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Cover photo: Female Western Bluebird returning to her nest cavity in a quaking aspen tree, Yellowstone National Park. Photo © Ben Renard-wiart / Dreamstime.com.
Table of Contents photo: A female Common Goldeneye leads her brood on a swim. Goldeneyes breed in tree cavities across the boreal forest of Canada and the north-central and northeastern US.
Fall Message To Our Affiliate Organizations
Phil Berry

I would like to welcome our newest NABS Affiliate, the Hendricks County Bluebird Society in Danville, Indiana. Meetings are once a month, only during nesting season.

As I write this, we are looking forward to the annual NABS meeting in Newport Beach, California, and as you read it, we will have already been to California and gone home. I would like to thank all the members of the Southern California Bluebird Club for their hard work in putting the conference together so we could get together and learn from each other. And while on the topic, let’s start planning for next year, when the South Carolina Bluebird Society will host NABS 2013 in Aiken, South Carolina.

And while I speak of conferences, NABS is actively looking for an Affiliate to host NABS 2014. Any of our Affiliate organizations who would like to host the conference PLEASE get in touch with me and I can tell you what is involved. If you live in an area that you are proud of, we would like to see for ourselves.

I would also like to encourage any of you to submit articles for print in Bluebird that tell us what you as an Affiliate have been doing. We are always willing to learn something new about our mutual interest, bluebirds.

Phil Berry
VP for Affiliate Relations

Like us on Facebook! Great friends, great photos, great videos, and great information are all waiting for you on the NABS Facebook page. Stay connected with NABS members and other bluebird enthusiasts at www.facebook.com/NorthAmericanBluebirdSociety

The North American Bluebird Society, Inc. is a non-profit education, conservation and research organization that promotes the recovery of bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting bird species in North America.

www.nabluebirdsociety.org

Like us on Facebook!
As the nesting season draws to a close and my bluebirds prepare to migrate, I wonder where they will spend the winter? Research here in the Okanagan Valley on overwintering Western Bluebirds has produced some wonderful results. There were a few surprises, some sparking more questions, and once the lab work is completed this winter I am hopeful we will have more answers. My last four nestlings fledged August 17 and now sport a lovely orange band along with their silver Fish & Wildlife “bracelet.” Will they return next year to breed? You can bet I will be watching for them! I also have one pair of color-banded adults from another nestbox that produced 10 fledglings so I am asking all our local birders to watch for them this winter in the valley bottom. If they go further afield, and you have Western Bluebirds during the winter—perhaps one may show up in your area!

This past year has flown by so quickly and I have learned a lot as I tended to the daily duties of my new role as your President. I want to thank all the Board members for their support. We do have changes coming and I would especially like to acknowledge and thank those Directors who have served at least two terms and are now stepping down: Greg Beavers, Jonathan and Lynne Ridgeway, and Brian Swanson. Your contributions have made NABS a stronger organization. You leave us in good shape financially and well prepared to meet the challenges we know the future will bring.

The first phase of updating our Bylaws and setting an election slate of Directors to get us into the triennial classes is complete. The ballots went out the beginning of August, and I want to thank the many of you who took time to vote. It was heartwarming to know that so many felt as I had over the years and really did want an opportunity to participate in the selection of our Board though we may not have always been able to attend the official Annual Meeting at a conference. Thank you also for the phone calls, emails, and notes mailed with ballots that came as a result of our going through this process. Some minor changes will be forthcoming in 2013 as we clarify certain aspects within the Bylaws and further refine our balloting process. Your comments are important and helpful and I want you to know that we will address them all.

So where do we go from here? We will be having a planning workshop during the Board session at the conference and setting some goals for 2013 and beyond. We do know that our Affiliates give us strength and we will be working with them on some new initiatives starting next year. Our Fact Sheets are now available on the NABS website. I would especially like to acknowledge Bet Zimmerman who worked so tirelessly on this project and all those who participated. I am sure at times you wondered whether you’d ever see this day! Scott Gillihan has done a marvelous job with layout and getting appropriate photos. Sincere thanks to you all.

I am hopeful that the changes we’ve made meet with your approval as they ensure everyone a chance to participate more actively in NABS. Please remember that your Board is always available to you.

Sherry
250-495-7891 (in Canada but always ready to call you right back on my dime!)
goldstrm@vip.net
NABS Notices

Are You Planning a Change of Scenery? Is a Move in Your Future?

One thing we have learned from the large ballot mail-out is that many folks have moved and not remembered to notify us. Unfortunately, a few of our long-time Life members have also passed away yet we have been continuing to send the journals every year long after they were gone. If no one notifies us, we have no way of knowing what is happening and the journals keep going out. Have you lost a loved one or a long-time bluebird friend who you know was a member of NABS? Please help by dropping us a quick note. Bluebird is sent out under a non-profit bulk rate and copies are not returned to us if they can’t be delivered.

If your mail is forwarded to your new address, please check the addressing on your journal to ensure our information is right. We do not have a phone number or email address for many of our members yet this can be very helpful when we need to contact you. With a lot of volunteer time we’ve been able to get information through the internet, but for others we have hit a dead end and cannot resend your ballot. Your help is really needed for us to keep our records up-to-date. Remember—we do not share our member information and do not sell our list.

Membership Manager Needed

After six years of “temporarily” taking on the membership database and communications duties, Tena Taylor is ready to retire. If you have an average of five hours a week to give NABS, have some computer knowledge, and like to communicate with folks who love bluebirds, then this may be the way you can volunteer and take an important role with NABS. Let’s talk! Contact Tena at ccbluebirder@tds.net or Sherry at goldstrm@vip.net to learn how you may assist us.

Officials of North American Bluebird Society, Inc.

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Farrell Roe - Second VP for Community Relations
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Jim McLochlin
From the Managing Editor
Scott W. Gillihan

I had the good fortune of attending the recent North American Ornithological Conference in Vancouver, BC. This large meeting, held every four years, was organized by nine of the largest organizations in North America dedicated to the scientific study of birds. I attended a number of excellent presentations on the latest research on bluebirds and other cavity nesters. I will try to summarize this research in a future issue.

Recently, I received a handwritten letter that pointed out the preponderance of website addresses sprinkled throughout Bluebird. The writer pointed out that not all NABS members have Internet access. Point well taken. From now on, I will make an effort to include other contact information (i.e., phone number and mailing address) besides just the Internet address.

Many thanks to all who contributed to this issue, to Sherry Linn for proofreading it, and to Lauren Kane (for providing ongoing access to scientific papers on BioOne.org for the Research Review section).

As always, please send any photos, articles, or ideas to me at NABSeditor@gmail.com or 5405 Villa View Dr., Farmington, NM 87402.

Notices from NABS Affiliates

Joint Bluebird–Purple Martin Conference
The Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania and the Purple Martin Conservation Association will hold a joint conference on April 5 & 6, 2012 at Best Western Premier – The Central Hotel & Conference Center, 800 East Park Drive, Harrisburg, PA 17111. The hotel is now accepting lodging reservations: (717) 561-2800 (mention the Bluebird/Purple Martin Conference to receive the group discount rate).

Event Highlights: Friday evening: 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Hors d’oeuvres and cash bar with evening programs. Saturday: All-day conference includes Speakers, Displays, Vendors, Exhibits, Live and Silent Auctions, Amish Quilt Raffle, Door Prizes, Bluebird and Purple Martin Store items for sale on site. Registration of $35.00 per person includes Saturday morning Breakfast Buffet and Mid-day Luncheon Buffet and all activities on Friday night and Saturday.

Pre-Registration is required for food planning. Registration forms and additional information can be obtained from the following host organizations’ websites: The Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania: http://www.thebsp.org The Purple Martin Conservation Association: http://purplemartin.org

Speakers:
- Bluebird Speaker, Mr. Andy Ohrmon, Past President of the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania: “The Joy of Bluebirds and Other Cavity-Nesting Birds up Close and In Motion.” Experience birds in slow motion footage with special effects from cameras placed inside the nestbox. Explore cavity-nesting birds as you’ve never seen them before.
- Purple Martin Speaker, Mr. John Tautin, Executive Director of the Purple Martin Conservation Association: “Building Community for Purple Martins.” This conservation topic concerns the ecology, status and management of Purple Martins, with emphasis on building community to address the decline of martins in Pennsylvania.
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"Feeding live insects to the wild birds in my yard has helped me build a special bond with individual birds."
—Julie Zickefoose
I have been curious about Flammulated Owls for some time. In 1997, the North American Bluebird Society helped me begin studying this small, elusive owl by funding the purchase of a cavity-checking camera system, which is still in use to this day. I studied Flammulated Owls in New Mexico for 11 consecutive years and learned a lot about their ecology. One aspect of my study was to determine the effectiveness of nestboxes in conserving populations.

Last year, NABS helped me return to New Mexico to study Flammulated Owls once again. I had not been to my study site for five years and I wanted to know how stable the population was, especially where owls used nestboxes. When I arrived on Oso Ridge in the Zuni Mountains it felt like I had been there the day before. The study area appeared almost unchanged, other than the later timing of owl nesting. Of the 14 nests that I located, none of the eggs had hatched by the time I left on June 19, which was about one week later than on average in previous years.

In New Mexico, I found that of the 52 nest boxes that I had randomly placed in half of the study area from 2004 to 2006, six had become unusable or destroyed due to black bears (four boxes) and fallen trees and branches (two boxes). I was able to repair two of these boxes and put them back up on the tree. Therefore, after a total of eight years, only 11.5% of boxes (6 of 52) became unusable with no maintenance and only 7.7% (4 of 52) with minimal maintenance. Owls consistently used nestboxes, averaging 5.3 used per year (range = 3–8). The reproductive success of owls nesting in boxes was equivalent to that of owls nesting in natural cavities. Thus, nestboxes in the Oso Ridge study area have provided a stable, long-term supply of nesting cavities for Flammulated Owls. The addition of nestboxes to the study area from 2004 to 2006 had rapidly increased the number of nesting pairs by more than half.

This year I began a study of Flammulated Owls in northern California. The Plumas Audubon Society and the U.S. Forest Service are collaborating to study this insectivorous, neotropical migrant around Lake Davis in Plumas County. The purpose of the study is to examine the effect of fire fuel breaks, which are called Defensive Fuel Profile Zones, on Flammulated Owls and how nestboxes may help stabilize populations. The results in both New Mexico and California confirm that the use of nestboxes is a valuable conservation tool to increase the abundance of Flammulated Owls around existing populations. However, forest management that maintains suitable Flammulated Owl habitat is critical to the long-term persistence of this and other cavity-nesting species.
David Arsenault is president of the Plumas Audubon Society in Quincy, California. He received a NABS research grant to support his work on Flammulated Owls.

[Editor’s note: David Arsenault has produced an impressive body of work on this often-overlooked species. The publications listed below are available online at www.plumasaudubon.org/flammulated-owls.html]


A new study of house cats allowed to roam outdoors found that nearly one-third succeeded in capturing and killing animals. The cats, which wore special video cameras around their necks to record their activities, killed an average of 2.1 animals every week they were outside, but brought less than one of every four of their kills home. Bird kills constituted about 13 percent of the total wildlife kills. Based on these results, American Bird Conservancy and The Wildlife Society estimate that house cats kill far more than the previous estimate of 1 billion birds and other animals each year.

Loyd said the cats were outside for an average of 5–6 hours every day. “If we extrapolate the results of this study across the country and include feral cats, we find that cats are likely killing more than 4 billion animals per year, including at least 500 million birds. Cat predation is one of the reasons why one in three American bird species are in decline,” said Dr. George Fenwick, President of American Bird Conservancy.

Volunteer cat owners were recruited through advertisements in local newspapers, and all selected cats were given a free health screening. Each cat owner downloaded the footage from the camera at the end of each recording day.

The study was carried out by scientists from the University of Georgia and the National Geographic Society. “The results were certainly surprising, if not startling,” said Kerrie Anne Loyd of the University of Georgia, who was lead author of the study. “In Athens-Clarke County, we found that about 30 percent of the sampled cats were successful in capturing and killing prey, and that those cats averaged about one kill for every 17 hours outdoors or 2.1 kills per week. It was also surprising to learn that cats only brought 23 percent of their kills back to a residence. We found that house cats will kill a wide variety of animals, including lizards, voles, chipmunks, birds, frogs, and small snakes.”

Loyd and her colleagues attached small video cameras to 60 outdoor house cats in the city of Athens, Georgia, and recorded their outdoor activities during all four seasons.

The new study does not include the animals killed by feral cats that have no owners. A University of Nebraska study released last year found that feral cats were responsible for the extinction of 33 species of birds worldwide, that even well-fed cats in “managed” cat colonies will kill, that feral cats prey more on native wildlife than on other invasive creatures, and that most feral cats (between 62 and 80 percent) tested positive for toxoplasmosis (a disease with serious implications for pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems).

You can view photographs and videos from the “kittycams” at www.kittycams.uga.edu/photovideo.html.
At the beginning of September, 2010, I realized that one of the immature bluebirds from our nestboxes was crippled, with the toes of his right foot dangling downward. I likely wouldn't have noticed this if my husband and I hadn't fed mealworms to the 2–3 resident pairs that routinely nest on our property and bring their families to our deck while we sit outside in the evenings.

I looked into the option of bird rehabilitation and decided against it—the bird could not be rehabbed in time for migration and it would likely compromise the trust that the families had in us if we set up a trap. Instead, during the coming weeks, we simply made sure that this disadvantaged young bird had some advantages. He routinely showed up with the families in the evening, but didn’t come to the deck with them for mealworms—he was too crippled, or in too much pain, to get into the mealworm feeders. Instead he perched in a nearby pine—leaning, because he could not perch on both feet. He always lingered late, so we made certain to have extra handouts for him that we tossed onto the deck floor after most of the others had gone to roost. He looked awful—fluffed and disheveled—but he took us by surprise one evening two weeks later when he landed on the deck floor along with other bluebirds. An adult female, presumably his mother, stood beside him—and not a single bluebird vied for the mealworms that we tossed directly to him.

We saw then that the toes that had dangled downward had begun to turn upward. This made it possible for him to balance on his tarsometatarsus. The toes eventually held fairly tightly against his leg, giving the appearance of a thick stump. He also eventually learned how to negotiate the Plexiglas domed feeder and even the wooden mealworm feeder with Plexiglas holes. He had made it through a critical time in his life and we think that our mealworm handouts helped his survival. He and the family continued to come each evening into late October and when they departed, we were certain we’d never see him again. The odds of migration and winter survival are low for every young bluebird and this disability only decreased his odds.

In mid-March, 2011, Western Bluebirds began returning to our home. One evening when a baker’s dozen were on our deck, my husband watched intently and smiled as he spoke the words “look at the one that’s leaning.” “Junior,” as we had come to call him that previous autumn, had made it back home—perhaps a more apt name for him would be “Miracle.”

As April of 2011 progressed, two pairs of bluebirds won nesting territories on our property. Junior was not one of the males. On May 11th and 12th, during a persistent snowstorm, I saw Junior several times at a mealworm feeder. Each visit was a mad dash, avoiding the territorial male that chased him aggressively. On each departure, Junior held a couple of giant mealworms in his beak as he flew away.

After that storm, I didn’t see him and often wondered about him. During the storm, had he been escaping with food for himself or carrying food to a mate in a nest cavity? Had a female decided that this survivor would be a good mate and provider? Had he been able to pass his genes to new bluebirds?

Later that summer, we would find out.
As I sat on the deck on the evening of July 31, the calls of immature bluebirds graced the air and a flock of 11 bluebirds sallied over me and perched in nearby trees. Soon they flew back toward the deck and an adult male landed atop the wooden mealworm feeder—this adult male was leaning! The toes on his right foot pointed upward and his leg looked like a stump. Nine young of different age and brood plumages, one adult female, and Junior were all in that flock of 11. The Miracle Bluebird seemed to have had found a mate and raised two broods. Through late October, we watched and enjoyed his family, plus the families of the two pairs of bluebirds that had nested on our property. Some 30 individuals routinely came to our deck in the evenings and many of them came again at each following sunrise. In late October, we bid them all farewell.

Junior did not make it back after his second winter. What was even sadder, however, was that only six bluebirds returned to our home in March 2012. Whatever migration route or winter destination they had chosen had been difficult for them. We miss that special survivor of physical hardship, and we like to hope that Junior’s genes are among those raising families here this year—and, 2012 has been another interesting year.

The dominant pair in 2012 nested just beyond our deck, as is typical. What is not typical is that they raised seven in their first brood. I’ve never observed a brood this large among Western Bluebirds; five, sometimes six, has been the norm. Two of the first brood stayed and helped with the second brood—and a few days after that second brood had fledged, I got a good look at the female—she looked like she had a brood patch. I checked her nest box and found three more eggs—this is the first year with a clutch of seven and also the first year with a third clutch here at my home in Franktown. I began hosting Western Bluebirds 17 years ago. Before that, I’d hosted Eastern Bluebirds in New Hampshire for 11 years.

And I was in for another surprise this year—by the “pair” that nested in the front of our property. From the start, they have not been a typical pair. They’ve been a “trio” all along. Two males have cooperatively tended a single female and their subsequent two broods, of five and four, respectively.

In past years, I’ve often observed helpers at the nest for the second brood. Sometimes one or more adult male “uncles” attend; in other years, first-brood male offspring have been the helpers for their parents’ younger offspring. This is the first time, however, when two adult males have been present throughout all of nesting season. One male is less vividly colored than the other, but I cannot describe one as dominant over the other.

I’ve wondered if this cooperation—and the additional nesting with a third brood—might be a consequence of so few bluebirds having returned last March. Whatever the reasons, I know that I am blessed to have had so many bluebirds grace my life. 

Karen Metz began putting up bluebird boxes in Windham, New Hampshire in the mid-1980s. When her husband took a job in Colorado, they selected their home in (large) part because they saw Western Bluebirds on the property; they soon added a few nestboxes. She has monitored bluebird trails in the past, but most of her current volunteering is raptor monitoring and bird surveys.

State of Canada’s Birds 2012

A coalition of nonprofit bird conservation organizations has completed an analysis of 40 years of Canada’s bird-population data. Highlights of the recently released report:

- Breeding populations have declined 12% since 1970.
- More species are decreasing than are increasing.
- Aerial insectivores (including cavity-nesting swallows) have declined most dramatically, with some species down to only 25% of their 1970 populations. The reasons for the decline are unknown.
- Populations of some forest-dwelling species, such as Black-capped Chickadee and Pileated Woodpecker, have increased.

The complete report is available to download at www.stateofcanadasbirds.org
Tough Times for Bluebirds in 2012
Leif Marking

For decades, members of the Brice Prairie Conservation Association have been confident that our inch-and-three-quarters PVC-covered steel T posts were effective protection for our bluebirds. We believed that ground predators were unable to climb the posts. Yet this spring and early summer both nestlings and eggs began disappearing from many of my nest boxes on Marking Ridge in La Crosse County, Wisconsin.

My bluebird box number 7, located on our farm yard, is a box designed especially to accommodate a nature camera so it is 16 inches high and provides adequate distance to focus on the entire bluebird nest. The tiny Hawkeye video camera, attached to the ceiling, is powered by electricity through the cord that leads into our house for connecting to a television for viewing or to a computer for recording. This video camera has six tiny infrared light bulbs so the subject can be viewed in darkness.

This site offers ideal bluebird habitat and bluebirds have nested here many years. On April 4 a bluebird nest was recorded in the box; the early Wisconsin spring offered early starts for birds and other wildlife. Within a week there were five blue eggs in the nest cup, and the expecting parents spent their spare time searching for ground insects while perching on the windmill, the buildings, or the perches placed next to the box. Insects appeared early to fortify the decision for birds to start early.

The five eggs hatched on April 26, and the adults began to feed small insects. They also removed the fecal sacs to maintain sanitation in their home. The chicks grew rapidly, their feathers were developing, their eyes were open, and they were oriented to the entry where food arrived from the adults about every 10 minutes. The 12-day nestlings were healthy and content on May 10, but on the morning of May 11 I discovered that they had disappeared overnight. I searched for evidence of a predator, but there were no visible scratches or claw marks. The nest was not greatly disturbed with the remaining cup and shelf in place, although a few nest grasses were pulled out of the entry hole. That nest material was probably in the clutches of the chicks as they were pulled reluctantly from their nest.

In 2011 the nestlings in this box as well as a few others were taken by a kestrel, so sparrow hawks were under suspicion. One upward sliver on the side of the box could have been a claw of a cat. But they usually mess up the nest and pull more nest material into the entrance. Our PVC predator guard has been effective in the past to prevent climbing ground predators. I set a baited live trap, not knowing which predator was the culprit, and caught a skunk. The La Crosse County Humane Society fortunately came and took the skunk so I didn’t have to deal with it. They recommended baiting with canned cat food.

Then, the live trap was set in buildings farther from home to avoid skunks, but I caught raccoons rather than cats. Meanwhile the parent bluebirds had built a new nest in their box, and on May 18 five eggs were recorded. On May 19 the eggs were gone. I suspected a cat again. One egg was lodged between the nest and front panel and another was broken and seeped to the bottom of the box. I removed the nest material. Nestlings and eggs had also been taken from nearby boxes on this trail.

I suspected this predator was local and must be destroyed. First, the predator must be identified. My friend Dan Leubke from RECONYX in Holmen, Wisconsin (where motion cameras are built, tested, and marketed) offered to place cameras to focus on four bluebird boxes that lost eggs and nestlings.

On May 25 the adult bluebirds had completed a third nest in their box and on June 1 there were five blue eggs in the nest cup. Incubation was under way, but on June 8 those eggs were gone. The adult birds were distraught at this point, but they remained around the farmyard entering the box occasionally to make sure it was not a bad dream. They didn’t realize the motion camera had recorded the theft at 11:05 the night before (see photo). They also had no clue their fourth attempt would be safe from predators. The motion camera revealed a raccoon had climbed the PVC predator guard and removed the eggs. A single exposure reveals a blue egg in the front paw of the coon. On the night of June 9 that raccoon entered a live trap baited with marshmallows, and a few days later circling turkey vultures recycled the raccoon’s dead body for energy to continue their niche in our environment.

The resilient parents restructured the remaining nest material for a nest cup and shelf during the next few days, and on June 17, only nine days after losing five
eggs in their third nesting, they had four eggs in the fourth nesting. How remarkable for the female to physiologically prepare her reproduction system to begin laying eggs five days after losing the third clutch of five. The four eggs hatched on June 30, and those nestlings fledged successfully on July 17. Those tremendous efforts demonstrate the persistence and the resilience of the parent bluebirds’ producing 19 eggs that resulted in only four fledges. These amazing and persistent bluebirds overcame these devastatingly adverse conditions.

The motion camera results suggest the raccoon doesn’t use claws to climb the PVC predator guard, but foot pads under pressure cling to the pipe to facilitate the climb. New PVC pipe is slick and apparently restricts climbing for a few years, but when the plastic surface oxidizes and ages the surface loses the slippery texture. We believe the slippery surface can be restored by treating the pipe with car wax. We will be evaluating this procedure and promoting brands that are most effective. Annual or more frequent applications may be required. Not all raccoons realize that some of these pipes can be negotiated to get to the lunch box, but we now realize that aging PVC becomes vulnerable to raccoon predation.

The trapped raccoon was apparently the guilty party since there were no more losses of eggs or nestlings in the local vicinity, and results of motion camera monitoring did not capture any more attempts of climbing or entry. However, my records suggests 20 nestlings were lost in box numbers 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 and 40 eggs were lost before this raccoon was destroyed. I suspect that I lost 100 or more eggs and nestlings in the 160 boxes that I monitor. In addition, many other bluebird monitors in Wisconsin are reporting similar results. This has become the year of the raccoon, and we must prevent their entry to ensure that bluebird reproduction continues successfully in our boxes.

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.

A Must-Have Book for Bluebird Lovers

Most bird lovers are familiar with the art and prose of Julie Zickefoose. Her new book, The Bluebird Effect, has found an enthusiastic audience beyond the nestbox-and-binoculars crowd. Here are excerpts from some reviews:

"We’ve been knocked to our knees by the delightful illustrated essay collection.” – Oprah.com

"The prose here is richly descriptive and eminently readable... Zickefoose can make the mundane fascinating.” – Cleveland Plain Dealer

"Anyone who’s ever considered hanging a birdfeeder is likely to be mesmerized by the sensuous, precise prose as well as Zickefoose’s vivid portraits.” – Publisher’s Weekly

Pick up a copy from your favorite bookseller or online at www.juliezickefoose.com.
A Bluebird Summer: Bringing Western Bluebirds Back to Southeastern Vancouver Island
Julia Daly

When asked to write a “week in the life” article that described my experiences as a field technician working on the pilot year of a five-year Western Bluebird (Sialia mexicana) reintroduction project, I thought to myself, how can I generalize all I’ve seen and done over the past six weeks into one “typical” week, when each day brings so many personal firsts? On my first day of work, for example, I got to see live Western Bluebirds for the very first time—an entire family of them! Little did I know that these same birds would later choose to remain at their release site and produce another clutch! As I write this, four newly hatched bluebird chicks are nestled inside a bluebird box in the Cowichan Valley. They are the first Western Bluebirds known to have hatched on Vancouver Island in 17 years.

In the 1950s, Western Bluebird numbers in southwestern British Columbia (the northern extent of their former range) began to decline, a trend that continued until the mid 1990s when the last breeding activity on Vancouver Island was recorded. Compounding pressures, such as wide-scale commercial and residential development, the removal of dead wood from habitat, pesticide use, long-term wildfire suppression, and the introduction of exotic invasive species such as European Starlings (Sturnus vulgaris), House Sparrows (Passer domesticus), and domestic cats appear to be the main drivers of this loss.

We’re hopeful that Western Bluebirds will rebuild a population in this area through our ecosystem recovery program that combines the translocation of Western Bluebirds, habitat restoration, and the building of nestbox trails placed in suitable habitat throughout the region. The first phase of this international project reintroduced a breeding population of Western Bluebirds to the San Juan Islands, where they hadn’t nested since the 1930s.

Thanks to generous contributions from NABS and the Victoria Natural History Society, we were able to go ahead with the pilot year of the program in Canada.

My experiences working with this incredibly adaptable and undeniably beautiful species, and the many people who are working to help them, have given me hope that the songbirds will soon return to southwestern BC for the long term. In this pilot season, 17 Western Bluebirds (eight adults and nine juveniles) were captured from Joint Base Lewis-McChord military base in nearby Washington, which contains one of the largest remaining tracts of Garry Oak habitat in northeastern Washington, and translocated to the Cowichan Valley. At least one of the four translocated adult pairs has produced young here, which is the news of the summer! Our goal is to release at least 90 adult Western Bluebirds in the area by the year 2016. Here are some of the highlights, quirks, and things I’ve learned through my job as the “Bring Back the Bluebirds” Project Technician...so far.

June 4, 2012
I arrived in the Cowichan Valley for my first day of work and was greeted by the site manager at Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve (CGOP), Irvin Banman, who guided me on a tour of the native plant nursery that he manages on site, which specializes in the propagation of species associated with Garry Oak ecosystems. Soon we were met by Trudy Chatwin, a Rare and Endangered Species Biologist for BC’s Ministry of Environment, and together we surveyed 26 nestboxes in the area. We recorded many Tree and Violet-green Swallow nests and a few House Wren nests. I learned about House Wren “dummy nest” building behaviour—fascinating, but it does create extra work for the technician. In the evening, Conservation Specialist Kathryn Martell of GOERT (Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team) and Gary Slater of Ecostudies Institute arrived with the first family of Western Bluebird chicks that had just arrived at Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve. Photo by Trudy Chatwin
bluebirds translocated from Washington State.

**June 5-6**
I traveled to Fort Lewis, Washington with Gary, who coordinates the translocation component of the project. In the early morning of June 6th we drove to Joint Base Lewis-McChord to capture a family of bluebirds at a known location (i.e., where breeding activity had been observed). When we arrived at the capture site, the sun was just coming up over the horizon, lighting up the Garry Oak meadow full of dry grasses and blooming Deltoid Balsamroot into a gleaming sea of gold and yellow. I couldn’t gaze at the landscape for long, however, as moments later we were quickly setting up mist nets around a Garry Oak tree bearing the nestbox of a family of seven Western Bluebirds (an adult pair in their second year of life and their five 12-day-old chicks). Within 45 minutes, we had successfully captured the adult pair and their nestlings for banding. Once they had been banded and their border-crossing paperwork signed, we proceeded on our drive and ferry ride back to the Cowichan Valley. After 12 hours of nearly continuous cheep-ing, hand-feeding, and fecal sac removal, we arrived back in the Cowichan Valley. My ears were ringing, but my heart beamed for the bluebird family and their potential establishment on Vancouver Island.

**June 6**
The two bluebird families were held in aviaries until the young fledged from the nestboxes (about one week). How I treasured my early morning and evening visits to the aviaries to feed and check up on them! Through a tiny crack above the door on the only walled side of the aviary (the other three sides are wire mesh) I was able to peer in and watch their activities undetected. Sometimes I would close my eyes and listen to their subtle sounds—soft and content-sounding “chips” and “peeps” against a backdrop of a gentle summer wind. At other times I worked on surveying for the four bluebirds that had already been released, and monitoring and cleaning out the contents of other nestboxes throughout the region. I enjoyed learning about the unique sets of nesting materials used by the different cavity nesters I encountered, and the color and size variation of each species’ eggs.

**June 11**
Today was release day for the first family of six Western Bluebirds that arrived at CGOP on June 4th (exactly one week earlier). They took their time flying out of the aviary (more than six hours), but wasted no time in producing more offspring once they made their way out! The adult pair began searching for another nesting site almost immediately. Over the next couple of days I saw them defending several nestboxes near the aviary. At first they seemed fixated on securing a nestbox already occupied by a family of Tree Swallows! Eventually they settled on a nestbox that we hastily erected in the same area, which not only had a spectacular view, but also had a reliable food supply within 10 meters (mealworms that we provided). Made perfect sense to me.

**June 17**
I found a tidy nest made of fine dry grasses in the first family’s nestbox!

**June 20**
Wow, what amazing hovering skills! Today I saw one of the adult females hovering above the ground for several seconds to home in on an insect in the grass. Finally she pounced and caught the winged bug in her bill!

**June 25**
I peeked inside the nestbox and found four beautiful blue eggs that became a clutch of five by June 27th.

**June 29**
The adult male is seen delivering mouthfuls of food to his mate inside their nestbox. She must be incubating her eggs!

**July 4**
The first family of bluebirds at CGOP seems healthy, except I fear that one of the four juveniles (a female) may have died, as I did a survey of all the leg bands
on June 26th and could only confirm five birds. I am going to get the spotting scope out again tomorrow morning at feeding time to firm up those results, as it should be a clear sunny day here.

July 9
Four of the eggs have hatched! Ninety percent of their body mass will be reached by 10–11 days of age. They develop so fast! All this time, I’ve been watching the juveniles from the first brood learning to hunt, and today I witnessed them hunting for wild insects on their own at 36 days old.

July 3-17
So far this month I’ve been busy monitoring the progress of the family of bluebirds that remained at their release site (the adult pair with the three surviving fledged young and four two-week-old chicks); surveying for the other 11 bluebirds that have been released; installing, monitoring, and cleaning out nestboxes that have been installed in the Cowichan Valley; meeting with local landowners that are interested in or already hosting bluebird nestboxes; and collaborating with the Cowichan Tribes First Nation to share knowledge of Western Bluebird ecology and management.

I’ve seen, felt and learned so much over the past six weeks, and I’m certain the next month and a half will be just as memorable. Soon some of the translocated bluebirds may embark on a short-distance migration into the northwestern US to overwinter. I hope to see them back here for their next breeding season.

However adaptable Western Bluebirds seem to be to our ever-increasing presence and impact on the landscape, they are certainly not immune. We have already lost Western Bluebirds on Vancouver Island once before. Bringing them back goes hand in hand with a commitment to retain what we still have of their habitat, and to restore even more; it’s a leap of faith that we as stewards of the land are ready, this time, to care for the Western Bluebird and other species depending on Garry Oak and associated ecosystems. We’re off to a good start. Let’s keep the momentum going.

For more about the “Bring Back the Bluebirds” project, please see
www.goert.ca/bluebird, or follow our progress on Facebook (www.facebook.com/garryoakeco).

Update August 21, 2012: the four nestlings that hatched on Vancouver Island were banded on July 22nd and fledged on July 29th. They have been seen and heard high up in the Garry Oaks at CGOP, giving off surprisingly loud “tew, tew, tew” calls and being fed by their parents and older siblings. Besides the quick blast of rain and hail we received on the evening of August 7th during the passing of a thunderstorm, the weather has remained dry and warm and there has been an abundance of grasshoppers, which is great for the bluebirds. I’m glad that they’ve acclimatized to their new environment and are so eagerly hunting the local insects.

Nature is signaling that it may soon be time for some of the Western Bluebirds to depart southern Vancouver Island and migrate to their wintering grounds south of the border. The leaves of the Indian plum and snowberry shrubs are turning yellow and falling to the ground, and even the leaves of some of the Garry Oak trees are beginning to turn brown. I will sure miss seeing these birds on a regular basis whenever it is they decide to move on; however, I am optimistic that they’ll return next spring and thankful for all that they’ve taught me over the past three months.

Julia Daly is the “Bring Back the Bluebirds” project technician on the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team. Julia holds a diploma in Applied Coastal Ecology from Northwest Community College and a B.Sc. in Geography from the University of Victoria. She enjoys exploring and studying nature and puttering away in her garden in Victoria, British Columbia. Julia will continue working with GOERT on the Western Bluebird reintroduction project through an internship position that begins in the fall of 2012.

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The Missouri Bluebird Society 2012 Conference:  
An Opportunity to Watch, Learn, Explore,  
& Share Great Fellowship  
Sherry Linn

Although I have travelled extensively in the US and lived in three different states, there is a pocket of seven states that I have not set foot in. Missouri sits at the northern edge of that area so I jumped at the opportunity to attend their conference as the timing was perfect for me. The nickname for Missouri is the “Show Me State” and in mid-July they did just that! And they did not disappoint! Once again I had the pleasure of meeting some of the most congenial folks and the hospitality and welcome were heartwarming. Thanks again to Steve and Regina Garr for the special advance trip to the capital building and for giving of time that was precious when they were under the pressure of “getting the show on the road.”

A bit of history: The Missouri Bluebird Society (MOBS) was founded in March 2006. Unlike many bluebird organizations that were formed in an effort to start a conservation effort for native cavity-nesting birds, MOBS recognized the many groups and individuals spread across the state that were already working toward wildlife conservation goals and set out to enhance those efforts through education and informative handouts on bluebirds and cavity nesters. MOBS encourages interested people to provide proper housing and monitoring for bluebirds through a Nestbox Grant Program. MOBS is an integral part of the partnerships developed between the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) and the many like-minded conservation organizations throughout the state.

Jefferson City, the capital of Missouri, is a beautiful setting alongside the Missouri River. The host hotel was only blocks from the capital buildings so the dome of the capital was a beacon and easily recognized landmark to guide me when I took a wrong turn—twice!

The conference program MOBS planned included two birding outings, a dinner to kick things off, and a full Saturday schedule of speakers. They topped previous years’ attendance with 85 registrants representing eight states and one province. During the Friday evening dinner a great treat was the Bluebirds & Friends slide show that played on a huge screen as a backdrop to the activities. All attendees had been asked to submit photos beforehand to be included in the show—a nice touch and a lot of work! The True Blue Service Award has just been created and Jim Rathert was honored as the first recipient. Jim is a Charter member, serves on the Board, and supports MOBS in a variety of activities. I was happy to have time to talk with Jim and enjoy his expertise on the birding tour on Sunday morning.
the nestbox was called a Kinney and was designed back in the early 1950s. [For more information, see the article on page 19—Ed.]

Brad Jacobs from MDC gave an excellent overview of work being conducted on the wintering grounds of many of our migratory birds. I hope he’ll forgive me if my numbers are slightly off, but he advised us that, of the approximately 810 bird species that migrate throughout North America, at least 448 leave the continental US altogether for the winter season. This means that we must do more to support efforts outside of our countries as well as support habitat protection within to ensure the birds can survive and thrive. Learning about the efforts in Central and South America to ensure the birds have habitat and food sources and the partnerships forged with governments and conservation organizations in those locations left me feeling that we truly can make a difference when we look at the whole picture. My hat is off to Brad and the MDC for taking these important steps and demonstrating that money spent outside of the state really does make conservation work.

Dr. David Pitts from Tennessee, whose book was reviewed in the Spring 2012 Bluebird, gave an entertaining and informative talk on some of his findings after 40+ years of being a bluebird landlord and conducting research. He made himself available during the conference for not only book signings, but also to discuss one-on-one with folks who had questions or stories to share. He spent time with some of the fledging bluebirders and as an onlooker you could simply enjoy the rapt looks on both old and young faces as they were deep in conversation. My personal view of his book is that it is one that should be in every bluebird lover’s library. It is interesting and informative—but also leaves you asking more questions and wanting to observe more carefully what happens around the nesting places of your bluebirds. I did just that this past nesting season and it opened yet another world and I learned even more about the Western Bluebirds that occupy my space for six months of the year. If you’ve never seen Dr. Pitts speak to a large audience, you can catch him at the NABS conference in 2013 in South Carolina—I’m already looking forward to hearing him again!

After a delicious lunch, Kris Leech spoke about gardening for wildlife in Missouri. The photos were out of this world and I have come away with many good ideas for additional plantings around my home. If you get an opportunity to take in a talk by master gardeners in your area this winter please don’t miss it. You will learn much about the plants that will attract birds, butterflies, and beneficial insects as well as which plants deter deer and other animals. After all, we need to look at the habitat as a whole, rich ecosystem that supports not only our bluebirds but is integral to our lives as well.

Rich Stanton rounded out the day informing us of how he has researched the possibility of a reintroduction of Brown-headed Nuthatches to Missouri and all the steps that must be considered before any project of this sort can go forward. The information Rich presented tied in nicely with an article by Vickie Fuquay in our NABS Fall 2011 Bluebird on these small cavity-nesting birds. We get a much more complete picture of what is happening with bluebirds and native cavity nesters when we begin to put material from all the sources together. Until I listened to Rich I had not really given a lot of thought to the front-end processes and considerations that extend beyond the scope of habitat and the range of a bird species. He spoke about the interaction of the nuthatches within their own flocks/community and what they require not only of land area and habitat but also the number of birds that would be needed.
to successfully introduce and keep the birds within their new locale. I look forward to the future work this young man may pursue as he starts working toward his next level of education and hope his presentation in Vancouver, BC at the North American Ornithological Conference was a success.

Sunday we enjoyed a bird walk along a greenway where I was treated to Eastern Bluebirds, Northern Cardinals and a new bird for me—an Indigo Bunting. The Painted Bunting that had been sighted escaped us on that day but it was a wonderful way to end my trip spending time with old friends and new before heading back home. Once again I did not come home empty handed … my bluebirds have a new mealworm feeder, my mugs have lovely bluebird-themed spice-filled mats to sit on, and my wallet is a little lighter. Check out MOBS activities at www.missouribluebird.org and plan to attend their conference at Powell Gardens in Kingsville (southeast of Kansas City, MO) in mid-July 2013. Planning is underway for another great event featuring keynote speaker Dave Tylka, author of Native Landscaping for Wildlife and People.

NABS and our Affiliates are a wealth of information and our collaborative efforts are really beginning to shine. If you are a member of an Affiliate, please make sure we have your conference or meeting schedule for 2013 on the NABS website calendar. And if you are planning to make a concerted effort to learn more about your bluebirds this coming year, you will want to try to get to at least one of these events where you will make new friends who will enhance your life and broaden your knowledge. Bluebird folks are the nicest folks I know and you will not be disappointed!

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**Kinney Tree Swallow Nestbox**

Bet Zimmerman

This four-holed box for Tree Swallows was designed by Henry E. Kinney of Massachusetts, and shown in John K. Terres’ book *Songbirds in Your Garden* (1953; updated in 1968). It originally appeared in the *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Audubon Society* (March 1952).

Terres says that the box was designed to “protect young tree swallows from starving and from exposure during spells of rainy and cold spring weather, when they need considerable insect food, which might be difficult for parents to find.” The box has four holes—one that is 1.5” (for adults) and three 1” feeding holes, which allow adults to feed young faster without entering the box. (Some folks use a 3/4” hole for the smaller ones.) This would also help address the tendency of older nestlings to “hole hog.” Kinney found that more nestlings survived in these boxes, and more adults returned to nest in them in the spring than in a conventional single-holed box.

The box also has a “T” perch for guarding, and cleats on the roof to facilitate clinging during windy days. (You might want to leave the porch off, as it could enable predation by larger birds).

More information and plans for this unique nestbox are available online at www.sialis.org/kinney.htm.
Bluebirds, Navajos, and the Special Flour That Binds Them
Brenda M. Martin

The Diné (“The People”), more commonly known as the Navajo, hold the Western Bluebird in high esteem—a great spirit in animal form. Sung about in sacred origin songs (Klah 1942), there is even a “Bluebird Song,” which is sung in both social and ceremonial settings and reinforces the Diné belief that one should wake at dawn and rise to greet the sun (Huenemann 1978):

_Please provide the complete text._

Covering over 27,000 square miles, about the size of West Virginia, the Navajo Nation extends into the states of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico in what is known as the Four Corners Region. The Navajo Nation is also one of the two largest Indian tribes in the country with more than 300,000 enrolled members (the only tribe larger is the Cherokee Nation). Many Navajos still speak only their native language, and most others, although they may be bilingual and bi-cultural, still adhere to their traditional songs, dances, and ceremonies.

Like the Diné, the Western Bluebird is known to be very social, and family plays an important role (Stern et al. 2010). Juvenile bluebirds don’t necessarily “fly the coop” when they “come of age,” but instead may live close to home and maintain an important role in the survival of their extended family members, just as Diné youth often live in multi-generational homes. In turn, this helps to keep Diné language and cultural traditions strong and alive.

One of these traditions is the making of Navajo fry bread, a food that became critical to Diné survival in the late 1800s when they were deprived of their traditional lands and livelihoods. Uprooted and denied the opportunity to subsist on their traditional game, plants, fruits, and herbs, the Diné, like tribal people throughout America, became destitute. To survive, they learned to make an edible staple from the flour, salt, lard, and baking powder doled out by the US Army. Over time, fry bread became a part of American Indian culture, a symbol of nurture and neighborliness in almost every tribe.

Although fry bread is not unique to the Diné, what is unique about Diné fry bread is the commitment to using Blue Bird Flour produced by the Cortez Milling Company in Cortez, Colorado. The flour is favored because of the remarkable elasticity it endows to dough, which allows it to be stretched to just the right thickness for fry bread.

The Blue Bird brand was created in the 1930s, but it was 1964 when Halworth Tanner started running the Cortez Milling Company. His grandsons are the current owners; they say, “It’s our philosophy that it’s their (Diné) flour and we make it for them” (Calvin 2010). Blue Bird is the only flour produced by the company that is completely packaged in cloth sacks, and the company may be the last in the country to use cloth sacks. The sacks often find themselves repurposed into aprons, tote bags, dish cloths, bandages, and diapers, among other things. The sacks even inspire Diné carvers, beaders, and painters.

Once serving more than 150 trading posts, the company now primarily stocks big chain stores in the Four Corners region with their 5-, 10-, and 20-

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1 To hear the Navajo “Bluebird Song” go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDUhfbFfd1s. More information can also be found on page 3 of the document at this website: www.newworldrecords.org/linernotes/80406.pdf.
pound sacks. And it’s not only the Diné who have adopted Blue Bird Flour. The Hopi, a tribe located in northeastern Arizona in the midst of the Navajo Nation, value the flour so highly that they are known to give away 200 to 300 sacks of it as gifts to wedding guests (Calvin 2010).

Needless to say, the Tanners work long hours to meet the high demand for Blue Bird Flour. To place an order from Cortez Milling Company, go to www.cortezmilling.com.

And for a good laugh, go to www.frybreadmovie.com/#da3/custom_plain to watch the trailer for the 2012 comedic feature film, More Than Frybread, a “mockumentary” about a fictional frybread competition.

References

Brenda Martin (Potawatomi) is a cultural anthropologist and cultural resources consultant living in the Four Corners region of New Mexico.

Traditional Navajo Fry Bread

16 handfuls of Blue Bird Flour
3 small handfuls of baking powder
2 tablespoons of salt
1-2 teapots of hot water
lard for frying

Mix the dry ingredients. Add just enough hot water to make a dough—not too sticky and not too dry. Mix with your hands as you add water. Knead until the dough feels smooth and falls away from your hands. Cover and let rest for a couple of hours.

Pinch off a piece of dough the size of a large egg and flatten it by hand until it is about the size of a donut. Then pick it up and pat it between your hands, stretching it thin, like pizza dough. Place it carefully into heated lard.

Let cook until brown on the first side. If your lard is hot enough this will cook quickly. Flip and cook on the other side. Drain on paper towels.

Serve with a little salt sprinkled on top to accompany mutton stew. For a “Navajo Taco,” top with seasoned ground beef or bison, beans, cheese, lettuce, tomato, onion, salsa, and sour cream. You can even serve it as a dessert by topping with honey or sugar.
Remembering Lloyd Wilson
5 July 1923 – 4 July 2012

We are sad to announce the passing of long time NABS member and supporter Lloyd Wilson of Godfrey, Illinois. His longtime love of bluebirds began back in the 1950s when a story appeared in the local paper about bluebirds nesting along a mail route. Then in 1977, when the article about “bringing back the bluebirds” written by Dr. Lawrence Zeleny came to his attention, Lloyd went into action and got involved. He began building nestboxes and giving them to people who showed interest and promised to care for the birds who occupied them. He used wood from packing crates and soon found a source for metal for the roofs. He never charged for his nestboxes, building and giving away well over 1000 in the past 35 years.

Once, when asked about the return of the bluebird to areas where they had not been seen for decades, Lloyd told a reporter from the Alton, IL Telegraph that “they haven’t come back because there was a change in the habitat. The only reason we’re seeing more bluebirds is because people are working with them.” Folks knew Lloyd locally as “The Bluebird Man” but his reputation within the bluebird community extended well beyond the East Central Illinois Bluebird Society and the borders of Illinois. As a great bluebird ambassador, Lloyd went far and wide speaking about bluebirds and presenting the NABS slide show interspersed with local photos donated from friends. He would speak at any opportunity that presented itself—young folks at 4H, Girl Scouts, and Boy Scouts were a specialty.

Lloyd’s family and our NABS family will miss this gentle man who loved bluebirds and did so much to ensure their survival for future generations to enjoy. We thank the family for thinking of NABS in this difficult time and thank those who donated in his honor and memory.

Bluebirds vs. Extreme Weather
Betty Ebert

On June 29, 2012, after record-breaking heat of 104 degrees, one of the most destructive complexes of thunderstorms in recorded history swept through the entire DC area. Packing wind gusts of 60–80 mph, the storm produced extensive damage, downed hundreds of trees, and left more than 1 million area residents without power.

The impact of the storms affected wildlife as well, including our bluebird pair. They had been working on their second brood—had four eggs in the nestbox (a great achievement considering the continuing battle with House Sparrows). The morning after the storm, we looked around for damage. The bluebird nest and eggs were lying on the ground near the nestbox—the wind and rains were so strong they had blown the nestbox door open and the nest and eggs fell out! My husband gathered up the nesting material, re-formed it, and put the eggs back in. While he was doing this, a distressed Mr. and Mrs. Bluebird hovered. They immediately started tending the nest.

Would the eggs still be viable?? They had spent the stormy night on the ground! I contacted several sources for more info. The consensus was ... maybe.

July 6: Two eggs hatched! Two not hatched. Will this heat wave affect the babies?? Will they fledge?

July 11: Two babies four days old and thriving. Two eggs not viable.

July 22: The two babies are now 16 days old. We see their blue feathers! Fledging should be soon!

July 24: They fledged!! Considering the storms and the record-breaking heat we are thrilled that two out of four made it!

July 28: Mr. and Mrs. Bluebird are rebuilding the nest—a third brood?? Never had that happen in our area!

August 2: Two eggs.

August 5: Four eggs!

September 2: Happy ending to this saga—the four bluebirds in the third brood fledged over Labor Day weekend. A symbolic ending?
Extinct Birds: Gone but not Forgotten
The extinct cavity-nesting Carolina Parakeet has been immortalized in bronze by artist Todd McGrain. The bronze parakeet sculpture, and sculptures of four other extinct North American birds, each up to six feet tall, have been installed in the locations where the last members of each species were known to live; the Carolina Parakeet sculpture is in Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, north of Okeechobee, Florida. “These birds are not commonly known and they ought to be, because forgetting is another kind of extinction,” McGrain said. “It’s such a thorough erasing.” Learn more online at www.lostbirdproject.org.

European Starlings and House Sparrows Declining, Just Not Here
The British Trust for Ornithology reports that European Starling populations are in a freefall in the United Kingdom. Since 1979, the population has dropped by 80%. Across the whole of Europe the population has declined by a staggering 40 million birds in that time. House Sparrow populations are down in the UK, too, with only one-third as many birds present now as in the early 1970s. For both species, the culprit seems to be habitat loss due to intensive agriculture and shrinking green spaces in cities.

Save Cavity-nesting Birds from a Gruesome Death
In recent issues of Bluebird we have raised the issue of cavity-nesting birds becoming trapped in all sorts of open pipes, where they die a slow death from starvation or dehydration. Now comes news of another danger: small, cavity-nesting owls such as Boreals and Saw-whets are entering the vent pipes of outdoor vault toilets, slipping down the pipe to the collecting vault, and becoming trapped in the effluent. Fortunately, the good folks at the Teton Raptor Center worked with a leading manufacturer of these toilets to design a simple screen to fit over the vent pipe. The Port-O-Potty Owl Project (PoO-PoO Project, for short) is busy fitting screens to scores of vault toilets at campgrounds and trailheads in Wyoming. But thousands more of these toilets across the country need screens. To receive an information packet about the screens, contact: Teton Raptor Center, P.O. Box 1805, Wilson, WY 83014; 307-203-2551; www.tetonraptorcenter.org.

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!

With the recent passing of Andy Griffith and George “Goober” Lindsey, it seems fitting to showcase Mayberry’s “Blue Bird Diner.” Viewers of the old Andy Griffith TV show may remember that Barney’s never-seen love interest, Juanita, was a waitress at the diner (Barney would phone her from the sheriff’s office and serenade her). This version of the show’s diner can be found in Mt. Airy, North Carolina, where the town of Mayberry has been recreated. Photo by ucumcari / Flickr

NABS member Nancy Diefenderfer spotted this attractive sign near her home in the Denver area. The company conducts sales to liquidate entire estates or to simply help folks who want to downsize. Given the excellent choice of a company name and the attractive artwork, it’s no surprise to learn that the owner of Bluebird Estate Liquidation is an artist.

Carolyn Perkins submitted this image, with this description: “Connecticut recently announced a new $2 instant scratch lottery ticket and my first purchase was a $10 winner. Not only are bluebirds pretty, they are lucky as well!”
Bluebirds that nest in Wisconsin are subject to cold temperatures in early spring. Recently, erratic weather patterns have caused heat cycles that reach 100° F and higher. Temperatures of 107° F and higher are considered lethal to eggs or hatchlings (Zeleny 1968). More recently Marking and Koperski (2012) summarized temperature results inside of NABS-style bluebird boxes that were occupied by nesting bluebirds. With ambient temperature of 99° F, the presence of five nine-day nestlings contributed about 6° F to the standard non-vented box.

Ambient temperatures of 100° F or higher would most likely become lethal to 12-day and older nestlings in non-vented boxes. However, vented control boxes were found to be cooler than the ambient temperature of 100° F by an average of nearly 8° F, and cooler than the non-vented control boxes by an average of 4.7° F. Optional venting was promoted as the method of choice to overcome heat mortality in bluebird nestboxes.

Convertible NABS-style boxes were used in the temperature research project to provide options to vent boxes on-site as desired. The Brice Prairie Conservation Association (www.briceprairieconservation.org) has produced only convertible boxes for our members and for sale the last four or five years. Thousands of bluebird boxes exist in Wisconsin that were not constructed convertible so procedures are sought to offer relief from overheating in all types of boxes. Perhaps those boxes could be modified in a simple manner to become convertible?

The convertible NABS-style box is constructed with dimensional cedar lumber that is 7/8-inch thick. The roof is 8-inch stock, the front and back are 6-inch stock, and the side panels are ripped to 5-inch width. Waste from side panels is ideal for making cover strips over permanent vents on existing boxes. Floors are cut to size that results from the dimensional material. The roofs and floors are fastened only to the front and back panels. Side panels are fastened only to the front and back with screws that can be withdrawn to lower them in order to create the 1/2-inch vent as needed. Pilot holes should be drilled to prevent splitting in the conversion process.

The NABS box plan promoted by NABS founder Lawrence Zeleny required vents under the roof line. We constructed hundreds of boxes with permanent vents, which seemed appropriate for most of the areas where bluebirds nest, but our club members suspected cold mortality of eggs and nestlings some years in early spring in Wisconsin. In addition, we discovered the vents were perhaps making the nestlings more vulnerable to Black Fly attacks. Hence, we decided to cover the vents in spring and remove the covers when heat cycles threatened. The 1/2-inch-thick cover strips were made out of waste from ripping the side panels, fastened originally with small nails, but now screws are preferred for optional venting.
Many boxes were also constructed without vents when cold temperatures were suspected to be lethal to some eggs and nestlings. Those boxes are difficult to disassemble without wrecking the material. We demonstrated a procedure to pry the roof away from the front panel, insert a 1/2-inch block of waste cedar, and place a screw through the roof, through each block, and into the front panel to ensure the vent is stable. This procedure provides venting from both sides and the front, and the procedure can be reversed as desired. This treatment prevents rain from entering and was about as effective for venting heat as the full side vents.

These three options are especially appropriate for a NABS-style box, but the treatments should be applicable to other box plans. We prefer to use screws rather than nails in the original construction and also with alterations to simplify any additional modification or replacements. For instance, the vents could be created by drilling holes to offer air exchange. Then cover strips could be installed for cold cycles in early spring. The important factor for eliminating heat is placement of vents at the highest level because heat rises. Twelve-day and older nestlings are most vulnerable to heat mortality because they contribute heat to the box interior. Proper vents offer a chimney effect where the warm air is exhausted, eliminating the higher temperatures.

References
Can nestling bluebirds make themselves heard in an increasingly noisy world?
Bluebirds are devoted parents, regularly bringing tasty bugs to the nest to quiet their squawking brood. But what if the parents can’t hear the begging calls of their young? We know from studies of other species that human-caused noise can be so loud that it interferes with parent-nestling communication:
A study of House Sparrows in England found that females in noisy areas visited their nests less frequently and fed their young less frequently than did females in quiet areas; as a result, nestboxes in noisy areas produced fewer young.

A number of factors can limit the distance that sounds carry, including humidity, obstructions such as vegetation, and interference from other noises, whether natural or human-caused. Researchers in Virginia tested some of these factors to find out how bluebirds using nestboxes are affected.

To their surprise, they found that bluebird nestlings do not turn up the volume on their begging calls when there is more outside noise, such as from automobile traffic. Nor do they call longer or more frequently. The chicks do increase the intensity of their calling when temperature and humidity increase, so they are certainly capable of changing their pattern of begging. Apparently, the nestbox muffles much of the outside noise, so the young in the nest aren’t even aware that it is noisier than normal outside. (By the way, the test results showed that the nestbox materials used—cedar, plywood, pine, or PVC—all muffled outside noise equally.)

This failure of bluebird nestlings to beg louder and longer in noisy environments could be a problem for nestboxes placed near roads, machinery, or in other locations where constant noise might make it difficult for parents to hear the begging calls. Switching to a different nestbox material won’t help, since any nestbox material will muffle the outside noise. A nestbox monitor’s only option might be to relocate nestboxes away from noisy areas.

Could the use of decoys and taped calls convince Chimney Swifts to use artificial towers?
Originally, Chimney Swifts roosted and nested on the vertical surfaces inside large, hollow trees. With the removal of mature forest across most of the species’ range, the swift adopted the next best thing: human-built chimneys and other tall, hollow structures. However, Chimney Swift populations have been declining, for reasons that are not clear. One school of thought maintains that the birds are not finding enough suitable sites for nesting and roosting.

To address this possibility, some conservation groups have been building artificial towers, open at the top and hollow inside, with roughened walls to allow swifts to cling to the vertical surfaces. However, the towers have had variable success, with some adopted by breeding pairs or utilized for roosting by migrating swifts, while others sit empty and ignored.

Purple Martin landlords know that birds can be attracted to unoccupied nesting sites by employing decoys and taped calls. Passing birds are attracted to a site they might otherwise bypass, and (hopefully) they will like it enough to settle down.

In a study involving Chimney Swifts in southern Ontario, decoys and recorded calls did succeed in attracting swifts to artificial towers, but none of the towers was occupied by swifts during the course of the study. Apparently, either the birds need more than one season of attraction to a site before they will accept it, or the towers are lacking something that swifts need. Given that the towers were designed for use in the warm Texas climate, a modified design may

be necessary for use in Ontario, the northern limit of the species’ range.


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**Fledgling Woodpeckers: Tough or lucky?**

One of the basic tenets of ornithology is the idea that young birds are more likely to die in the first few weeks after fledging than at any other time in their development. This has been confirmed in many species—among some birds, half of the fledglings die in the first month after leaving the nest. Young, inexperienced birds out on their own for the first time are highly susceptible to starvation, predation, and accidents.

A recent study was the first to radio-track fledgling Red-bellied Woodpeckers to see if they follow this same pattern of mortality. The birds were fitted with lightweight radio transmitters while still in the nest, then tracked for 22 weeks after fledging. Remarkably, they showed extremely high rates of survival—twice as high as for some other species. Only Red-cockaded Woodpecker fledglings had a comparably high survival rate.

One reason the Red-bellied Woodpecker fledglings have such high survival rates is their acceptance of a broad range of habitats and foods. Bird species that are specialists are limited to finding food and shelter within their narrow niche, while generalists can fulfill their needs in a variety of ways. Also, cavity nesters in general have a longer developmental period in the nest than do open-cup nesters, which means cavity nesters may be more mature and have better flight skills by the time they leave the nest. This would translate into enhanced ability to evade predators and avoid collisions with tree limbs, cars, etc.

Additional research on other woodpecker species, and on other cavity-nesting species, should shed more light on this phenomenon.


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**Are Tree Swallow populations declining, or just moving?**

Populations of birds that eat flying insects have been dropping at an alarming rate, especially in northeastern North America. Birds in this group include swifts, flycatchers, kingbirds, Purple Martin, and swallows. Researchers held a special conference to discuss the declines this past spring in Canada (a follow-up to a similar conference held in 2009), and a number of publications have addressed the topic.

One of the most ambitious efforts analyzed data from long-running Tree Swallow nest-study sites across the continent. The results reinforced previous findings that Tree Swallows are declining in the northeast, but also revealed the unexpected finding that the species is increasing in other parts of its range. Specifically, all six study sites that were in the northeast had declining trends, while four of the ten sites elsewhere in North America had increasing trends.

While this article provides good news about Tree Swallow population growth in parts of their range, it doesn't shed any light on why the species is declining in the northeast. Several potential causes have been suggested, including forest regeneration and maturation (which close off the open forest structure favored by Tree Swallows), climate change (causing life cycles of insect prey to be out of sync with the timing of Tree Swallow nesting cycles), and acid precipitation (which reduces calcium availability for insects, which results in calcium deficiencies in birds). However, each of these explanations falls short in one aspect or another, leaving researchers scratching their heads about the declines.

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