## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring Message to Our Affiliate Organizations - Phil Berry</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the President - Sherry Linn</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Managing Editor - Scott W. Gillihan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notices from NABS Affiliates</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NABS Research Grants Approved by Board of Directors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Let Your Bluebird Trail Become Ho-Hum (Boring) - Dean C. Rust</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanglefoot Problems and an Alternative - Barbara Chambers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nest Sites Set in Stone - Scott W. Gillihan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If You Build It They Will Adapt - John Layton</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep Bluebirds Safe—Minnesota Style - Tom Comfort</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo Gallery</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avian Advice and Adventures - Maureen Eiger</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NABS Conference 2014</td>
<td>Insert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Gilbertson on the Gilwood Nestbox - Fred Stille</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing for American Kestrels - Dick Tuttle</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Memory - Sherry Linn</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo Gallery</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Have Bird House Designs Changed? - Tom Comfort</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must-Have Nestbox Book - Scott W. Gillihan</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BluesNews</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluebirds Everywhere</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Review - Scott W. Gillihan</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliates of the North American Bluebird Society</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Cover photo:
Chris Earley took this photo of a pair of Eastern Bluebirds who found a unique way to quench their thirst. Snow melting from the top of the statue was trickling down the sides and dripping off each earlobe—the birds captured each drop as it formed. Pretty clever drinking fountain! Photo taken at the University of Guelph Arboretum in Ontario, Canada, where Chris is the interpretive biologist. You can view more of Chris’s bluebird photos at www.flickr.com/photos/52649814@N05/sets/72157640534883765/

### Table of Contents photo:
Boreal Owl, Two Harbors, Minnesota, by Greg Schechter
Spring Message to Our Affiliate Organizations

Phil Berry

Welcome to Spring! It has been a long winter for most of us, including here in NW Florida. My bluebirds are far behind the normal pattern for this time of year. I hope we didn’t lose too many in the colder parts of the country with such cold weather and heavy snow.

Our Spring message is going to be a bit different in that we are having our NABS Annual Meeting in the middle of our nesting season rather than the fall. We are meeting in Boise, Idaho, June 13–15. For all the details and information on how to get everything done, turn to the center of this issue of Bluebird or go to the NABS website and download the information you need to get registered. We will be treated to a pre-introduction of the new movie, Bluebird Man, hosted by Wild Lens, Inc., done in Boise, along with field trips including a bluebird trail. There will also be an option to see hummingbird banding. All the information and paperwork you need can be found on our website, www.NABluebirdSociety.org.

We are working in collaboration with the Golden Eagle Audubon Society to help continue the conservation work of southern Idaho’s bluebird populations begun in the late 1970s by Alfred and Hilda Larson.

Looking forward to a great bluebird year for all of us, and we hope to see you in Boise (The City of Trees) in June.

Sincerely,

Phil Berry
NABS Vice President - Affiliate Relations

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
Old Man Winter can go back to the North Pole anytime he wants! Although my winter has not been as extreme as some of you are experiencing, I am certainly ready for my bluebirds to return. If we think the weather was tough on us—just think about our feathered friends! I have had numerous emails from throughout the Midwest and Northeast expressing concerns about how many birds will be returning and what shape they will be in for the breeding season. Please keep us posted if you see a drastic downturn in your area because these weather events are going to be a major problem in future years too.

I’d like to extend a warm welcome to all our new members across the continent. Our Life member numbers have grown with the addition of Madison Alderson (FL), William Bahr (MO), Susan Lordi Marker (MO), and John Schuster (CA). Our Zeleny Fund benefits greatly from these memberships and they enable us to continue supporting research of native cavity-nesting birds through our grant program. In late January the Board accepted the Grant Committee recommendations for nine research projects that involve all three species of bluebirds, Acorn Woodpeckers, Carolina Chickadees, and swallows (see notice on page 4). Project extracts will be posted on the NABS website very soon.

Reflecting on Our History
As we approach our 36th anniversary this March, it is interesting to reflect on our reason for being and how things have changed over the years. Today, some areas have been very successful in recovering bluebird populations to a point where some folks consider them “common”; some of us continue to struggle to keep the current populations stable; while still other areas have experienced fairly steep declines over the past ten to fifteen years and try to understand where the problems lie for these birds—is it in the breeding territory or along the migration routes?

I would like to thank the NABS Board of the day from back in 1999–2000 for having the foresight to see the growth of new like-minded groups springing up across the nation and creating the Affiliate program to bring us together in our common cause. It has changed our role somewhat as we work to support the grassroots action on the ground and, like “Topsy,” we keep growing! A lot of interest has been generated through the expanded distribution of our journal and Fact Sheets and we support Affiliate events with auction items, a variety of handouts, and NABS banners. I would like to thank the Affiliates that also support us through sponsorships as without financial backing, many of the things we do to get the word out about bluebirds and proper nestbox management could not occur. Please check out the listings in the back of this journal and the Calendar of Events on our website. I hope you are able to attend one of the many activities this spring—and perhaps we’ll see each other in Boise, Idaho in June!

Moving into Our Future
Our busy Treasurer, Gwen Tietz, has managed to keep on top of our financials even though she has her own accounting firm to run. Having her expertise with QuickBooks has made our transition from manual bookkeeping to software-based accounting almost painless. Thanks to Jim Engelbrecht we are already prepared to submit our 990 to the IRS and complete the other state filings we must do early in the year. Of course it all begins with you and the interaction we have with Dan Sparks! Dan wears many hats for NABS and I don’t think many members fully recognize how his touch is in just about everything we do. From picking up the mail to depositing your cheques, ensuring the orders are filled and membership information gets quickly sent to Marion Ball in Nebraska, answering the phone and handling the info@nabluebirdsociety.org emails—he does it all. Fortunately we still have Greg Beavers doing background financial work as well and he is readily available to help when needed. He and Dan create the “dynamic duo” in Bloomington for us.

As we enter another busy season of activity with our beloved bluebirds and our behind-the-scenes tasks that keep NABS going strong, I want to thank

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
From the Managing Editor
Scott W. Gillihan

As a native Westerner, I would like to strongly encourage you to attend this year’s NABS meeting. Boise, Idaho (and the West in general) has a lot to offer in terms of scenery, hospitality, culture, and natural history. How can you turn down an opportunity to see Western and Mountain Bluebirds and other cavity nesters of the Rocky Mountains up close? And learn from Al Larson’s many years of experience with those species? And see a special screening of the film *Bluebird Man*? If you’re on the fence about attending, please visit the filmmaker’s website to view clips from the film and get a taste for what this special NABS meeting has in store: www.wildlensinc.org/bluebirdman/

Just one piece of advice if you’re not accustomed to the high elevations and dry climate of the West: Drink lots of water.LOTS! You’ll feel much better.

In the Winter issue, I presented a list of books that could help you pass the long cold winter months while also burnishing your knowledge of bluebirds and the natural world. Of course, it wasn’t possible to include every book ever published on these topics, and I missed some good ones, but I was especially remiss in not including *The Bluebird Book* by Don and Lillian Stokes, which is an excellent source of information for beginners and veterans. My thanks to Dean Sheldon, Jr. for pointing out this omission.

If you’d like to contact one of the authors or photographers whose work appears in this issue, just drop me a line and I’ll forward your message.

My thanks to everyone who contributed articles, photos, and feedback. Thanks also to Doug Rogers (editor of *The Bird Box*, newsletter of the Virginia Bluebird Society), Bill Read (President of the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society) for connecting me with Chris Earley, who provided the cover photo for this issue; and Lauren Kane (for access to scientific journals via BioOne).

As always, please send any photos, articles, or ideas to me at NABSEditor@gmail.com or 5405 Villa View Dr., Farmington, NM 87402.
NABS Grants are funded by an endowment named for our founder, Dr. Lawrence Zeleny. The Zeleny Fund was established to award educational, conservation, or scientific grants to further the purpose and mission of the society. NABS contributes a portion of Life Memberships directly into the endowment and encourages further donations earmarked to the Zeleny Fund in order to help finance worthy research.

The NABS Grant Committee, under the leadership of Anne Sturm, deliberated on applications received in December 2013 and presented their recommendation to the Board in January. There were nine projects reviewed with a total of $9,000 being approved. The following topics are now being researched during the 2014 field study season:

- **Garry Oak Ecosystem Recovery Team**, Southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada: “Reintroduction of Western Bluebirds”
- **Ellis Bird Farm**, Central Alberta, Canada: “Using New Technology to Track Migration and Overwintering Sites of Mountain Bluebirds”
- **Braelei Hardt**, Oregon State University at Corvallis, Oregon: “The Role of Corticosterone in Mediating Escape Performance & Short-Term Memory in Swallows Under Stressful Conditions”
- **Sarah McArthur**, Thompson Rivers University at Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada: “The Relative Influence of Environmental and Genetic Factors on Structural Plumage Colouration in Mountain Bluebirds”
- **Sara Berk**, University of Montana at Missoula, Montana: “Consequences of Nest-Box Placement for the Post-Fledging Period and Adult Condition in Mountain Bluebirds”
- **Anna Brownson**, Old Dominion University at Norfolk, Virginia: “Understanding the Evolution of Cooperation: Dynamics of Mate Choice and Tree Cavity Use in Polyandrous Acorn Woodpecker”
- **Alia White**, University of Northern B.C. at Prince George, British Columbia: “Interactions between Parental Quality and Food Availability: Consequences for Offspring and Reproductive Success of Mountain Bluebirds”
- **Desiree Narango**, University of Delaware at Newark, Delaware: “Does Exotic Vegetation Limit Food Availability for Breeding Birds? A Supplementation Experiment with Carolina Chickadees”
- **Chloe Josefson**, Auburn University at Auburn, Alabama: “Characterization of Sub-Seasonal Fluctuations in the Innate Immune System of Eastern Bluebirds”

Congratulations to all of the awardees!

**Notices from NABS Affiliates**

On Sunday, May 18th 2014, from 1 to 4 p.m., the **Maryland Bluebird Society** will host its 4th annual Bluebirds Forever Festival at Black Hill Regional Park in Boyds, MD. Activities will include bluebird trail hikes, storytimes, games, music, and arts & crafts.

Scheduled presentations include: Homeland Security, Bluebird Style; Bluebirds of the Antietam Battlefield; Who Is Nesting In Your Box/So What If The Bird’s Not Blue; Planting for Bluebirds

Hands-on demonstrations include: Building a Nestbox; Setting up a Nestbox; Hassles with House Sparrows/Traps and Spookers

Exhibits and displays: Maryland Bluebird Society, North American Bluebird Society, Wild Birds Unlimited, Wildlife Photographer Jean Miller

Admission is free and all are welcome. Come join us for an afternoon filled with bluebirds!
**Membership Renewal**

Is it time to renew your membership? Check your mailing label on the back cover for a message!

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### Officials of North American Bluebird Society, Inc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive Committee</th>
<th>Awards Committee</th>
<th>Grants Committee</th>
<th>Nestbox Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sherry Linn - President</td>
<td>Anne Sturm - Chair</td>
<td>Anne Sturm - Chair</td>
<td>Bob Benson - Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil Berry - First VP for Affiliate Relations</td>
<td>Greg Beavers</td>
<td>Greg Beavers</td>
<td>Kevin Berner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Burke - Second VP for Community Relations</td>
<td>Stan Fisher</td>
<td>Kimberly Corwin</td>
<td>Bernie Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Kremnitzer - Secretary</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stan Fisher</td>
<td>Stan Fisher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen Tietz - Treasurer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kathy Kremnitzer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board of Directors</th>
<th>Bluebird Managing Editor</th>
<th>Education Committee</th>
<th>Hotline Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob Benson</td>
<td>Scott W. Gillihan</td>
<td>Bernie Daniel, PhD - Chair</td>
<td>Bob Benson - Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Comfort</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kevin Berner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Cook</td>
<td></td>
<td>Terry Neumeyer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie Daniel</td>
<td></td>
<td>John Schuster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Engelbrecht</td>
<td></td>
<td>Julie Zickefoose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stan Fisher</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bet Zimmerman Smith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim McLochlin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Farrell Roe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Schamberger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Schuster</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Sherd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Sparks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bet Zimmerman Smith</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook Committee</th>
<th>Journal Advisory Committee</th>
<th>Membership Committee</th>
<th>Nominating Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Schamberger - Chair</td>
<td>Tom Comfort - Chair</td>
<td>Marion Ball - Database Admin.</td>
<td>Bob Benson - Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Kremnitzer</td>
<td>Vicki Butler</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kevin Berner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Sparks</td>
<td>Bernie Daniel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bernie Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benjamin Leese</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stan Fisher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dick Tuttle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kathy Kremnitzer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finance Committee</th>
<th>Grants Committee</th>
<th>Nestbox Committee</th>
<th>Nominating Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gwen Tietz - Chair</td>
<td>Anne Sturm - Chair</td>
<td>Bob Benson - Chair</td>
<td>Bob Benson - Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Beavers</td>
<td>Greg Beavers</td>
<td>Kevin Berner</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie Daniel</td>
<td>Kimberly Corwin</td>
<td>Bernie Daniel</td>
<td>Bernie Daniel</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jim Engelbrecht</td>
<td>Stan Fisher</td>
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<td>Stan Fisher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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www.nabluebirdsociety.org  Spring 2014 | Bluebird
For the past 17 seasons I have umpired girls field hockey, both high school and collegiate in Division I, II, & III. In September and October I umpire field hockey games practically every day somewhere in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey or Delaware. My mindset in preparing for each game is to be the best I can possibly be that day—attention to detail, focus, and concentration. I try to enjoy the special moments each day brings. After all, it is a hobby and it needs to be fun!

This same mindset can be applied to bluebird trail monitoring. Checking a trail is not just an “accounting exercise”—How many nestboxes? How many nests? How many eggs? How many chicks? How many nestlings have fledged? Checking a trail should be an art form that utilizes every part of our brain and all our senses to make that trail “the best that it can be.” The birds on your trail deserve the very best; we have an obligation to perform well every time we go out.

OK… How do we do it?

1. If you have a box that is “past its prime,” i.e. leaking, cracking, rotting, and unrepairable, please replace it; either make or buy a new one. Personally, I think bluebirds prefer new construction.

2. If you have a box that has NOT attracted a bluebird for 2 or 3 years, select a better location on your trail and move the box; 15 minutes of your time will accomplish that task.

3. Try different nestbox models; PVC, Troyer slot, Kentucky Bluebird box, Peterson, NABS model, Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania nestbox kit, Carl Little box, etc. It would be a very boring world if we all lived in the same style of house—ranch, two-story, Cape Cod, Saltbox, etc. We could call it “Home Sweet Home in a Smurf Village”!

4. If you have eggs or chicks disappearing on your trail, you need to deploy some predator guard devices; a baffle (cone type or stovepipe), a Noel guard (screened-in porch), or both; if your mother bluebird feels safe in your box, she will return again and again providing many nests and bluebird chicks year after year; if she is terrorized every other night, she won’t stick around very long.

5. Pay attention to ants, wasp nests, earwigs. Your defense system: Diatomaceous earth (food grade) sprinkled underneath the fully-built nest destroys soft-bodied insects like earwigs and blowfly larvae that may have entered the nestbox; Tanglefoot applied to the mounting pole, this sticky substance introduced in 1890 deters insects, especially ants, from reaching the nestbox. [Editor’s note: See the article at right for a different take on Tanglefoot.] Bar soap rubbed on nestbox ceilings prevents wasps from attaching their paper cells—just smashing them is not good enough! Prevent others from moving in.

6. If your box is wet, your nesting material will wick the wetness and that is a bad situation; try to find a solution. Perhaps silicone caulking is needed? Try a molded wood fiber cup; it provides some moisture protection and gives the mother a template in which she can weave her nest of grass or pine needles. Gardeners know these as “Jiffy-pots.” A molded wood fiber nest cup facilitates nest building as well as monitoring activities.

7. After you check your box, give the parents a mealworm treat; place a few worms in a small plastic cup tacked to the roof; they will watch for you each week.

8. Do NOT allow House Sparrows to take up residence on your trail; removing their nests is a start but not the final answer. Learn to
set traps and permanently “relocate” these non-native birds; it takes extra work, but it is so rewarding to know that you have made your bluebird’s world safer.

9. Use passive measures to discourage the House Sparrow: PVC boxes are not preferred by House Sparrows; add a 2x4” block to existing wood boxes (cut to fit the floor) to “shrink” the compartment space; try a "sparrow spooker" after the first bluebird egg is laid.

10. Add a “special box” to your trail each year and carefully select just the right spot. A couple of weeks ago I was at Susquehannock State Park and took a walk before starting my trail; I was in a camping area and a male bluebird sang to me the whole time I was there. You guessed it—I placed a nestbox in that area; perhaps he was already happy in a natural cavity, but now he has a choice.

11. Check to make sure the ventilation holes or spaces under the roof are adequate. When those 100-degree days come, three or four in succession, box temperatures can go above 106 degrees—that can be lethal. Try cooling inserts on the floor—concrete, tile, marble, or stone, ¾–1¼” thick & cut to floor dimension might just reduce the ambient temps in the box a couple degrees.

12. When monitoring your trail, carry a trash bag with you for litter you may find. It’s also, a good place to put old nests after the nestlings fledge or for House Sparrow nests and/or eggs you want to discard discreetly; you never know who might be watching. Go to Lowe’s and buy a Grip n’ Grab to save your back and look professional at bagging trash; remove all trash, aluminum cans and litter from your trails.

Tweak is a word that comes to mind. Tweaks are any small modifications intended to improve a system. We need to constantly make changes or modifications to enhance the character of our trails. This should be our goal every time we visit our trails. Remember, you don’t have to do 1 thing 100% better to be successful, but 100 things 1% better.

What a great hobby we all enjoy with bluebirds AND it is great exercise. HAPPY BLUEBIRDING!

Dr. Dean C. Rust is President of the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania (www.thebsp.org).

Please remove all Tanglefoot from your buckets and monitoring equipment. It is dangerous to wildlife. It would NEVER get off an animal’s coat or a bird’s feathers.

The main reason to not use Tanglefoot is that any animal that comes in contact with it is doomed to a slow death. If it gets on a bird’s feathers, or on the hair of a squirrel or mouse, or on a snake, they will not be able to get it off and it will get in their mouth as they try to remove it. The Tanglefoot will stick in their mouth and choke them or prevent them from getting food or water—an agonizing death. We are killing one animal to save another. Not a great bargain.

In its place, please purchase a jar of Vaseline and use that on the pole to block the way up the pole for ants. The Vaseline will eventually rub or wash off of an animal and, if they lick it, it will go through their digestive system and not cause choking or asphyxiation.

Use the Vaseline ONLY when there is an ant problem or you know that the box is in a problem place for ants. Use any reasonable method to put a good glob all around the pole, up under the snake guard only. Lift the snake guard up as far as it will go to be sure that the guard will cover the Vaseline when lowered.

Tanglefoot Problems and an Alternative

Barbara Chambers

[Editor’s note: This article originally appeared in a slightly different format in the Fall 2012 issue of The Bird Box, newsletter of the Virginia Bluebird Society. It is reprinted here with permission. Barbara Chambers was a NABS board member and longtime champion of bluebirds known and respected for her knowledge of good nestbox trail management; she passed away in October 2012.]
Our public library holds a big book sale each fall. I look forward to this event with great anticipation because of the fun of standing elbow-to-elbow with other bibliophiles for hours as we pick and paw through thousands of used books to find the occasional gem. And you can’t beat the prices: $1 per hardback and 50¢ per paperback.

At last year’s sale I picked up a number of natural history books, including the classic *Wild America* by Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher. This book chronicles an epic birding trip around North America taken by these two great naturalists in the 1950s. It’s fascinating to read about the state of the natural world in those days and compare it to today.

One thing that has probably not changed since then, or at least not very much, is some of the geology they encountered. When they traveled through Oregon, for instance, they visited Crater Lake National Park.

Their route took them along Pinnacles Road, named for the vertical stone spires created as erupting lava flowed up through vertical gas vents during some long-ago volcanic event. As softer lava around the vertical vents eroded away by wind and rain, these pinnacles were left standing.

Some of the pinnacles are partially or completely hollow inside, and some are pockmarked with small openings or cavities. Peterson and Fisher noted that the park’s naturalist, Donald Farner, had found birds nesting in some of these cavities in the early 1950s. Mountain Chickadees, Violet-green Swallows, and Mountain Bluebirds had all been observed carrying small food items into these stone dwellings. If you’re curious, Mr. Farner’s brief report is available online at www.craterlakeinstitute.com/online-library/nature-notes/vol18-wheeler-creek-pinnacles-p.htm

I searched online but could not find any more recent references to birds nesting in these pinnacles. Perhaps some ambitious NABS members in the Crater Lake area could visit this spring and search for such nests and provide us an update. Given the enduring nature of stone, one would expect that the cavities are still available and birds would still be using them.

In addition to finding out if bluebirds persist in nesting here, it would be especially fitting to find House Wrens. After all, their scientific name, *Troglodytes*, means “cave dweller.”
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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
During the early years of the 2000s, the township where I live (Egg Harbor Township in southern New Jersey) was hit with a major housing boom. This boom was manifested in more than 45 housing projects. When each project is completed at least one storm-water retention basin is mandatory. The basins must be fenced and must be completely drained within four days after the end of any storm.

After contacting the Atlantic Audubon Society and finding that I was a member with a successful 62-box bluebird trail, the Township Environmental and Beautification Committee asked me if I thought it would be feasible to install nestboxes at the retention basins. After inspecting the basins I had my doubts given the suburban setting, but I decided to give it a try.

My first year I built and installed nestboxes at nine locations. In three weeks, six boxes were occupied and bluebirds were busy building nests. That year 36 chicks were banded and fledged. So much for me being skeptical!

As I monitored the boxes people from the neighborhood would come up to me to ask questions, so I would explain about bluebirds and monitoring. I would open the boxes and show all stages of nesting, from nest starts to banding and fledging. The people really took to this method and frequently will call me whenever they see anything questionable.

I call them my "neighborhood watch committee."

Over the past four years the trail has been very successful with an average of 116 chicks, banded and fledged, plus other cavity nesters each year.

So I say, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

John Layton is a founder of the New Jersey Bluebird Society and currently serves as their treasurer. He is also a member of NABS (15 years), the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, and the Atlantic Audubon Society. In addition to the 28-box trail mentioned in this article, John manages a 90-box trail. Since he started monitoring and banding he has fledged more than 2,000 bluebird chicks.

One of the nestboxes adjacent to a storm-water retention basin (the area beyond the fence).

Many of the nestboxes are close to sidewalks and streets, yet the bluebirds don't seem to mind. The storm-water retention basin is to the left, outside the frame of this photo.
Keep Bluebirds Safe—Minnesota Style
Tom Comfort

My first bluebird conference was a Bluebird Recovery Program EXPO in Minnesota. I have never been the same. This Audubon Chapter was established back in 1979 by pioneers in the restoration of bluebirds, including the often-admired and appreciated Dick Peterson. Like NABS, it was a handful of concerned and caring individuals with a mission statement that begins, “To Encourage, Inspire, Educate, and Assist…” I have seen examples of how Bluebird Recovery Program (BBRP) accomplishes this, many times.

My first experience at an EXPO (and as a visitor from Michigan) was so inspiring that the day left me a babbling idiot! The dinner that evening was our first meeting of the wonderful parents of our future daughter-in-law. Unfortunately, my focus was on telling everyone what I had just learned and what wonderful people I had just met!! These friends will always be special to me. We continue to share and learn from one another.

I have recognized some rather unique BBRP methods to help their mission to “sustain a healthy and expanding population of bluebirds and other cavity nesters.” One of the fairly new educational and instructional tools is their brochure Top Ten Tips For Successful Bluebirding. The first of these ten tips is actually more like a pledge: “COMMITMENT: Commit to opening and checking the contents AT LEAST once a week during nesting season.” This tip ends with, “Do not install nestboxes if you cannot make this commitment.” This is the first tip for successful bluebirding and the basis of the BBRP philosophy that comes, in part, from an extraordinary recovery from a devastating decline in their annual bluebird fledging count.

The ninth tip: “KEEP BLUEBIRDS SAFE: Volunteer to help move, remove or remount boxes that are poorly placed and/or improperly mounted. This may be as important as installing new boxes to help the bluebird population.” They also note the importance of repairing or removing nestboxes that are badly damaged and no longer provide safe nesting cavities.

The lead paragraph of the Keeping Bluebirds Safe flyer states: “Recognizing the problem of abandoned trails, unmonitored boxes and the ongoing threat they pose for bluebirds. The BBRP are taking down poorly mounted and placed nestboxes across the State of Minnesota. Through the Keeping Bluebirds Safe program [which was spearheaded in 2008 by Keith Radel, Loren ‘Murph’ Murphy, Carrol Johnson, and Lance Krogg], BBRP members can earn an annual patch” by successfully achieving the Keeping Bluebirds Safe goals (for details, visit their website at www.bbrp.org).

The closing statement of the flyer comes from Nicholas A. Zbiciak: “Nature is NOT putting up boxes for the birds to nest in. Putting up a box is interfering with nature. With that intervention comes responsibility.”

My friends in Minnesota have taught me how reverently they promote this responsibility and if you won’t make the commitment to checking nestboxes, PLEASE don’t provide nestboxes for any bird.

I spoke with my friends Keith, Murph, and Carrol about how they recognized the need for this program, how to measure the success of these goals, and what have been the reactions of the owners of nestboxes they knew were detrimental to the success of bluebird preservation.

What happened to initiate these efforts to remove, repair, replace, or relocate bluebird nestboxes?

Carrol Johnson told me of the bluebird fledging data in Minnesota that showed a significant decline in the mid to late 1990s — almost twenty years after the founding of the BBRP. In the beginning, there were major efforts to promote nestbox building, and bluebird recovery efforts did not focus on education; rather, there was more of an emphasis on “the more nestboxes, the better” approach, a fallacy that took a while to recognize and years to recover from. It became apparent that

www.nabluebirdssociety.org

Tom Comfort

Keith Radel presenting “Murph” Murphy with the BBRPs “Bluebird Hall of Fame” award for fledging 1,048 bluebirds in 2012. Note the arm patches on both. Photo by Ardy Murphy.
the early efforts to supplement the meager supply of natural cavities with nestboxes (an effort started over a half century before NABS or BBRP were founded) was an unsupervised blitz of random nestbox building and placement; the often poorly mounted boxes became “raccoon feeders.” These early efforts of bluebird recovery encouraged the placement of many boxes and there was little attention to monitoring or inspecting those boxes. This overabundance of boxes placed too closely or in poor habitat often supported competitive species and species that destroyed bluebirds or their eggs.

Carrol Johnson: “We recognized that we had to get down inadequate houses or good houses that were in bad habitat. The houses could have been in good habitat years ago and the habitat changed over those many years.”

This small band of BBRP members saw a need to address a variety of bluebird trails. Fortunately, Minnesota State Parks were easy to access and park managers were quite accepting of their requests to remove or relocate old boxes with safer boxes mounted on predator-resistant poles (Gilbertson ½-inch conduit/rebar system). All agree that Dick Peterson preached the importance of checking inside the nestbox (and dealing with the issues) and this was more important than what kind of nestbox was used ... as long as the box stayed dry inside!

**How well do you think the efforts of Keep Bluebirds Safe has helped the recovery rates in Minnesota?**

Keith Radel commented that a number of the revitalized state parks were now fledging hundreds of bluebirds every year when, before the effort to remove, relocate, and remount nestboxes, there were virtually zero bluebirds. When I asked Keith about the challenges of addressing the issue of private properties hosting obvious “problem” nestboxes, he said, “It is difficult and you have to get out of your comfort zone.” Approaching neighbors about their clusters of nasty old nestboxes that no one is paying any attention to can be a real challenge.

Murph told me about a gentleman he approached in his county. “The guy had 7 acres with about 150 of those little garden/wren houses... He came to a BBRP EXPO, went home with an armload of good nestboxes and poles, ...plugged his old boxes, joined BBRP, got a ‘patch,’ and raised over a dozen successful nests in the first year.” I guess that is a reasonable measure of success!

**Do you find resistance from property owners to letting BBRP members remove, repair, replace, or relocate bluebird nestboxes?**

All the guys had similar reactions. They are motivated by what they know is best for the recovery of bluebirds in Minnesota. And they are realistic that not everyone is accepting of change. Perhaps, over time, the owners will “see the light” or maybe a different approach will be the key.

Murph told me, “If you can, get them to talk to you about bluebirds... and get permission to look in the nestboxes. Then, show them or tell them what you see and what it may mean to the success or failure of the bluebirds. Ask them to allow you to fix or replace the nestboxes.” For Murph, this technique works quite well. If you spend any time listening to his passion for bluebirds, you will agree that Murph is quite persuasive.

Keith said that sometimes he will drive past a group of boxes for a long time without stopping. “It was like that steering wheel had a lock on it.” But when he thinks of a good way to approach the owners, Keith can also be quite persuasive and often succeeds in making a change as well as probably recruiting a new BBRP member!

When I asked Carrol Johnson about resistant owners, he said, “We can do only what we can do... and hope for the best for the next one.” He noted that most people accept the request to look in a nestbox. From my own experience, owners are quite curious about what we see and report back to them. I am prepared to offer a replacement box and conduit/rebar pole when I approach a land owner. Carrol noted that
BBRP gets gracious support from a sportsman’s club that helps with funding of nestboxes and poles for public land trails. He has had tremendous success with renovating the Root River Bike Trail (63 miles) and appreciates the support for the materials to get that project done.

Earning the Keep Bluebirds Safe patch and yearly bar demonstrates my dedication to making the effort to correct a bad situation for bluebirds and make it better, if at all possible. “I pick my targets with care but I am convinced that I am rewarded with a dramatic increase in bluebird recovery,” Carroll told me.

The BBRP annual fledging count has recovered quite well from the down swing of some 15 years ago. Unfortunately, the snowstorm of May 2013 was devastating to the population of bluebirds in southeastern Minnesota, a very highly productive area. The recovery efforts will be that much more important and the BBRP membership knows what it will take to get the job done. I am sure their bluebirds will recover.

Once again, a few bluebird pioneers lead the way to “encourage, inspire, educate and assist individuals and organizations to become actively involved in the restoration and preservation efforts to sustain a healthy and expanding population of bluebirds and other native cavity nesters.”

For more information about the Keep Bluebirds Safe program or the Top Ten Tips, visit BBRP’s website at www.bbrp.org

Tom Comfort and his wife Peg live on Torch Lake in northwest-lower Michigan. Tom is a member of several bluebird societies and serves on the Board of Directors of NABS and the Michigan Audubon Society. Contact: Tom@nabluebirdsociety.org

Author Tom Comfort proudly displays his Keep Bluebirds Safe patch and annual bars from BBRP.

Kathy Miller sent in this image of some early February battling between two males. She writes, “I have a family of five Eastern Bluebirds that wintered over in my yard in Pennsylvania—four males and one female. I was surprised this week to see two males fighting—I thought it was early, but Bet Zimmerman confirmed that testosterone levels could be on the rise this early. It was interesting to watch the female come near them, even fly at them.” Kathy’s photos have graced the cover of Bluebird (Fall 2011 and Winter 2011–2012).
In a perfect world, breeding birds should have healthy baby birds that grow up, fly away, and continue the cycle of bird life. Sooner or later if you are a bluebird trail monitor or have just one nestbox on your property you will notice something is wrong. The bird parent(s) died or abandoned the babies, mites or blowflies infested the box, a predator invaded the box but did not kill all the nestlings, it rained so much or was so hot all the baby birds look weak, like they are going to die. Maybe a bird hits your window or car and is lying on the ground unconscious. What can you do? Who do you call? As this column progresses, I hope to help you decipher what to do in specific situations, but first some general information to keep in mind.

In the United States it is illegal to acquire a bird and care for it yourself, because all migratory birds are protected by the Federal Government. To quote the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service:

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act makes it illegal for anyone to take, possess, import, export, transport, sell, purchase, barter, or offer for sale, purchase, or barter, any migratory bird, or the parts, nests, or eggs of such a bird except under the terms of a valid permit issued pursuant to Federal regulations.

If you find an orphaned or injured bird first move it out of harm’s way: put the bird(s) in a cloth- or paper towel-lined box with a lid and small air holes poked in the sides. Then, since I would not want you to get arrested or fined for trying your best to take care of a wild bird, you should call a federally permitted wildlife rehabilitator so you can be covered under the Good Samaritan Law which reads, “If a citizen is acting in good faith to rescue an injured or orphaned bird and will transport the animal promptly for appropriate care, they are generally allowed to do so.” The rehabber will give you instructions as to what to do with the bird. The bird may need to be brought to the rehabber for care or put back where you got it. Each case is different and only a bird Rehabber should tell you what to do.

Can I call any wildlife rehabilitator?

There is a difference in wildlife rehabilitators. Only Federally Permitted (Migratory Bird) Rehabilitators can take care of birds. So just because someone has a valid state permit for wildlife rehab that does not mean they can legally take care of birds. You should always ask if they have a federal permit or are a subpermittee under someone’s federal permit. Also a federal permit is not valid unless the rehabber is also in compliance with state requirements. To confuse matters more, not all states require a state permit to rehabilitate wildlife, but always, any legitimate migratory bird rehabber will have a federal permit certificate.

Where can I find a bird rehabber?

In some states bird rehabbers are easy to find and in other states more difficult. At the moment there is no central list, though the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Migratory Bird people are working on a central database. Also, each state is associated with a Regional Permit Office. The Regional Permit Office phone numbers can be found on the web at https://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/mbpermits/addresses.html. You may want to call your regional office and see if they will help you with the name of an organization or person to start your quest. You can also check with your local veterinarian, with your state game warden, or an animal control officer. Each state has a different department/division that oversees wildlife rehabbers or information about wildlife. The Ohio Wildlife Rehabilitators Association website under the “find a rehabilitator” tab probably has the most comprehensive list (go to http://www.owra.org/find-a-wildlife-rehabilitator). You can click on your state, then the state’s menu to find the name of the nearest rehabilitator. It is a valuable tool because injured birds don’t keep office hours.

Bird rehabilitators are in the minority in the rehab world and are usually swamped with phone calls and intakes during baby bird season. So you may want to
find and contact the nearest bird rehabilitator before baby bird season starts. Also it may take you hours or even days to get a rehabilitator's name and phone number that can legally work with you. It is best to look for that information now. Make a call and establish that they are available to help you. Burnout or lack of money might close down the person you used to use, so check in with them each year.

More than 800 bird species occur within the United States. Thus, bird rehabilitators have to acquire a lot of knowledge and experience to take care of many different species. You may find some bird rehabilitators specialize in just raptors, chimney swifts, hummingbirds, waterfowl, and so on. Most bird rehabilitators work out of their home and are unpaid volunteers. They have a working relationship with a licensed veterinarian. It takes a lot of time, money, and dedication to properly care for a bird and return it into the wild.

**How can I help?**
Funding is not available for animal caging, veterinary care, medicine, or food. For this reason, most bird rehabilitators gratefully accept donations toward the care of the wild birds they receive. Bird rehabilitators are always looking for a good habitat for releases. If you have a pond on your property that has ducks or a large wooded area or even a field that is not cut, you should share that information.

Maybe you will get to witness or release a rehabbed bird on your property! Also, some rehabilitators are into re-nesting baby birds; you might want to offer your services to re-nest a baby bird in one of your nestboxes. You can also help by being a bird transporter.

**How can I become a bird rehabilitator?**
Remember, in the United States, to legally care for or have a wild bird in your possession you must obtain a permit from a Federal Migratory Bird permit office. The permit requirements are the same no matter which state you live in. If you are interested, you can go to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website (https://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/mbpermits.html) to learn more. If you live in Canada the license requirements are different than the United States. Contact the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Ministry of Natural Resources for more information. Canadian wildlife rehabilitation centers can be found at http://www.ontariowildliferescue.ca/wildlifecentres/

I will admit there seems to be a lot of sadness and frustration involved with bird rehabilitation. But when you rehabilitate a bird, then watch it fly away, free at last, there is no greater joy.

**NABS member Maureen Eiger of Roanoke, Virginia is a State and Federally permitted Wild Bird Rehabilitator, Board Member of Wildlife Care Alliance, and The Roanoke Valley Bird Club.**

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**VEHICLE/PROPERTY DONATION PROGRAM**

If you have a car, truck, motorcycle, RV, boat, or even an airplane that you no longer need, NABS would like to receive it as a tax-deductible charitable donation.

To donate, simply call this toll-free number: **866-244-8464**. Our agents will have your vehicle, boat, RV, etc. picked up and taken to a facility where it will be evaluated by experts. A determination will be made regarding what should be done to maximize its selling price, thereby resulting in significantly higher value than it might otherwise generate so you will receive the maximum tax benefit allowable by U.S. law. For tax purposes you, the donor, will receive a formal Certificate of Donation complying with all State and Federal requirements for authenticating your donation to NABS, an IRS 501(c)(3) tax-exempt charity.

Thank you for supporting the conservation of bluebirds and other native cavity nesters!

www.nabluebirdsociety.org
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Grubco’s bluebird feeders are available in two versions; cedar and recycled plastic. The recycled feeder is made from recycled milk jugs. Keep any unwanted birds out. The holes are sized and located specifically for bluebirds. Whichever feeder you decide to use, you will join thousands of happy bluebird feeder users.
Join us in beautiful Boise, Idaho for the 37th Annual Conference of the North American Bluebird Society at the Boise Centre and Grove Hotel in downtown Boise, Idaho. As producers of the forthcoming film Bluebird Man we welcome you to this year’s opportunity to “Continue the Legacy of our Founding Members.”

Boise, Idaho, the “City of Trees,” is home to a wide diversity of wildlife including Idaho’s state bird, the Mountain Bluebird. The bountiful Boise River flows through Idaho’s capital, which is nestled in the heart of the Treasure Valley.

Please join us for this unique annual event to experience bluebirds on the big screen, great trips to local bluebird trails, and other fantastic field trips. Wild Lens is proud to be hosting this event with special help from members of the Golden Eagle Audubon Society.

Wild Lens, Inc. is a not-for-profit video production company focused on addressing wildlife conservation issues through film and media. Our forthcoming documentary film Bluebird Man documents one citizen scientist’s effort to increase bluebird populations in southwest Idaho and looks to inspire the next generation of bluebird conservationists across North America. We hope this film helps continue the great legacy of citizen science–based conservation started by the North American Bluebird Society decades earlier.

We are working in collaboration with the Golden Eagle Audubon Society to help continue the conservation work of southern Idaho’s bluebird populations begun in the late 1970s by Alfred and Hilda Larson.
## Registration at Boise Centre

**Friday June 13, 4–8PM**

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<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4–8PM</td>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>Waters Room, Boise Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>4–5:30PM</td>
<td>NABS Board Meeting</td>
<td>Waters Room, Boise Centre</td>
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<td>5:30–7:30PM</td>
<td>Banquet Buffet Dinner</td>
<td>Waters Room, Boise Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>7–7:30PM</td>
<td>Guest Speaker TBD</td>
<td>Waters Room, Boise Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>8–9PM</td>
<td>Film Screening of <em>Bluebird Man</em></td>
<td>Summit Room, Boise Centre</td>
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## Saturday June 14

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<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>7–8AM</td>
<td>Breakfast (on your own)</td>
<td>Various Boise breakfast locations</td>
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<tr>
<td>8AM–5PM</td>
<td>Prairie Bluebird Trail Field Trip</td>
<td>Meet in Grove Hotel Lobby</td>
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<td>TBD</td>
<td>Hummingbird Banding</td>
<td>Meet in Grove Hotel Lobby</td>
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<tr>
<td>6–8PM</td>
<td>Dinner (cost not included)</td>
<td>Boise Restaurant TBD</td>
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## Sunday June 15

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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Owyhee Bluebird Trail Field Trip</td>
<td>Meet in Grove Hotel Lobby</td>
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<td>TBD</td>
<td>Alternate Field Trip TBD</td>
<td>Meet in Grove Hotel Lobby</td>
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## ~Friday Banquet Dinner~

Boise Centre Dinner Buffet  
(included with full conference registration)  
- Fresh salad bar with seasonal greens, croutons, and dressings  
- Pan-seared Salmon with lemon dill sauce  
- Grilled Small Steaks with brandy peppercorn sauce  
- Roasted Idaho Yukon potatoes  
- Individual Tiramisu, an Italian Trifle that includes Ladyfingers soaked in coffee and spirits layered with rich custard  
- Chocolate Truffle Layer Cake, luxurious layer cake with a bittersweet chocolate filling and a genache glaze
Boise Centre Banquet / Screening Information
Boise Centre, Downtown Boise
850 W. Front Street, Boise, Idaho 83702
Tel: (208) 336-8900 ~ Fax: (208) 336-8803
www.BoiseCentre.com

Location: Directions from I-84 & Airport: Take the Vista / Airport exit. Go north on Vista to Capitol Boulevard, and turn left on Capital Boulevard after approximately two miles. In approximately one mile, you will turn left on Front Street; go one block to the corner of 9th and Front Streets. The Boise Centre is on the right.

Parking: Parking for the Boise Centre is available at primary parking facilities through an agreement with the Downtown Public Parking System. Designated Event Parking at: City Centre Garage, Corner of 9th and Front Streets, Entrance on 9th Street, 208-424-7855. Rates: First Hour Free, Hourly: $2.50, All Day: $12.00. Please visit http://boisecentre.com/directions/parking for more information.

Hotel Information
The Grove Hotel, Downtown Boise
245 S. Capital Blvd., Boise, Idaho 83702
Tel (toll-free): (888) 961-5000 “Group Code: North American Bluebird Society”
Tel (if calling from Canada): 208-333-8000
$104/night + 13% tax (subject to change)
www.GroveHotelBoise.com

Location: Ideally situated in the heart of downtown Boise, this European-style retreat is attached to CenturyLink Arena and adjacent to the Boise Centre, with Boise’s most eclectic shopping, dining, and entertainment just steps away. Directions from I-84 & Airport: Take the Vista / Airport exit. Go north on Vista to Capitol Boulevard, and turn left on Capital Boulevard after approximately two miles. The hotel is located on the left-hand side of Capitol Boulevard—just three blocks south of the Capitol Building—at the corner of Front Street and Capitol Boulevard.

Parking: There will be a charge of $10.00 for guest’s overnight self-parking, and an hourly charge for conference registrants not staying at the hotel; free for the first hour, $2.50 for each hour thereafter and a maximum charge of $16.00 per day. Valet parking is available for $16.00 per day.

Room Amenities: Elegant furnishings and fabrics; high-speed wireless Internet access; refrigerator; designer bath amenities and terry-cloth robes; evening turndown service; well-lit work station; 32-inch flat-screen television, with video on demand; in-room coffee service; laundry / valet service; dual-line telephones, with computer data jacks; speakerphone and voicemail; in-room iron and ironing board; lighted / magnified makeup mirrors; AM / FM alarm-clock radios/CD player.

Facilities: Emilio’s fine dining restaurant; The Bar, for cocktails and live piano music; The Zone Restaurant, overlooking CenturyLink Arena; onsite covered parking; business center.

Services: 36,000 square feet of conference venues; complimentary airport shuttle; room service; complimentary high-speed Internet access; laundry / valet service; bellman / concierge; valet parking.
Field Trip Information

Prairie Bluebird Trail, Saturday June 14, 8AM – 5PM
Trip Leader: Alfred Larson
Cost: $30. Unlimited number of entries

Experience over 30 years of history along the 100+ nestbox bluebird trail around Prairie, Idaho. Located an hour and a half east of Boise along the South Fork of the Boise River, this trail offers the unique opportunity to see Western and Mountain Bluebirds nesting nearly side-by-side! Trip leader Alfred Larson has been banding bluebirds along this trail since its inception in the late 1970s, and mid-June is peak banding time. Great birding opportunities will be present throughout the duration of this trip. Please meet at 8 AM in The Grove Hotel lobby. Transportation and lunch will be provided. Please plan to be outside all day and bring any of the following items you may need: extra water, hat, and sunscreen.

Hummingbird Banding, Saturday June 14, 7AM - TBD
Trip Leader: Idaho Bird Observatory
Maximum of 20 persons
Cost: $20

Join the Idaho Bird Observatory (IBO) at their banding site near Idaho City. You will observe IBO biologists at work and see the early morning rush of hummingbirds at the feeders. This is a great opportunity to photograph hummingbirds up close, and even hold one of these tiny gems before it is released back into the wild. IBO has been banding hummingbirds at this location since 2012. How do you band a hummingbird you might ask? Come and see for yourselves! IBO is part of the Hummingbird Monitoring Network—an international effort to conserve hummingbirds. Plan to arrive one hour after sunrise (transportation is provided). You will be outdoors the entire time, so please bring what you need to be happy (snacks, water, warm clothes) and don’t forget your camera!

Owyhee Bluebird Trail, Sunday June 15, 8AM – 5PM
Trip Leader: Alfred Larson
Cost: $30. Unlimited number of entries

Experience more than 30 years of history along the 100+ nestbox trail in the Owyhee Mountains of southwest Idaho. Located an hour and a half south of Boise, the Owyhee Mountains are dominated by Mountain Bluebirds. Trip leader Alfred Larson has been banding bluebirds along this trail since he began working with bluebirds in the late 1970s, and mid-June is peak banding time. The Owyhee Mountains are part of the Great Basin ecosystem and contain a unique bird community dependent on sagebrush shrubs and juniper trees. Please meet at 8 AM in The Grove Hotel lobby. Transportation and lunch will be provided. Please plan to be outside all day and bring any of the following items you may need: extra water, hat, and sunscreen.
Possible Alternate Saturday Field Trip and Self-Guided Trip Options
(Subject to Change)

**MAPS Songbird Banding**, Sunday June 14, 9AM – 2PM
Trip Leader: TBD
Maximum of 20 persons
Cost: $20
Take a trip to Lucky Peak and the Idaho Bird Observatory to observe songbird banding.

**The World Center for Birds of Prey**
The Peregrine Fund, 5668 West Flying Hawk Lane, Boise, Idaho 83709
10AM – 5PM daily
Cost: $7/general, $6/seniors (age 62+), $5/youth (ages 4-16)

**The Jim Hall Foothills Learning Center**
3188 Sunset Peak Road, Boise, Idaho 83702
Dawn – Dusk
Cost: Free

**MK Nature Center**
Address, Boise, Idaho
Dawn – Dusk
Cost: Free

**Hyatt Hidden Lakes Reserve**
5301 North Maple Grove Road, Boise, Idaho 83704
Dawn – Dusk
Cost: Free
Conference Registration Requirements

Advance registration is required. Deadline for tour, conference, meals, and hotel reservations is May 22, 2014.

PAYMENT TERMS: Full payment is due at the time of reservation. Please make all checks payable to Wild Lens, Inc. and mail with reservation form enclosed. Please note there is a $20 charge for returned checks or denied credit cards. Please send registration and payment to: Wild Lens Inc., NABS Registration, PO Box 6701, Boise, Idaho 83707. Reservations will not be accepted without payment. We will do our best to send you a confirmation within three weeks.

REGISTRATION ON DAY OF EVENT(S): Walk-in registration is only available for people attending the screening of Bluebird Man. Advance registration is required for all meals and field trips.

RESERVATIONS: Can be made by calling:
The Grove Hotel toll-free directly at 888-961-5000 (credit card required), or 208-333-8000 if you’re calling from Canada. Group Code: North American Bluebird Society
 $104/night + 13% tax (taxes subject to change)

CANCELLATION POLICY: All cancellations must be made in writing. Changes in tour reservations must be made no later than May 23, 2014.

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Advance registration is required. Deadline for tour, conference, meals, and hotel reservations is May 22, 2014. Conference registrants will receive priority for field trip reservations if space is limited. Send completed form to Wild Lens, Inc. PO Box 6701, Boise, ID 83707

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I would like to be recognized as:

__1st Timer __ NABS Board Member __ Attendee of 10+ Conferences
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Is it OK to release your name to: other attendees? Yes No vendors? Yes No

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TODAY’S DATE _________________  *(FOR WLI ONLY)*  DATE RECEIVED _________________
REGISTRANT#1 __________________________ REGISTRANT#2 __________________________

I/We have received the terms of payment, cancellation and responsibility flyer regarding the 37th annual North American Bluebird Society Conference for June 13-15, 2014 in Boise, Idaho. Please confirm the following for registrants indicated above. Full conference registration is NOT required to attend field trips, *but* if space is limited conference registrants will receive priority over non-registrants.

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**NABS 2014 TOURS/MEALS**

**SATURDAY June 14**

- __ Prairie Bluebird Trail Field Trip  
  ___# X $30 = $ ______
- __ Hummingbird Banding Field Trip  
  ___# X $20 = $ ______

**SUNDAY June 15**

- __ Owyhee Bluebird Trail Field Trip  
  ___# X $30 = $ ______
- __ Alternate Sunday Field Trip (TBD)  
  ___# X $20 = $ ______

**TOTAL PAYMENT (US CURRENCY)**  
= $ ______

Special notes to conference registrar: _________________________________

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Steve Gilbertson on the Gilwood Nestbox
Fred Stille

The Gilwood represented one of the most radical changes in bluebird nestbox design since manmade nesting structures were first erected for Eastern Bluebirds in the 1930s. Designed by Steve Gilbertson of Aitkin, Minnesota, the Gilwood has since established itself as a favorite with both bluebirders and the bluebirds themselves.

Kevin Berner, current Research Chairman for NABS, wrote, “I’ve been field-testing various bluebird nest box designs to determine bird preferences for approximately 13 years. As I find boxes that work well, I continue to test against new box designs... For both 2000 and 2001, bluebirds showed a strong preference for the Gilwood Nestbox over the box that was most used in my previous trials (NABS oval hole).”

Bet Zimmerman Smith, author of the website www.Sialis.org, states that, “If I bought ONE box for Eastern Bluebirds, it would probably be a Gilwood (which they seem to prefer in my experience).”

What’s the magic? Well, bluebirds certainly don’t approach the nestbox and say, “Hey, it’s a Gilwood,” (although sometimes we think they might). So why is this nestbox so desirable to bluebirds? To find the answer, I decided to ask the designer, Steve Gilbertson.

Q: What makes one nestbox more desirable to birds than another?
Steve: Nestboxes have four features in common: an entry of some size and shape; a certain distance from the bottom of that entry to the floor; the cavity size; and the ambient light level inside the box. Birds pay a lot of attention to these four elements when selecting a nestbox. The key is to refine each of those features to suit what the bird wants, then design those preferences into the nestbox.

Q: How did you identify these preferences?
Steve: In areas where natural cavities are scarce, competition for nesting sites can be fierce. In this case, preferences are hard to detect, as the birds will nest in whatever cavities are available. But if the birds have the luxury of making a choice, they will reveal these preferences. Pairing boxes on my trails, with variations in the four key elements, eventually showed me what the birds preferred.

Entry
Q: The Gilwood inverted mouse-hole entry was a radical change from the standard round entry that was prevalent at the time. What led you to this style entry?
Steve: Bluebirds, especially Eastern Bluebirds, like a large entry. Dick Peterson’s trail research proved that when given a choice, bluebirds preferred his 2¼” × 1¾” oval entry over the standard round.

In studying bluebird anatomy, I felt they might prefer a wider entrance, so I began by turning the Peterson oval horizontally. I extended this 2¼” width to the top of the door, which then resembled an inverted mouse-hole.

Most nestbox builders configure the Gilwood with a bottom-pivoting door. The entry wire is retained. Conventional screws are used for the pivots.

Eastern Bluebirds have displayed a preference for large entries, such as the Gilwood (above left) and the Peterson oval (above right).
To discourage avian predators from reaching inside the nestbox, I knew I had to close down the height of the mouse-hole to between 1¼" and 1⅜", but I did not want to block the excellent ventilation the overall entry size would provide. A simple ¼" diameter wire solved the problem. Threaded through both of the sides and across the inverted mouse-hole, it reduced the functional height of the entry without blocking airflow, and served as the door pivot as well. The Gilwood entrance was born.

Q: Could a different style entry be used on the Gilwood, say a 1½" or 1⁹/₁₆" round, or a Peterson oval?

Steve: Certainly. But these style entries won’t provide the same ventilation of the Gilwood entry, so vent holes in the sides should be added to compensate.

Cavity Size

Q: How was the Gilwood’s floor size determined?

Steve: The first step was to establish the Eastern Bluebird’s preference. Again, this was determined by years of trail research conducted by Dick Peterson and myself, where we provided the birds with varying floor sizes to choose from. We discovered that the birds, when given the choice, were more inclined to choose a nestbox with a floor size of between 14 and 16 square inches.

A floor size in this range would serve another purpose: It deters the European Starling, a competitor species that prefers a much larger cavity. The Peterson nestbox has a nesting area of around 14 square inches [at nest level], and starlings almost never attempt to nest in that box, even though they can squeeze through the Peterson oval entry.

I live-trapped starlings and placed them in the Gilwood, where they always managed to escape. But the 15-square-inch floor would be a deterrent to them, as the Peterson nestbox had already proved.

The “Drop”

Q: The distance from the bottom of the entry to the floor, or drop, is the subject of much debate. Many claim that a deeper box provides more protection from the probing arms of raccoons and cats, and prevents avian predators from reaching the nest inside. Others have discovered that the birds—especially Eastern Bluebirds—build a taller nest in a deep box, effectively canceling the deep box strategy. What are your thoughts on this?

Steve: We’ve learned that it’s much better to prevent climbing predators from reaching the box in the first place, rather than depending on the box itself to provide protection. The ½” conduit pole does a good job in deterring climbing predators as long as it’s polished and waxed. As far as predator birds reaching inside, the Gilwood entry, with its tight dimension beneath the wire, prevents that.

Dick Peterson and I discovered through pairing boxes on our trails, offering boxes of different depths, that the Eastern Bluebird showed a strong preference for a drop of around 5". I had no reason to argue with success, so that’s the dimension I used for the Gilwood.

Ambient Light

Q: You mentioned ambient light inside the box. Do birds really have a preference for this?

Steve: I’m convinced they do. When a bird perches half inside a round entry hole, their bodies effectively block all light that would normally come through that entry, and the box interior goes dark. Woodpeckers do not chisel out perfectly round holes, so these entrances don’t block all light when the bird is perched there.

When first investigating a new cavity or nestbox, most bluebirds don’t immediately go inside. They remain in the entry and bob their head in and out a few times. Are they checking for danger inside the box? Would you poke your head into a dark hole without
first allowing your eyes to adjust to the lower light level? It’s much the same thing.

Of course ventilation holes or slots in the sides of some nestboxes, and slot entries, will maintain a certain light level inside the box even when the bird is perched in the entry. The Gilwood entry with its 4 square inches of area provides all the ventilation the box needs and, at the same time, allows light to enter the box above the bird’s body.

Q: Why did you design the Gilwood with a recessed door?
Steve: The total thickness of the back and door, plus the length of the floor, is around 6”. A 1 × 6, which is actually 5½”, would not cover the door. The next standard size up, a 1 × 8, was too wide. Because I did not want to create a design that required cutting standard lumber to a non-standard size, I left those 1 × 8s as is, which created a door recess of about 1¼”.

Q: There are no floor drains on the Gilwood. Why not?
Steve: The Gilwood is a dry box. All of the openings—the entry and the gaps between the door and side panels—are facing the front, which should be faced away from prevailing winds. The recessed front protects it further from windswept rain. If any box takes on a large amount of water, the nest is going to get soaked regardless of whether the floor has drains.

I conducted an experiment where I filled the Gilwood with water from a hose, and all the water drained out quickly through the small door seams. Floor drains might speed this process slightly, but the nest would still be wet in any case. And floor drains, contrary to popular belief, do not help dry a soaking wet nest.

Q: So the appeal of the Gilwood to bluebirds is the combination of their preferences designed into one box. What other features are important in a nestbox?
Steve: There are features the birds don’t readily see, or see at all. It is our responsibility to keep the birds safe by designing and building a nestbox that is tight and dry, won’t overheat and is easy to monitor. Mounting the nestbox properly and in good habitat is equally important as the nestbox itself. A successful nestbox is a mixture of all these things.

Steve’s contributions to bluebird recovery cannot be overstated. His designs include the Gilbertson PVC nestbox, the conduit/rebar mounting system and the Universal Sparrow Trap. Although Steve is now retired and no longer sells nestboxes, he continues to maintain his website—the Gilbertson Nestbox Company (www.gilbertsonnestbox.com)—for informational purposes.

Fred Stille writes, “After retiring in 2007 from a career in architectural design, I’ve devoted much of my time to woodworking. Because wildlife conservation is another of my interests, helping bluebirds and nestbox building combined to become a passion. To help others enjoy this hobby, I created Nestboxbuilder.com two years ago. My wife and I live in Waleska, GA, a small town nestled in the foothills of the north Georgia mountains. I’m also a NABS member.”

This article originally appeared on Fred’s website, www.nestboxbuilder.com
Managing for American Kestrels
Dick Tuttle

Dick Phillips and I monitor and maintain 18 nestboxes for the Delaware County American Kestrel Project, an effort started by four agencies and four school districts in central Ohio in 1991. Annually, the project’s boxes average a near 90 percent success rate for raising fledglings with at least 70 kestrels raised each year.

We credit our success to numerous protocols starting with placing nestboxes no closer than ½ mile apart in rural settings and staying clear of woodlots by hundreds of yards in order to avoid accipiters such as Cooper’s Hawks. By the time kestrels fledge, crop fields can hide fledglings from larger hawks.

The project’s boxes hang at 12 feet above the ground, and during the first five years of production, boxes had been attached to the backs of traffic signs where some kestrels nested in boxes 8 feet above the highways’ grassy berms. Most of the boxes face east to southeast to take advantage of a warming, rising sun, while avoiding afternoon temperature extremes.

For today’s boxes that hang from utility poles, we nail a band of aluminum flashing below each box to prevent climbing raccoons from turning nests into raccoon feeders.

When we find a European Starling nest, only the eggs are removed from the grassy nest. Normally, once kestrels eat or evict starlings, they will reshape the starling’s round grass nest cup into an oval kestrel cup. If a recently usurped starling nest is replaced with white pine bedding, a kestrel might freak out when it returns to its box to find new furnishings. Beginning in mid-March, we begin to check boxes at least every two weeks for two reasons: we can accurately extrapolate data to predict nest events, and we avoid the emotional challenge of dealing with starling nestlings. In Central Ohio, new starling eggs don’t appear after the first week in June.

Even though small rodents, large insects, frogs, and snakes make up most of a kestrel’s diet, small birds are also on their menu, so nestboxes are never installed near homes showing bluebird nestboxes, Purple Martin hotels, or bird feeders in order to preserve peace in the neighborhood.

Try to think like kestrels when selecting nestbox sites. Since kestrels hunt from utility wires, a T-intersection has 50% more wires than a straight stretch of road by itself, and a crossroads intersection has twice as many grassy berms as a lone road.

Kestrels are easily spooked by new objects near their nests and that includes farm machinery. Locate boxes at least one pole beyond the pole nearest to where farmers access their fields so kestrels won’t become afraid to approach their nestboxes. Cold temperatures can ruin an unattended clutch of eggs.

After the nesting season, use a spackling knife to dig out each used nest before adding new white pine...
bedding. Stomp and pulverize the cemented nest patty to check for remains of prey or kestrel nestlings that might have perished.

It is wise to keep several nestboxes in storage, so when repairs are needed, it is easy to trade one for the other so a kestrel never finds a bare pole upon its return. Kestrels hold on to their territories before and after their nesting seasons.

There are successful kestrel projects that band adult birds, but usually bird banders trap or net their adult birds outside their nests. Since we are not researchers, we only band nestlings and never grab adults off their nests. We are convinced that most of our veteran nesters know us when we peer in to the nest cavity during our “King Kong” routine. The small falcons know that the intruder in their ceiling will soon be gone and the kestrel experiences the least amount of fear. Nest checks are as short as possible, just long enough to gather data so leg-banding events for the nestlings can be accurately planned.

Unfortunately, most utility companies will say “No” when asked for permission to hang nestboxes from their poles. It is a traditional policy, but since bucket trucks, also called cherry pickers, have replaced the need for linemen to climb poles, policies are gradually changing. On the other hand, many projects across North America make their own freestanding poles.

The Delaware County project has one such pole that stands in a park. A cable and winch is used to raise and lower the box for easy monitoring.

An important part of any conservation effort is to use the resource to inspire and educate others. It is good public relations to engage neighbors, young people, families on bicycles, motorcyclists, and anyone else who appears curious about your monitoring activities. They will become allies of your project if you call them over to the nestbox during leg banding and other activities. Kestrel nestlings with their large, dark eyes, and ominous, sharp talons, are powerful ambassadors for all birds of prey. They aren’t Bald Eagles, but explain that more than 40 years ago, captive-bred kestrels were used to prove the connection between DDT poisoning and its threat to the reproductive health among birds—and people. We owe *Falco sparverius* for helping us to expose our chemical threat to ourselves and those creatures that share the earth with us.

Dick Tuttle is a retired middle-school life science teacher and has been a bluebirder since 1968. His nest structures have raised more than 44,000 native birds, including more than 10,000 Eastern Bluebirds. A charter member of NABS, Dick was our first Education Committee Chairman that circulated the first NABS Slide Program for 4½ years.

A female kestrels guards three hatchlings with one (egg) to go.
In Memory:

Remembering our Bluebird Friends and Supporters

Sherry Linn

Our world is again saddened by the loss of two very wonderful bluebird lovers and long-time NABS members.

**Martha McClure White** of Harrisonburg, Virginia
— passed away July 29th, 2013

From an early age both Martha and her brother Spencer were instilled with a love of bluebirds by their father, Thomas Arthur White. Martha and her father were NABS members and Spencer continues to be an active member with nestboxes built by his father still being used by bluebirds on his Virginia property.

Spencer advised us of Martha’s passing earlier in the winter through a letter telling us about a bequest from Martha and offering us copies of photographs their father had taken and that were found in Martha’s personal items. Martha enjoyed family, flowers, gardening, reading, and bird watching—especially bluebirds. She was extremely patriotic and an advocate for veterans including support for “Breaking Free,” a nonprofit organization that assists local veterans with readjustment issues. She loved her two cats, helped with animal rescue, and supported the Shenandoah Valley Spay & Neuter Clinic.

Our condolences go out to her family. Martha, age 61, will be missed and left us all too soon. We appreciate that Martha loved her bluebirds so much and included NABS in her will. Her bequest will be used wisely to support ongoing bluebird programs.

**Hilda Mae Larson** of Boise, Idaho
— passed away February 17th, 2014

Hilda, 87, was the wife of longtime NABS member Al Larson of Boise. Hilda, along with Al, was a founding member of both the Golden Eagle Audubon Society and the Southwestern Idaho Birders Association. She was an active member writing an article for each newsletter for 33 years as well as hosting the annual picnic at their cabin on Daggett Creek.

A native of Boise, Hilda grew up on her parent’s ranch in Boise County, adjacent to the ranch of her grandfather on Daggett Creek. She and Al married in 1974 and moved to the family ranch at Daggett Creek about twelve years ago. Hilda enjoyed feeding and attracting wild birds to their yard. She was an accomplished artist painting in various mediums and filled dozens of sketch books with wonderful pen-and-ink sketches of animals and scenery. In support of Al and the documentary *Bluebird Man*, Hilda donated many sketches and works as gifts for the various levels of donations that helped the film come to life.

I had the pleasure of spending some time with Hilda last July in Boise. She was a gracious hostess and told us wonderful stories about early life in the Boise area and of their escapades monitoring the bluebird trails around Prairie and the Owyhee Mountains. To Al and family—our thoughts are with you and we’ll see you in June.
Membership Renewal
Is this your last Journal? Please check your mailing label for membership expiration date. If renewing through PayPal, remember you can use either your credit card or your PayPal account.

Q: I see on the form I can renew for multiple years – how do I do it using PayPal?
A: Change the quantity from the default of 1 to the number of years you want to renew for. PayPal does the math and Marion picks up the number of years to adjust your NABS record.

Photo Gallery

NABS member Carolyn Perkins writes, “The snow is still piled up and there’s ice in the driveway of my Connecticut home, but on Saturday, February 22, mild temperatures (low 50s) brought back a pair of bluebirds who began laying claim to a nestbox in my yard. I now have six at my feeder — they were the last brood that hatched at the end of last summer. We are back to cold temperatures with snow in the forecast, but it looks like the birds are here to stay! What a welcome sight after a long, cold winter.”
Why Have Bird House Designs Changed?
Tom Comfort

Bird house or nestbox designs have changed significantly over the past dozen years and even more significantly since the mid-twentieth century, when the pioneers of bluebird conservation were trying to duplicate natural cavities the best they knew how. But this is not about the best nestbox or the even the most favored bird houses. That discussion may never see a conclusion and is best left to regional preferences. Instead, we are recognizing that there have been simple improvements that resulted in subtle changes that have helped all kinds of cavity-nesting birds.

The authors of the *Audubon Birdhouse Book* investigated many nestbox designs and thought their task to identify the “best” was going to be simple. They asked several bluebird enthusiasts, including me, about the best nestboxes and they quickly learned the wide variety of very passionate opinions. The authors tell interesting facts about each cavity-nesting bird in their book and explain the basis of the nestboxes or birdhouses selected for each. But the authors realized that trying to identify the “best” nestbox was futile and could trigger unnecessary debate. What they did report is the fact that birdhouses have changed and we see an opportunity to suggest why birdhouse designs have evolved to variations of early attempts to replicate natural nesting cavities.

I often tout the benefits, as I see them, of one nestbox design over another. Eventually someone asks, “Why are there so many different birdhouse designs?” or, “What is wrong with our old box?” and, “Why should we change to a different nestbox, if the birds use it?” My reply was never short. I would bore them with the details of the pros and cons and the point would be lost. The advantage of age is the opportunity to tell about the “old days.”

The design of nestboxes has been the subject of much experimentation (and debate) over a period of about 80 years. Most of the focus has been variances to attract birds to select one nestbox over another and with only a few pioneers evaluating the factors helping the birds to safely nest and fledge their young. But I think the safety and security of nesting birds has been the most significant factor in nestbox evolution. Now, I find my best and shortest explanation is drawing a comparison to the evolution of the automobile or the airplane since the early 1900s. Safety, reliability, and convenience have changed our history in transportation and so it may be for birdhouses.

My first car was a 1956 Oldsmobile. This “stylish” steel vehicle kept me pretty safe, but probably some of that success was luck. Over time, automotive engineers and marketing people continued to make changes to improve safety, reliability, and make their cars more appealing. With the addition (since the ’56 Olds) of seatbelts, padded dashboards, radial tires, air bags, and the like, passengers travel farther and with more comfort, reliability, and safety. This automotive evolution means we are now less at risk from a terrible crash.

The first birdhouses in North America were probably gourds hung from trees by Native Americans. Later, farmers mounted birdhouses fabricated from materials on hand and mounted them on fence posts as an early form of insect control. The function and functionality of birdhouses have changed as our needs and priorities have changed. And the birds have faced new challenges of nesting cavity competition and loss of natural habitat in our progressive world.

About 30 years ago, Dr. Lawrence Zeleny, the founder of NABS, wrote that prior to the introduction of the English House Sparrow (early 1850s) and the European Starling (1890) to America, “bluebirds had no particular need for human help.” But by the early 1900s the story was changing. Aggressive competition from these intruders, along with loss of natural habitat as land was cleared and natural cavities disappeared, created new

Cover photo from the Spring 1999 issue of Bluebird, where it carried the caption, “Experimental bluebird houses built by T. E. Musselman of Quincy, Illinois, in the early 1930s.” Photo by Musselman’s daughter, Virginia Gullette of Kenney, Texas.
challenges for bluebirds and other native cavity nesters. With fewer safe places to raise their nestlings, there were fewer and fewer bluebirds.

Like Dr. Zeleny, many other bluebird fans recognized the lack of what was a plentiful and adored species of bird. Fortunately, some people were concerned enough to try to turn this threatening situation around.

Thomas E. (T.E.) Musselman of Quincy, Illinois is often cited as one of the early pioneers who recognized the decline of bluebirds in his area and decided to try to help their recovery. Dr. Zeleny wrote that Musselman was making and experimenting with nestboxes in 1926. He adds that Musselman is credited with placing a number of nestboxes along some sort of path that was suitable for bluebird habitat and for the convenience of nestbox inspection. Thus, the concept of a bluebird “trail” was born.

Musselman worked closely with William G. Duncan, a friend from Louisville, Kentucky. They shared ideas and compared the results of their nestbox trails from 1930 until Musselman died in 1976. The “Duncan” nestbox had a roof that opened for inspection and bird banding. This design seems to be the basis for the original NABS nestbox, which evolved to opening from the side.

About 80 years ago, Musselman wrote an article entitled “Help the Bluebirds” in *Bird-Lore*. This was the first nationally published call for bluebird conservation in the United States, according to Dr. Zeleny.

Regarding his early experiments to replicate natural cavities, Musselman wrote that the “most effective” nestboxes were small mailboxes with a knothole entry that he attached to the front. Later, he assembled wooden nestboxes and outfitted them with removable roofs. In the *Bird-Lore* article, he noted that his boxes had a 1¾-inch diameter hole bored through the front near the top of the box. “The top was cut to extend slightly over the sides and over the front like the lid of a mailbox.”

Musselman described his latest nestbox creation: “I completed twenty-two of these boxes, which I painted a dirty grayish brown paint, and I sprinkled sawdust over them while the paint was still moist. They were apparently well weathered before the arrival of the bluebirds.” He sounded excited about the successful nestlings produced in these boxes, and banded most of the birds occupying his first bluebird trail placed along 5 miles of Illinois roadways.

At the conclusion of his article, Musselman wrote, “In the 1934 season, I expect to place more than a hundred additional boxes. These will be scattered broadcast over the neighboring farms, and, once such a box has been placed, it is interesting to note how the farm family... immediately takes over the protection of the little blue-backed renters who have taken up housekeeping in their box.”

Since the days of T.E. Musselman and William Duncan, numerous bluebirding pioneers have continued refining nestboxes to suit their tastes, experiences, and challenges in an ongoing effort to find the *ultimate* nestbox to lure native birds to nest. Dick Peterson (founder of the Minnesota Bluebird Recovery Program) wrote on his nestbox plans, “This superb nest box design is the result of nearly 20 years of research in the field, and the building of nearly 5,000 ‘BLUEBIRD’ nest boxes.” Dick Peterson devoted a significant part of his life to bluebird conservation.

To me, the dedication and persistence of countless bluebird pioneers cannot be overlooked as we tweak or refine their bird house designs. There are few nestbox designs that one can say are wrong or just inappropriate. But, in time, we have learned

The evolution of bluebird nestboxes continues, as they move from hollow gourds and crudely cut apple crates through T.E. Musselman’s experimental designs to this, the *Xbox*, which was designed in 2010 and is featured on the cover of the *Audubon Birdhouse Book*. Photo by David Kinneer.

www.nabluebirdsociety.org
to make nestboxes safer and more secure from weather, competitors, and predators. As stewards of our nesting birds, we have a responsibility to offer the safest nesting conditions we can. And this responsibility includes safe and secure nestbox mounting and placement to avoid predation and attacks.

For more information go online to www.Sialis.org or www.nestboxbuilder.com, or call the NABS HOTLINE (1-812-200-5700)

**Must-Have Nestbox Book**

**Scott W. Gillihan**

What could be so hard about putting up a nestbox for birds? Just make a wooden box, cut a big hole in it, nail it to a tree, and step back while all the birds in the neighborhood make a beeline for it, right?

Well, we all know that it’s more complicated than that. Much more complicated. Fortunately, we now have this excellent book by Margaret A. Barker and Elissa Wolfson to provide all the necessary details of building and installing nestboxes that are safe and secure for the birds we love.

Barker and Wolfson begin with some history about nestboxes and their role in bird conservation. They move into information about protecting your nestbox inhabitants from predators, competitors, blowflies, and other insect pests. They even provide information on what materials and designs are unsuitable for nestboxes.

The bulk of the book is devoted to providing information on cavity nesters (some 27 species), including their natural history, identification, and geographic range. The section on each species (or group of related species) is followed by clear plans for a nestbox appropriate for that species and illustrated instructions for its assembly and installation. Craftsman Chris Willett and the crisp photos make it all look so easy that even a non-woodworker like myself could build these boxes.

In addition, the authors provide the same information on 11 bird species that do not use nestboxes but will readily accept other types of artificial nest structures.

Want to encourage Barn Owls to nest on your property? Check. Want to build a floating nest platform for Common Loons? Check. Want to discourage House Sparrows and European Starlings? Check. Every page of this book is packed with good information. The fine photography and attractive layout make this book a real pleasure to read.

Although the authors drew from many sources, the influence of NABS is quite apparent. You’ll recognize the names of many of the people the authors consulted — many of them are on the NABS Board of Directors or are active in NABS.

No doubt some readers will be unhappy with the few photos that show nestboxes mounted on trees, and some of the instructions for mounting the boxes recommend such placement. However, I should note that the mounting instructions for nestboxes of bluebirds and other songbirds specify the rebar/conduit method, and readers are specifically warned against mounting those species’ nestboxes on fenceposts or trees. The tree-mounting recommendations are limited to boxes for forest owls, chickadees, and Northern Flicker.

My only quibble with this book is it left me wanting more! Red-headed Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, and White-breasted Nuthatch are just some of the other species that can be coaxed into using a backyard nestbox. Perhaps a sequel is in order!

Spring—what better time to trade in that old clunker (or donate it to NABS!) for a shiny new one. Back in 1954 you could’ve driven away in one of these special-edition Chrysler Bluebirds. Image from Alden Jewell, an automobile historian who posts photos of old vehicles and associated memorabilia online at www.flickr.com/photos/autohistorian/

Eastern Bluebird to be Subject of Ohio Wildlife Stamp
One of our favorite birds, the Eastern Bluebird, will be featured on the 2015 Ohio Department of Natural Resource’s Wildlife Legacy Stamp. Proceeds from the sale of the stamps go to support Ohio’s Wildlife Diversity Fund; more than $100,000 has been raised in the last 5 years. The funds are used to acquire land for wildlife, restore habitat, provide education, and support endangered species research. Bluebird supporters in Ohio with an eye for photography can submit their best images August 10–23, 2014; the winner receives $500 and the satisfaction of knowing that they’ve made a lasting contribution to the conservation of bluebirds and other wildlife in Ohio. Additional information is available at www.wildohiostamp.com

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 email 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!

Kurt Hagemeister, president of the Michigan Bluebird Society, took this photo of Blue Bird school bus Number 1 (built in 1927) at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Blue Bird buses are still in production today.

Bluebird Cargo is a small airline (five aircraft) based in Reykjavik, Iceland. Bluebird hauls freight between Canada, Iceland, Europe, and northern Africa. No word on how they picked the bluebird name. Photo by Luc Willems / Wikimedia Commons.

NABS member Suzi Conklin of Oregon writes: “I was walking our property looking for mushrooms when I thought I saw an orange mushroom emerging from the ground. Turns out, it was this delightful whirly gig toy that had been buried for who knows how long. I’ve lived here ten years and this was not mine. Except for the broken whirly wings, it is in remarkably good condition.”
Burrs and Birds
During the course of their lives, birds face all sorts of hazards: predators, communication towers, windows, and harsh weather, to name a few. One more item can be added to that list: plants that produce seed pods with hooked burrs. The dried seed pods of some species bristle with spikes, each spike ending with a small hook. It is these small hooks that can ensnare a careless bird and hold it fast until a predator grabs it or it dies from dehydration, starvation, or exposure.

Various species of burdock (Arctium) are notorious for entangling small birds (see photo, below). This invasive plant used its spiky seed pods to hitchhike from Eurasia to North America and then across the continent. (To its credit, burdock has at least one redeeming value: The hooked burrs on the seed pods served as the inspiration for Velcro.)

Small birds that forage for insects among dried leaves and seed pods, such as warblers, are especially susceptible to entanglement. But some larger birds, including cavity-nesting Black-capped Chickadees and Tufted Titmice, have become entangled, too.

Gardeners and other people who spend a lot of time outdoors should be vigilant. Remove the invasive burdock wherever you see it growing, and watch carefully for birds caught among dried seed pods of any plant that produces pods with burrs.

Good Help is Hard to Find
We all know that the basic bluebird family unit is the adult male, adult female, and their offspring. Mom and Dad bluebird take good care of their young, and drive away any other bluebirds that venture too close to the nest. This territorial behavior is believed to be the bluebird’s way of blocking other adult bluebirds from taking over a good nest site or stealing a mate.

However, if you manage bluebird nestboxes long enough, sooner or later you may witness “helpers” at the nest. The helpers are young birds, still with their spotted breasts; they bring food items to the nestbox to feed the nestlings. Typically, helpers are young birds that hatched from a clutch produced by the adults earlier in the season, i.e., these helpers are the older siblings of the nestlings they are feeding. The adults tolerate their presence because 1) they’re helping, and 2) they’re young birds so they present no threat to take over the nest site.

But researchers studying Eastern Bluebirds in Oklahoma witnessed an adult male helping a pair at their nest. Rather than drive him away, the mated pair accepted his help; all three birds fed the lone nestling in the nestbox and defended the box against a House Sparrow. The two males seemed quite chummy and sometimes perched close to each other.

The researchers offered several possible explanations for this behavior:

- The helper was the offspring of the mated pair, i.e., he hatched the previous year but was still recognizable to the pair as their son.
- A high rate of predation in the area made the mated pair more willing to accept help in order to ensure the survival of their offspring.
- The mated male had a second mate, and his efforts to support and protect two families made him more willing to accept help.

Son or Daughter, Bright or Dull: Which Fledgling Will a Bluebird Parent Protect?
In the sometimes-harsh world of nature, a parent must make difficult decisions. Limited supplies of time, energy, and food must be allocated to offspring.


But *which* offspring? Which young bluebird should receive favoritism?

Researchers in North Carolina devised a simple but ingenious test to determine if Eastern Bluebird parents show preferential treatment to certain fledglings. At some of their nestboxes the researchers installed two wire cages, each one 2.5 meters (about 8 feet) away from the nestbox, one on each side. When the young were almost ready to fledge (14–18 days old), one young bird was placed in each cage, and a dummy American Crow was hung over each cage, to simulate a predatory threat. The reactions of the adults were recorded and analyzed.

When a son was put in one cage and a daughter in the other, the father usually spent more time defending the son against the “crow”; the mother defended the son and daughter equally.

When a brightly colored son was put in one cage and a dull son put in the other (his plumage dulled temporarily by artificial means), the father usually spent more time defending the brighter male; the mother, again, defended both sons equally.

**Sons over Daughters:** Bluebird parents might be expected to favor sons over daughters because a son will have the potential to produce more young, and thus pass along more of his (and his parents’) genetic material to the next generation. This is because a male could, in theory, have two mates for every round of egg-laying, resulting in him fathering twice as many young each year as a given female.

Bright over Dull: Bluebird parents might also be expected to favor offspring with bright plumage because it indicates a healthier young bird, and a healthier bird is likely to produce more offspring than a less-healthy (dull-plumaged) bird.

But why did the fathers show those preferences but the mothers did not? A mother bluebird invests more time and energy into each brood—she builds the nest, she lays the eggs, she incubates the eggs, she broods the chicks, she provides about half of the food, etc. The father’s investment is much lower—he defends the nest and his mate, and provides about half the food. Since he has less at stake, a father can afford to be picky about which of his offspring to protect; a mother, on the other hand, must protect all offspring equally.

The North American Bluebird Society serves as a clearinghouse for ideas, research, management, and education on behalf of 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 working together in a partnership in international bluebird conservation. No cost is associated with affiliating with NABS. Your affiliated organization will be 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 send correct information to Phil Berry at pbsialia@gmail.com and info@nabluebirdsociety.org.

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