky
Kentucky Bluebird Society
Philip Tamplin, Jr.
PO Box 3425
Paducah, KY 42002
502-895-4737
ptamplin@aol.com
www.biology.eku.edu/kbs

Louisiana
Louisiana Bayou Bluebird Society
Evelyn Cooper
3907 Cook Rd
Gretna, LA 70053
504-892-3210
ecoper@email.net
www.labayoubluebirdsociety.org

Maine
Mid-Coast Audubon Society
Joseph F. Gray
35 Schooner Street #103
Damariscotta, ME 04543
207-563-3578
cgray025@gmail.com
www.midcoastaudubon.org

Manitoba
Friends of the Bluebirds
Barry Danard
PO Box 569
Killarney, MB R0K 1G0 - CANADA
204-523-8258
jbdanard@mts.net
www.mts.net/~jbdanard/index.html

Maryland
Maryland Bluebird Society
Kathy Kremitzker
19305 Deer Path
Knoxville, MD 21758
301-662-7818
Griffith459@myactv.net
www.mdbirdsociety.org

Massachusetts
Massachusetts Bluebird Association
Henry R. Denton
726 Montgomery Road
Westfield, MA 01085-1090
413-562-0926
dald9@msn.com
www.massbluebird.org

Michigan
Michigan Bluebird Society
Kurt Hagemeister
PO Box 2028
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-2028
734-663-9746
810-736-8713 f
khagemeister@michiganbluebirds.org
www.michiganbluebirds.org

Minnesota
Bluebird Recovery Program
Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis
Keith Radel & JENean Mortenson
P.O. Box 984
Faribault, MN 55021
507-332-7003
clmjmm@ll.net
www.bbrp.org

Missouri
Missouri Bluebird Society
Steve Garr
P.O. Box 105830
Jefferson City, MO 65110
573-638-2473
stevegarr@missouribluebird.org
www.birds-i-view.biz/Missouri_Bluebirds.html

Montana
Mountain Bluebird Trails, Inc.
Johnny Hanna
P.O. Box 14
Wapiti, WY 82450
307-587-7064
president@mountainbluebirdtrails.com
www.mountainbluebirdtrails.com

Nebraska
Bluebirds Across Nebraska
Derry Wolford
705 9th Ave
Shenandoah, IA 51601
info@bbne.org
www.bbne.org

New Hampshire
NH Bluebird Conspiracy
Bruce Burdett
5 Upper Bay Rd
Sunapee, NH 03782-2330
603-763-5705
bluebird@myfairpoint.net

New Jersey
New Jersey Bluebird Society
Frank V. Budge
173 Carolyn Road
Union, NJ 07083-9424
908-687-2169
www.njbluebirds.org
New York

Bronx River - Sound Shore Audubon Society
Sandy Morrissey
Scarsdale, NY
914-949-2531
www.brrsaudubon.org

NY State Bluebird Society
John Ruska
3149 Whittaker Road
Fredonia, NY 14063
716-679-9676
ruskhill@adelphia.net
www.nysbs.org

Orleans Bluebird Society
Gary Kent
3806 Allen’s Bridge Rd.
Albion, NY 14411
585-589-5130
gkworking4u@hotmail.com

New York State Bluebird Society
Sandy Morrissey
Scarsdale, NY
914-949-2531
www.brrsaudubon.org

Ohio

Ohio Bluebird Society
PMB 111, 343 W. Milltown Rd.
Wooster, OH 44691
330-466-6926
info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org
www.ohiobluebirdsociety.org

Oklahoma

Oklahoma Bluebird Society
Herb Streator
6400 E. Commercial St
Broken Arrow, OK 74014
918-806-2489

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Bluebird Society
Harry Schneider
448 Portman Road
Butler, PA 16002
724-285-1209
harryschneider@gmail.com
www.pennysb.org

Purple Martin Conservation Assoc.
John Tautin
Tom Ridge Environmental Center
301 Peninsula Dr., Suite 6
Erie, PA 16505
814-833-2090
jtautin@purplemartin.org
www.purplemartin.org

South Carolina

South Carolina Bluebird Society
Jim Burke
P.O. Box 5151
Aiken, SC 29804-5151
803-644-0235
jimburke271@gmail.com
www.southcarolinabluebirds.org

Tennessee

Tennessee Bluebird Trails
Louis Redmon
381 Liberty Rd
Wariburg, TN 37887
423-346-3911
amyredmon@hotmail.com

Texas

Texas Bluebird Society
Pauline Tom
PO Box 40868
Austin, TX 78704
512-268-5678
ptom5678@gmail.com
www.texasbluebirdsociety.org

Virginia

Virginia Bluebird Society
Anne Little
726 William St
Fredericksburg, VA 22401
540-373-4594
vbs@virginiabluebirds.org
www.virginiabluebirds.org

Audubon Society of Northern Virginia
Jill Miller
11100 Wildlife Center Drive, Suite 100
Reston, VA 20190
703-438-6008
info@audubonva.org
www.audubonva.org

Washington

Cascadia Bluebird & Purple Martin Society
Michael Pietro
3015 Squalicum Pkwy #250
Bellingham, WA 98225
360-738-2153
mmpietro@hinet.org

Puget Sound Bluebird Recovery Project
Susan Ford
PO Box 1351
Poulsbo, WA 98370
susan@pugetsoundbluebird.org
www.pugetsoundbluebird.org

West Virginia

Potomac Valley Audubon Society
Peter Smith
PO Box 578
Shepherdstown, WV 25443
304-876-1139
pvsmith@frontiernet.net
www.potomacaudubon.org

Wisconsin

Aldo Leopold Audubon Society
Larry Graham
918 Arts Lane
Stevens Point, WI 54481
715-344-0968
lgraham@uwsp.edu
www.aldoleopoldaudubon.org

Bluebird Restoration Assoc of Wisconsin
Patrick Ready
1210 Oakwood Ct
Stoughton, WI 53589
608-873-1703
pready@tds.net
www.braw.org

Lafayette County Bluebird Society
Carol McDaniel
14953 State Rd. 23
Darlington, WI 53530-9324
lafayettedountybluebirdsoociety@yahoo.com
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