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Cover photo: Male Mountain Bluebird in winter, by Rob McKay/Bigstock.com

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Winter Message to Our Affiliate Organizations

Phil Berry

Well, here we go again, another winter coming up on us. Time to clean out and winterize our nestboxes and get ready for Spring and a new breeding season.

It is also time to make your plans for our NABS annual conference to be held in Boise, Idaho, in June of 2014. Details will follow, and be sure to check our website (www.NABluebirdSociety.org) for further information. To be hosted by Wild Lens, Inc., in conjunction with the Golden Eagle Audubon Society. Field trips, Mountain and Western Bluebirds, and time to spend in the City of Trees, Boise.

I would like to remind the Affiliate organizations to take advantage of our "Affiliate Plus" Membership Program. We believe that this "A+" offering will help both Affiliates and NABS increase our respective memberships and encourage further support for bluebird conservation and educational outreach programs. Your members can join NABS for as little as \$20.

We have added a special section on our website just for members: www.nabluebirdsociety.org/aplus. To make joining NABS even easier, your members can make a call to Dan Sparks, NABS Storefront Manager, at 812-200-9825 during his office hours of 12–3 PM Eastern Time Monday through Friday.

Hoping to meet many of you at our annual conference in Boise, Idaho next summer.

Sincerely,
Phil Berry
NABS Vice President -
Affiliate Relations



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General questions may be addressed to:
info@nabluebirdsociety.org
or call 812-200-5700 during office hours (12–3 pm Eastern time Mon–Fri); messages can be left at any time.

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

trees	water	energy	solid waste	greenhouse gases
5 fully grown	2132 gallons	2 Million BTUs	135 pounds	473 pounds

From the President

Sherry Linn

We had the most marvelous time in Aiken at our 36th Conference hosted by the South Carolina Bluebird Society. I must say Aiken is the friendliest city I have ever had the pleasure of visiting. Having breakfast with Eastern Bluebirds at the Burke home was a standout, too! I cannot thank the SCBS folks enough for their hospitality and the well-organized event they hosted. Y'all did a real fine job! And I know they are not the kind of folks to sit back on their laurels now either—they are already gearing up for an excellent nesting season in 2014 with expanded trails in the state.

So where do we go from here? Next year we are taking a different tack and our conference format will be somewhat different. Some of our newer and smaller Affiliates are hesitant to take on a large event with so few hands, and the fully packed program of SC makes hosting seem like a daunting task. So we are planning on going to Boise, Idaho in late spring and have a less structured event where folks can plan a vacation and make the NABS event an easy part of it. How does a film premiere sound? The documentary *Bluebird Man* should be ready to roll out and the timing will be such that nesting Mountain and Western Bluebirds will take the stage, too. Pack your cameras and gear because there are a lot of wonderful sites in the greater Boise area to take in. Watch for more information on Facebook, our NABS website, and in the Spring issue of *Bluebird*.

The Annual NABS Board meeting was very productive with many of us meeting face-to-face for the first time in Aiken. General election results and the recent Board election of the Executive are behind us. It was disappointing to see so few ballots returned. Our election process does cost us money for inserting a ballot in the Journal in compliance with our Bylaws. Your Board of Directors works hard and it would be nice to see that recognized and supported through your participation in the election next year. The NABS Executive for 2014 remains the same and as President for one more year, I am looking forward to whatever the new year has in store for us.

When circumstances caused the cancellation of one of the speakers for the Saturday program in Aiken, we were able to have a good membership session. Participation in this Q&A saw questions about elections: Why not electronic voting? Why don't we know in advance about the Executive for the following year? Our Bylaws set out the manner and timing in which these two processes are carried out. Article XXII explains how our Bylaws may be amended. Before any change can be considered we need to receive a formal proposal accompanied by an explanation of why we need to make an amendment. These types of things are always a challenge and I can say that the last changes were major and worked on for over a year before they were in a format ready to put to the membership for a vote. One item we will go ahead and review, though, is where we can make simple changes that will give us options in the future for using electronic means for annual meetings and voting. We will do our best, but these may or may not be ready for addition to the ballot in 2014.

I hope you all have had a wonderful holiday season and are starting to think about getting those nestboxes ready. If you are fortunate to have overwintering bluebirds, don't forget to let us know how they are doing and share a picture or two on Facebook!

Greetings from the north,
Sherry
president@nabluebirdsociety.org



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

On a recent business trip I drove over Wolf Creek Pass in southwestern Colorado (elevation 10,857 feet, or 3,309 meters). As I drove I thought about the name, and the story behind it. At one time, wolves were common enough in the state for someone to name a creek after them, and then a mountain pass. However, as a steady stream of settlers moved into the state, bringing their livestock and guns, the wolves retreated northward. By 1940, they were gone from Colorado. Likewise, Eastern Bluebirds declined in North America in the 20th century. But bluebirds had a support group that wolves lacked, and those dedicated, caring individuals banded together to reverse the decline and “bring back the bluebirds.”

In this issue we present information about bluebirds, of course, but also information about other native cavity nesters and the concerns about their conservation. Many species are exhibiting serious population declines, and my sincere hope is that you will consider learning about these species and taking concrete steps to reverse their declines.

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 Jim Burke (President of the South Carolina Bluebird Society), Peter Burke (editor of the Colorado Field Ornithologists' journal, *Colorado Birds*), and Lauren Kane (BioOne, for access to scientific journals). Also Sherry Linn and Tom Comfort, for helping me fill this issue with interesting, timely material.

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



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Notices from NABS

Election 2013 Results

When voting closed August 15, returned ballots were tallied by our Secretary, Kathy Kremnitzer. Kathy presented the results to the Board on October 2 and they were ratified on October 5 by members attending the NABS conference in Aiken, South Carolina.

NABS members returned 69 ballots. There was one spoiled ballot; 67 votes were cast for option “a” —the entire slate of nominees; one ballot was cast for option “b” —in favor of accepting only marked nominees. The full slate of candidates was elected for three-year terms. Re-elected were Bob Benson, David Cook, Sherry Linn, and Dan Sparks. Newly elected were Stan Fisher, Linda Schamberger, and Paul Sherd.

In compliance with NABS Bylaw Article XIII (6), “Within 90 days following the Annual Election, the Board shall conduct an Election of officers from within its members,” at the November 12 Board of Directors meeting Nominating Committee Chair Bob Benson moved that the current Executive Committee be re-elected to a one-year term. The vote was passed unanimously by those present.

Please refer to page 3 of this issue for a complete listing of the current Executive Committee and Board of Directors who will serve through 2014.

Membership Renewal

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

New NABS Phone Number

Please note that the phone number for general questions has been changed; the new number is **812-200-5700**. You can speak to someone 12–3 Eastern time, or messages can be left at any time and your call will be returned.

Revised Fact Sheets

You may have missed the fact that the NABS fact sheets have been updated with new information and graphics. These make a nice handout at information booths and other events of your society. Best of all, they’re free! All seven fact sheets (and lots of other information) are available for downloading from the NABS website: www.nabluebirdsociety.org/



Notices from NABS Affiliates

Spring Bluebird Presentation – Plattsburgh, NY

On Sunday, April 6th at 2:30 PM, the New York State Bluebird Society will host a program at the Clinton Community College’s Stafford Theatre. John Rogers will be presenting his Powerpoint presentation, “All About Bluebirds—and More.” The presentation includes the life history of the Eastern Bluebird, nestbox management, other birds that commonly nest in bluebird boxes, and more.

The focus definitely is on bluebirds, but John also shares his passion for the natural world in hopes the audience will take in some broader and deeper messages about nature—and life. The program has variety, feeling, and is thought provoking. Also included are a few wildflowers, butterflies, and quotes by some of the great naturalists of the past. With visually beautiful photographs, sounds, and a sincere, enthusiastic presentation style, this program is of interest to anyone who appreciates nature.

Join Us in June 2014 for the 37th NABS Conference in Boise, Idaho

This unique event is being co-hosted by Wild Lens, Inc. and the North American Bluebird Society, with special support from the Golden Eagle Audubon Society.

Wild Lens, Inc. is the non-profit organization bringing you the half-hour documentary *Bluebird Man*, about the vital role citizen scientists played in the history of bluebird conservation in North America.

This unique conference will include:

- A special *Bluebird Man* screening and social event
- A variety of field trips with local Idaho experts to see:
 - Mountain and Western Bluebirds along several historic bluebird trails
 - The unique and diverse bird community around Boise, Idaho
 - And the stunning beauty of southwest Idaho!



Watch the NABS Facebook page and website for updates – then the Spring issue of *Bluebird* for full details.

Shop at NABS

Have you visited the NABS online store lately? Have you *ever* visited it? You'll find books, videos, back issues of *Sialia* and *Bluebird*, educational materials, nestboxes, accessories, gift certificates—the list goes on and on. We also provide a source list for vendors that sell nestboxes, predator guards, mealworm feeders, and sparrow traps.

Support bluebirds while supporting NABS!

Visit the NABS storefront online at
www.nabluebirdsociety.org/Catalog/catalog.htm



The 36th Annual NABS Conference: A Huge Success!

Terry McGrath

They arrived early, they arrived late—but arrive they did! One hundred and sixty-two dedicated, knowledgeable, and passionate bluebird lovers gathered for an informational, fun-packed three days of tours, lectures, food, and friendship in our beautiful town of Aiken, South Carolina. Hosted this past October 3rd–5th by our own South Carolina Bluebird Society (SCBS), it appears we “wowed” the crowd! Our president, Jim Burke, supplied the expertise and vision...our members flew on board to make this conference a memorable one for all who attended! From the abundance of “artful” items donated by local artists for the silent auction to seven tours, nine guest speakers, and four fabulous food venues, I happily take you on a recap that still has the compliments rolling in!

Tours and field trips began bright and early on a cool and sunshiny October 3rd. A coach bus awaited those who chose the Red-cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Field trip led by wildlife biologists Tracy Grazia and Tal Mims. Luckily the government shutdown did not affect this much-anticipated tour, and a little bird told me that this tour was “the best ever” for many of the 23 participants. An actual Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) nestbox insert was installed, and after it was up, no one could tell it was not a natural cavity that had been there for years! Let’s hope some of the RCW’s that were sighted agree!



Jackie Berry during the Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat tour at the Savannah River Site.

Photo by Phil Berry



Professor Emeritus Whit Gibbons, Savannah River Ecology Lab, introduces his “friend” to Rosie Shulz from Hanover, Germany. *Photo by Dave Kinneer*

A van took another eager group on the Hitchcock Woods field trip. Botanist Dr. Harry Shealy and geologist Dr. Walt Kubilius led 15 hardy hikers through a 2100-acre longleaf pine forest located in the middle of Aiken. The ecosystem Dr. Shealy pointed out was similar to what the first Europeans encountered in the coastal plain of South Carolina. An exposed outcrop of sediments deposited 40 million years ago during the Eocene Epoch, known as the Chalk Cliffs, was a focus of the area shared by Dr. Kubilius. South Carolina Bluebird Society has a 16-box bluebird trail in the Woods, along with 12 Screech-Owl boxes and 3 Barred Owl boxes.

A second coach bus carried 42 attendees to the Silver Bluff Audubon Center & Sanctuary with Paul Koehler, Director, giving everyone a historic tour of a vast variety of different ecosystems in a 3250-acre package! The history part included Spanish and English explorers, along with a Revolutionary War skirmish!

A trolley tour to “experience” Aiken was provided for those who like their excitement and education “sitting down”! From the City’s Historic homes and churches, training tracks and stables, to the live oak tree canopy on South Boundary Road, to guided strolls through Hopelands Gardens, the Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame, Aiken County Historical Museum and the Aiken Train Museum, I’m sure the morning and afternoon groups had some pretty good stories to take home about Aiken’s illustrious past! One guest told

me she felt like she had lived in Aiken for all her life after the tour!

Another group, perhaps a *bit* of the “horsey set,” really enjoyed the tour of Equine Rescue of Aiken. Jim Rhodes, the managing director, has taken the *reins* and *run* with a fabulous retreat for horses, dogs, and of course bluebirds. Horses for adoption, or just to live out their lives in comfort and love, flourish under the care of Jim, his staff, and volunteers.

The final field trip (are y’all tired yet?) was to the Phinzy Swamp Nature Park in Augusta, Georgia. This park earned an “Important Bird Area” designation by the Audubon Society for the high diversity of birds in this area. From songbirds, wading birds, raptors, and waterfowl, Phinzy Swamp visitors came back to the home nest all a-flutter!

The Southern Welcome Dinner, shared with 110 of our *new* friends, was most enjoyable. Even better than the stunning buffet of fried chicken, BBQ, and catfish was the over-the-top guest speaker Elliott Levy, Executive Director of the Aiken County Museum. His energy and knowledge of all things Aiken made for an unforgettable meal at the Woodside Plantation Country Club.

Friday the 4th found the attendees at the Aiken Center of the Arts bright and early for the Silent Auction and a full day of guest speakers. Dr. Harry Shealy, Professor of Biology at University of South Carolina-Aiken, offered an overview on how nonprofit groups can help with bluebird habitat restoration. Dr. Whit Gibbons, Professor Emeritus of Ecology at University of Georgia (GO DAWGS) and Head of the Environmental Outreach and Education program at the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory educated many on how bluebirds, reptiles, and amphibians have a lot in common. One thing in common that



The Silent Auction display was a popular place with conference attendees. *Photo by Dave Kinner*



NABS Board member Bet Zimmerman Smith spoke on “Managing House Sparrows, House Wrens and Paper Wasps.” *Photo by Dave Kinner*

I noticed was the number of feet that rose off the floor when the snakes came out! Dr. Gibbons is a fascinating speaker, and has never had an audience member snake bitten!

Lunch was taken at Newberry Hall and many were on the receiving end of some lovely art in the drawings *and* some great food. Discovering downtown brought a lot of you to Birds & Butterflies, and our own SCBS store. Everyone had a big smile on their faces!

Back to the Art Center and the afternoon’s selection of lectures which included “Imported Fire Ant Biology, Management and More” by Vickie Bertagnolli, Horticulture Extension Agent and Master Gardener Coordinator at Clemson University. As if we needed another reason to despise those fire ants, it was interesting to learn how they got here and ways to manage them.

Tracy Grazia, a wildlife biologist with the USDA Forest Service and the guide on the RCW tour, discussed habitat and management techniques and shared some pretty impressive statistics on the success of the RCW recovery efforts at the Savannah River Site, owned by the Department of Energy.

It’s Saturday the 5th and we are back at the Center for the Arts and ready for another day of guest speakers, lectures, and trying to score that much-desired item at the Silent Auction! The morning’s first lecture, given by Dr. T. David Pitts, Professor of Biology at the University of Tennessee-Martin, was “The Night Life of Eastern Bluebirds.” In a word, fascinating! From adaptations for survival to bluebird dreams, everyone could agree our little bluebirds are special indeed!

Certified Environmental Professional Bet Zimmerman Smith talked about “Managing Challenges: House

Sparrows, House Wrens and Paper Wasps,” and shared some sobering percentages on bluebird survival with the three above-mentioned forces in their habitat. Forewarned with knowledge, Ms. Zimmerman Smith shared proven, practical techniques to deter all three culprits.

After another delicious lunch at Newberry Hall followed by a round of drawings for the luncheon guests, it was back to the Center for the Arts to lock down those final Auction bids!

The final, last-but-not-least speaker was Robert Kenamer, a Research Professional at the University of Georgia and the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL). His talk, “Ecology of Breeding Wood Ducks,” covered his 30+ year career studying the breeding ecology of Wood Ducks using more than 275 nestboxes at the Department of Energy’s 310 square mile Savannah River Site.

Charting more than 48,000 duck eggs, Robert was able to show everyone the numbers as they pertained to nest times, clutch size, and return of banded ducks to the nestboxes. Robert shared with SCBS president Jim Burke that “this group of people asked the most interesting questions—a real pleasure to speak to.” Good job, y’all!

After the lecture on Wood Ducks, everyone made their way out to check on their bids! After claiming the items they had won, our guests departed for the buses and back to the hotel to prepare for the evening’s festivities.

The atmosphere at the Awards dinner was electric as we prepare for the end of the Conference. But



Robert Kenamer, Research Professional, Savannah River Ecology Lab, shares more than 30 years of Wood Duck research with the audience.
Photo by Dave Kinneer



Keynote speaker, Rudy Mancke, Naturalist-in-Residence, University of South Carolina, shares his ideas on the “Connectivity in Nature.”
Photo by Dave Kinneer

we planned to send y’all on your way in style, and I think we succeeded! Trolleys arrived carrying our guests, now 140 of our *old* friends (nothing brings a group of strangers together better than a cause), and we sat down for our final dinner of the Conference. We were served a delicious dinner while the awards were being given to numerous individuals for their achievements with NABS and bluebird conservation. I had the honor of presenting our own award to Jim and Sharon Burke, the first couple of our SCBS Affiliate. Despite my known “gift of gab,” I managed to keep this presentation a secret! The presentation was memorable and heartfelt! Fast forward to the guest speaker, Rudy Mancke, Naturalist-in-Residence, University of South Carolina. His talk, “Connectivity in Nature,” brought together all we had experienced in the three days of our conference and we all left on a high note for the evening, sharing our experiences with our new friends!

Thanks to all who attended and for those that couldn’t, I hope you got a taste of what it was like to be here at the 36th Annual North American Bluebird Society Conference. I’m looking forward to next year, and if you ever find yourselves down this way, be sure to stop in—we’d love to have you!

Terry McGrath is a member of NABS and the South Carolina Bluebird Society. She monitors a trail of 22 bluebird boxes and two Wood Duck boxes at Haven Hill Farm, home of Equine Rescue of Aiken.



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–Julie Zickefoose

NABS 2013 Awards

Anne Sturm, Awards Committee Chair, and Sherry Linn

This year we had the pleasure of reviewing award nominations and presenting tokens of appreciation to our most deserving recipients at our 36th Annual Conference in Aiken, SC hosted by the South Carolina Bluebird Society. The lifelong dedication of the individual recipients this year is very gratifying to see and we sincerely thank them for their continued efforts on behalf of bluebirds, NABS, and their respective affiliated organizations.

The Awards dinner was held at the beautiful Woodside Plantation Country Club and keynote speaker Rudy Mancke (Naturalist-in-Residence USC) invited us to look at things differently through his talk, "Connectivity in Nature." It was a stimulating talk and I know anyone conducting presentations on bluebirds and other critters they share their habitat with have gone home with more ideas to add to their repertoire. Thank you Rudy for offering a new way to look at the natural world around us!

Outstanding Contribution to Bluebird Conservation Awards were presented to two very deserving gentlemen for their dedication to bluebirds and contributions to their communities through working with nature.

The first was presented to **Bob Franz of Santa Ana, California**. Bob became a bluebird nestbox monitor in 1997 with a trail of 19 boxes. Since then he has recruited, trained, and established trails for about 100 new bluebirders. He is a founding member of the Southern California Bluebird Club (SCBC) and one of his achievements was arranging for Huell Howser to produce a TV show on the bluebird activity in Southern California. Bob has made scores of presentations to youth groups, seniors, garden clubs, and schools on bluebirds. Bob helped plan and arrange for the 45th NABS conference in 2012 in Newport Beach and served as Master of Ceremonies. Bob was unable to be with us in person to receive his award and Dick Purvis accepted it for him. Dick presented the plaque to Bob on November 2 at a SCBC meeting. Bob sent his thanks to NABS for the recognition:



Bob Franz (*right*) accepts the Outstanding Contribution to Bluebird Conservation Award from Dick Purvis at a Southern California Bluebird Club meeting. *Photo by Randy Franz*

"Many thanks to the NABS Awards Committee for this honor—to say the least, I was overwhelmed. Certainly a portion of this award goes to Dick Purvis, for it was Dick who introduced me to the world of Western Bluebirds in 1997... I am proud to have played a small part in increasing the interest in Western Bluebirds in Southern California that has certainly included significant efforts by Dick Purvis and Jo-Ann Coller of SCBC."

The second award of the evening was presented to **Ron Brenneman of Aiken, South Carolina**. Ron is a Certified Wildlife Biologist who has worked in research and conservation projects all over the U.S. In 1997, he and his wife Dori opened Birds and Butterflies, an independent bird retail store in Aiken. For sixteen years, he has conducted a series of seminars on various wildlife and outdoor-related topics, and is a frequent speaker for garden clubs, civic associations, and schools. The proceeds from his seminars are donated to local wildlife rehab



Ron Brenneman accepts the Outstanding Contribution to Bluebird Conservation Award from Sherry Linn. *Photo by Dave Kinner*

organizations. Ron has worked extensively in helping injured and abandoned wildlife and fields calls on how to help these creatures and get them to Carolina Wildlife Care, Riverbanks Zoo, or the Center for Birds of Prey. His first bluebird trail was established in 2002. By 2010, the trail had grown to 71 boxes. The founding of the South Carolina Bluebird Society gave him access to more trail monitors and resources for the 2011 nesting season. Now into its third nesting season, SCBS has 51 trails and 534 nestboxes. Ron has been a key player in the growth and activities of the SCBS. We thank Ron for his contributions to the conservation of bluebirds as well as the role he takes in educating folks from all walks of life on the bounty of the natural world around them.

A Lifetime Achievement Award in Bluebird Conservation was presented to **Stan Fisher of Boyds, Maryland**. Stan is a charter and life member of NABS. In 1976, Dr. Zeleny's book helped him get started with his first trail on his five acres, Bluebird Hill Farm. While working as a physicist, he pursued many activities besides bluebird conservation including sports, the Knights of Columbus, church choir, organizing the Red Cross Blood Drive, Master Gardeners, and many civic associations. Now retired, Stan is Vice President of the Maryland Bluebird Society and the 2013 Chair of the Bluebirds Forever Festival at Black Hills Regional Park. Stan is a Friend of Black Hills Regional Park and a Bluebird Monitor in the Maryland National Capitol Parks and Planning Commission Bluebird Monitoring Program. Besides his own trail, he monitors a trail in the Model Airplane Park, mentors Poolesville High School Global Ecology Students with five nestbox trails and three chestnut tree restoration plots. He is a co-monitor of a trail at Four Streams Golf Course, which is working on an Audubon Certification. On the Board of the Montgomery County Forestry Board and the Board of the Maryland Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, Stan is now also one of our newest NABS Directors being elected this year for a three-year term. He serves on three of our NABS committees and we thank him for the time he devotes to our common cause.



Stan Fisher accepts the Lifetime Achievement Award from Sherry Linn. Photo by Dave Kinneer

The 2013 President's Recognition Award was presented to **Linda Schamberger of Webster, New York**. Linda is relatively new to being a bluebird landlord and nestbox monitor but what she has learned in her participation over the past three years she gives back with sharing her expertise of the interconnected world through social media and Facebook. Linda saw our need to have an interactive page and stepped in, volunteering her services without hesitation. She has seen us increase our followers from just over 100 participants to over 2400 at the time of our conference—and she did this in just over a year! Linda keeps our Facebook presence interesting, educational, and fresh. The photography posted by our followers is amazing and she oversees the dialog that goes along with all the posts. I spent time with Linda in Idaho this past summer and despite our long days out on bluebird trails with Al Larson, she continually checked emails as the Facebook Administrator, posted daily photos and updates about our adventures, and handled queries. Her energy and willingness to share are remarkable. We are fortunate to have a member (and now new Board member) with her skills who is ready to assist wherever she can.



Linda Schamberger accepts the President's Recognition Award. Photo by Dave Kinneer

A Winter's Worth of Reading

Scott W. Gillihan

Finding yourself hunkered down, impatiently waiting for spring and the return of nesting bluebirds? Winter offers a prime opportunity to curl up with a good book (or computer, or tablet, or smart phone, ...) and expand your knowledge of bluebirds and the natural world. Here are some reading suggestions to get you started.

Read the bluebird classics, which are out of print but still available from libraries or used-book outlets:

The Bluebird Monitor's Guide, Jack Griggs, Keith Kridler, and Cynthia Berger

The Bluebird: How You can Help its Fight for Survival, Lawrence Zeleny (NABS's founder)

Read the newer bluebird titles:

Studying Eastern Bluebirds: A Biologist's Report and Reflections, T. David Pitts (available for purchase on the NABS website at www.nabluebirdsociety.org)

Audubon Birdhouse Book: Building, Placing, and Maintaining Great Homes for Great Birds, Margaret A. Barker and Elissa Wolfson

The Bluebird Effect: Uncommon Bonds with Common Birds, Julie Zickefoose

Explore the back issues of *Sialia* and *Bluebird*, freely available on the NABS website. These issues represent the accumulation of decades of knowledge about bluebirds and other cavity-nesting birds. Pick an old one at random and browse through it—you might find some long-forgotten gem of information about bluebirds!

Visit websites of the NABS

Affiliates, which contain a wealth of information. Let's learn from each other! Not every method will work in every location, but it can be beneficial to learn of other techniques, then modify or adapt them for your area. The Affiliates' website addresses can be found in this issue on pages 30–32.

Read Bet Zimmerman Smith's

endlessly fascinating website about bluebirds and other cavity nesters: www.sialis.org

Round out your knowledge of birds and the natural world with some of these new titles and timeless classics:

Gardening for the Birds: How to Create a Bird-Friendly Backyard, George Adams

Life Histories of North American Thrushes, Kinglets and their Allies, Arthur C. Bent (published in 1949 but now available online at www.birdsbybent.com)

Bright Wings: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems about Birds, Billy Collins

Their Fate is Our Fate: How Birds Foretell Threats to Our Health and Our World, Peter Doherty

Imperial Dreams: Tracking the Imperial Woodpecker through the Wild Sierra Madre, Tim Gallagher

Avian Architecture: How Birds Design, Engineer & Build, Peter Goodfellow

Feathers: The Evolution of a Natural Miracle, Thor Hanson

Ravens in Winter, Bernd Heinrich

Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival, Bernd Heinrich

The Laws Guide to Drawing Birds, John Muir Laws

A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold

Birds in a Cage: Warburg, Germany, 1941. Four P.O.W. Birdwatchers, Derek Niemann

Why Do Bluebirds Hate Me? More Answers to Common and Not-So-Common Questions about Birds and Birding, Mike O'Connor

More than Birds: Adventurous Lives of North American Naturalists, Val Shushkewich

Walden, Henry David Thoreau



Alex Rath / Bigstockphoto

Photo Gallery



“I live in Texarkana, Texas. One hot summer day I was sitting on the porch watching for birds. All of a sudden here came one bluebird after another. It was so hot & humid that day, I guess they decided to have a pool party.”

– Jan Davis, NABS member



Okay, it shouldn't have a perch, and that's not a bluebird, but this giant cavity-nester was too amusing to pass up. This bird resides at a bird-feeding-supply store in Durango, Colorado called "For the Birds."

Photo by Scott Gillihan



Ethan Winning took this striking portrait of a male Western Bluebird in California. This photo was taken early in the year (in February), and this handsome male is decked out in his finest plumage to impress females. You can see more of Ethan's photos at www.ethanwinning.com



“My last nesting in this box had four eggs. Three of them hatched on the day that they were to hatch—the next day one egg remained. I looked at the egg and it had a small piece of shell missing so I helped it out. It looked

so small compared to its brothers and sisters plus it was a day behind the others. I was not sure it would make it so I kept an eye on this box.” Based on photos taken each day, the runt was three days behind the others. “When it came time to fledge the three older ones left and the little runt was still in the box. Mom and Dad were still coming to feed it and three days later it fledged also.” – Herb Unkrich, member of NABS and East Central Illinois Bluebird Society

A Full Complement of Partners

Allen Jackson

Our interests varied but came together to benefit bluebirds: Allen Jackson, a wildlife biologist intent on helping bluebirds, and Dave Moyer, a wood-shop teacher determined to find meaningful projects for his students. Obviously, boxes were needed for bluebird trails and a supply of wood was necessary for the wood-shop class. However, some things lead you down unusual paths.

I received a call from Dave in the fall of 2011. He heard from a friend about my work with bluebirds and wanted his 8th-grade wood-shop classes at the Middle Township Middle School in Cape May Court House in southern New Jersey to make boxes for me. We scheduled to meet and discuss things further.



Dave Moyer (left) and Allen Jackson at the school's wood shop.

Being a biologist, proper management of bluebirds is paramount to me, including a well-designed box. Most boxes sold in stores or individually built do not meet current design standards, so I brought a NABS-style box to the meeting for Dave to replicate. What intrigued me was Dave's approach to teaching wood shop. He teaches wood shop as a life skill with an emphasis on paying attention to detail. Dave is very organized and follows a step-by-step process building the bluebird boxes. While I was easily convinced to move forward with the project, I needed to come up with some innovative ways to finish pulling the project together.

Aside from bluebirds, I was working on a mountain bike trail at Belleplain State Forest. I learned from Lorraine McCay, the superintendent, that her husband Ed owned a sawmill (McCay Wood Products in Nesco). When I found out he milled Atlantic white

cedar, a lightweight, disease/weather-resistant wood good for building bluebird boxes, things began to get more interesting. Ed has an appreciation of nature and gave me an exceptional estimate. Besides supporting a local business, buying directly from a sawmill offered greater savings. Now, all I needed was funding.

I had recently installed 13 bluebird boxes at Doug Mehaffey's Harmony Valley Nursery and Haven Hill Farm in Deerfield. When Doug inquired about the cost, I suggested he donate money to help fund the wood for Dave's wood-shop class. Doug's donation paid for the wood and other hardware. The cedar was milled and delivered in January 2012 and was enough to make 60 boxes. Dave took the opportunity to have me speak to his students about a career in wildlife biology and the importance of proper management to bluebirds. It also offered a unique opportunity to convince them of the importance of their efforts.

The 60 boxes were used in 2012 to help establish 12 new bluebird trails, which ultimately produced about 180 young bluebirds in southern New Jersey. In October 2012 another load of Atlantic white cedar was delivered to Dave's class, which made 90 boxes for the 2013 season. Those boxes helped add another 14 trails replete with monitors. Because I am responsible for and coordinate with people who monitor approximately 500 boxes, I also purchase boxes made with western red cedar from Builders' General Supply Company. The high-quality boxes are built at their store in Freehold but can also be purchased through request at their other stores in Edison, Little Silver, and Toms River.



Jackson with some of the students involved in making bluebird boxes.



This load of 30 boxes was quickly distributed throughout southern New Jersey.

In 2012 we fledged over 1,150 bluebirds. Prolonged adverse weather but more boxes resulted in fledging another 1300 bluebirds in 2013. Dave's 150 boxes have been an important part of my program within the newly established New Jersey Bluebird Society. In September 2013, the program continued forward when a third load of cedar was delivered for the 2014 season. Besides getting quality boxes, it provides a great opportunity to work with students who will be the next generation to help bluebirds. Dave expects that some of his students will continue their involvement with bluebirds.

An unexpected surprise were the number of people who came forward to support this program by providing funds or expressing interest to monitor a bluebird trail. Some of the partners include Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and Its Tributaries, Atlantic Audubon Society, New Moon

Nursery, Harmony Valley Nursery, Builders' General Supply Company, New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The volunteers who stepped forward to monitor a trail are too numerous to mention but their efforts put the finishing touches on a successful program. Without them the program would be extremely limited.

Partnering has turned out to be a great way to get more people involved and a better way to benefit bluebirds. Become an advocate of partnering!

Allen Jackson is a wildlife biologist retired from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. He is vice president of the New Jersey Bluebird Society, which he helped establish in 2011. He is also a member of NABS, the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, and is extremely involved with promoting proper management for both bluebirds and Purple Martins.



Dave's class made and presented Jackson with a NJ Bluebird Society sign.

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Stretch Your Bird Food Budget

Maureen Eiger

I feed birds all year round but this winter I will need to put out more feeders. Why? Remember the crazy weather we had this year? I don't know about you, but my flower and vegetable gardens were not very productive, and my oak trees did not fare any better. With the lack of acorns and seed heads, birds will be relying more on my feeders and emptying them out sooner. So I have thought of some ideas to keep me from going bankrupt and still enjoy seeing the birds that brighten my winter days. If you have thought about feeding birds but shudder at the expense, maybe you will appreciate these bird feeding tips, too.

I often forget about that apple I was meaning to eat and maybe it started to get brown or soft spots. Well, apples left on trees look about the same, and birds do change their diet to more fruits than insects in winter. I am not going to eat a soft, mealy apple, but birds don't care. As long as it is not moldy you would just be helping the birds out. Don't forget about apple cores. Skewer them on branches, or stick them on a shepherd's hook.

Do you cut off the tops of strawberries? I leave a little fruit on the green leaves and place them in a dish. If the squirrels don't get there first the wrens and mockingbirds will make them disappear.

All those pumpkins that we buy and cut up for pies have seeds that birds would love to eat. This also applies to winter squash and cucumber seeds. Instead of throwing out the seeds, toast them in an oven on low heat for a few minutes, just long enough so the shells are easy to crack. Extra bonus: You do not have to rinse the pulp off.

These are safe "people foods" for birds. It is still good to have suet and birdseed available, but adding these few extra items will stretch your bird feeding budget and help our feathered friends. You are in a sense recycling. Just make sure nothing is moldy and your eggshells are toasted. The fun begins when you see which bird is the first to eat your special handout.

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. Watch for her column on bird rehabilitation and other topics starting in the Spring Bluebird.

This article originally appeared in The Roanoke Star; it is reprinted here with permission.



We throw eggshells in the garbage almost every day, but they are full of calcium and minerals. Birds need additional calcium, especially after nesting season. When I eat eggs I simply return the empty shells to the cardboard carton. When all my eggs are gone and I am left with just a carton of eggshells, I microwave them in the carton, just until they start to pop (about 30 to 60 seconds). That way any possible salmonella germs will be killed. Crunch them up or leave them in halves and toss them out in your flower pots or garden. They will not be there long. It's so much fun watching Blue Jays and other birds carry them off and eat them. You don't have to worry if they miss a couple of pieces; your plants will appreciate the added nutrients.

Raptor Ecology in an Orchard Nestbox System: Diet Assessment

Megan Shave

Editor's note: This project was partially funded by the NABS grant program. These grants are funded by an endowment named for our founder, Dr. Lawrence Zeleny. For more information, visit the NABS website: www.nabluebirdsociety.org

For my dissertation research at Michigan State University, I am working with my graduate advisor Dr. Catherine Lindell to investigate the ecology of American Kestrels breeding in Michigan fruit orchards. This research is part of a larger Specialty Crop Research Initiative project investigating ways to reduce bird damage in fruit crops. Thus, one goal of this research is to examine the potential effects of kestrel predation on prey that damage fruit crops.

Kestrels forage in open habitats, including agricultural fields and orchards (Smallwood and Bird 2002); in addition, many potential prey species, such as voles and some passerine birds, cause damage in orchards (Askham 1990). However, the use of kestrels as a biological control species in orchards has received little investigation. Biological control via a native predator is an appealing management strategy that concurrently addresses conservation and agricultural needs (Kross et al. 2012). The typical kestrel diet includes invertebrates (mainly terrestrial arthropods) and small vertebrates; however, the observed proportions of prey types in the diet vary geographically and seasonally (Sherrod 1978).

Preliminary data were collected to assess the diets of kestrels using nestboxes in Michigan fruit orchards. First, in early March 2013, weatherproof security



Nestbox cam records a prey delivery.



Megan retrieving kestrel nestlings. Notice the swing-down nestbox pole, which allows easy access for banding nestlings and cleaning the box.

cameras (Opcom IP56) were installed in eight kestrel boxes located in orchards around Leelanau County, Michigan. All eight boxes were occupied by breeding kestrels during the summer of 2013. Prey deliveries to nestlings were recorded at each box on a rotating basis using a digital video recorder (SecurityMan HomeDVR) powered by a rechargeable 12 V DC sealed lead acid battery (Steen 2009). In addition, pellets and prey remains were collected from around and inside the boxes.

The eight recorded kestrel pairs provisioned their young at an average rate of 5.7 prey items delivered per hour. A total of 709 prey deliveries were recorded: 94.6% of the total deliveries were invertebrates (arthropods and mollusks), 3.1% were mammals, 2.1% were birds, and less than 1% were herptiles (reptiles and amphibians). It should be noted, however, that the provisioning rates and proportions of different prey types seem to vary among the individual boxes. Pellets and prey remains are currently being organized and examined; they will be used to potentially identify example genera and species included in the diets.

Twelve additional nestboxes will be erected during the fall of 2013, which will allow for a more robust collection of diet data during the summer of 2014. Future work may also include an investigation of

habitat use via radio telemetry, which would reveal the preferred hunting areas of individual kestrels and could help explain diet variation among boxes.

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Kestrel nestlings ready for banding.

Snow Cavities as Nighttime Roosts

Scott W. Gillihan

Some cavity-nesting birds do not fly to warm, tropical paradises for the winter. Instead, they tough it out in cold, snowy regions, smug in the knowledge that they will have first crack at nest cavities come spring. But this refusal to flee arctic blasts comes at a cost: Choosing where to roost at night can be a life-or-death decision.

Bluebirds and other cavity nesters sometimes pile into a natural tree cavity or nestbox. In fact, so many birds may squeeze inside that some near the bottom actually suffocate and die. Fortunately, such deaths appear to be uncommon. It is more common for all the birds survive the cold night thanks to the collective heat of so many bodies in such a small space.

Another, more unusual, strategy involves sleeping in the snow. Some types of grouse routinely burrow into the snow, where they spend the night safe and relatively warm, thanks to the insulating effect of snow. Some songbird species use this method as well. In general, they are birds that are adapted to life in cold, snowy conditions. Examples from North America include Snow Buntings (Bagg 1943) and Common Redpolls (Furness and Peterson 1987, Collins and Peterson 2003); examples from Europe include Goldcrests (Lagerström 1979), which are closely related to our Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Great Tits (Helle 1980, Jarska and Wysocki 2012), which are closely related to our chickadees.

In some cases, the birds merely seek shelter under overhanging snow drifts or similar features where snow-covered vegetation creates a welcoming hollow. But in other cases the birds actively dig shallow burrows in the soft snow of a vertical snow bank—these cavities are just 2–3 inches deep, just large enough for a bird to roost with its head sticking out. Such a roost would shield a bird from wind and the snow would insulate against the cold night air, thus providing a comparatively cozy place to sleep.

If you find yourself watching birds in the winter snow, watch closely for burrowing behavior. Small birds such as chickadees, kinglets, and nuthatches might seek shelter in snow banks in extremely cold weather, especially at dusk, when they need to find a warm place to pass the long, cold winter night.

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Which Cavity-Nesting Birds Need Help?

Scott W. Gillihan

When Larry Zeleny issued his 1970s call to action to help bluebirds, the bluebird-loving community responded in strength. Nestboxes were built, organizations were formed. As a result, Eastern Bluebird populations rebounded, and the species is no longer imperiled.

Sadly, in the intervening years, populations of some other native cavity-nesting species have declined. Many of those species are now in dire need of help—exactly the kind of help provided to bluebirds for the

last few decades. The enthusiasm, experience, and expertise of NABS’s members could go a long way toward pulling some of these other species back from the brink of extinction.

A collaborative bird conservation group called Partners in Flight has developed a system to prioritize conservation efforts (Panjabi et al 2012). In an article in last year’s *Bluebird* (Gillihan 2012), I presented that system and the scores that resulted for North American cavity-nesting landbirds (waterfowl

Table 1. Cavity-nesting landbird species in North America, ranked by conservation priority, with North American population estimates. See Gillihan (2012) for an explanation of the scores.

Priority	Species	Score	Population	Priority	Species	Score	Population
1	Ivory-billed Woodpecker	20	unknown	33	Mountain Chickadee	10	7,500,000
2	Red-cockaded Woodpecker	18	15,000	34	Boreal Owl	10	not available
3	Spotted Owl	15	15,000	35	Carolina Chickadee	10	12,000,000
4	Flammulated Owl	15	12,000	36	Golden-fronted Woodpecker	9	580,000
5	Oak Titmouse	14	500,000	37	Eastern Screech-Owl	9	800,000
6	Gilded Flicker	14	200,000	38	Acorn Woodpecker	9	1,500,000
7	Prothonotary Warbler	14	1,600,000	39	Northern Saw-whet Owl	9	not available
8	Elf Owl	13	70,000	40	Gray-headed Chickadee	9	not available
9	Lewis's Woodpecker	13	70,000	41	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	9	2,100,000
10	Williamson's Sapsucker	13	300,000	42	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	9	9,700,000
11	Nuttall's Woodpecker	13	600,000	43	Brown-crested Flycatcher	9	not available
12	Brown-headed Nuthatch	13	1,100,000	44	Western Bluebird	9	4,500,000
13	Red-headed Woodpecker	13	1,200,000	45	Ash-throated Flycatcher	9	5,200,000
14	Lucy's Warbler	13	2,000,000	46	Mountain Bluebird	8	4,600,000
15	Bridled Titmouse	12	90,000	47	Red-bellied Woodpecker	8	10,000,000
16	Juniper Titmouse	12	180,000	48	Tufted Titmouse	8	8,000,000
17	Red-breasted Sapsucker	12	2,000,000	49	Downy Woodpecker	8	14,000,000
18	White-headed Woodpecker	12	150,000	50	Violet-green Swallow	8	5,800,000
19	Western Screech-Owl	12	300,000	51	Purple Martin	8	6,000,000
20	Chimney Swift	12	7,800,000	52	Great Crested Flycatcher	8	6,700,000
21	Northern Pygmy-Owl	11	60,000	53	Tree Swallow	8	17,000,000
22	Boreal Chickadee	11	12,000,000	54	Pileated Woodpecker	7	1,900,000
23	American Kestrel	11	2,200,000	55	Barred Owl	7	3,000,000
24	Northern Flicker	10	8,100,000	56	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	7	10,000,000
25	Northern Hawk Owl	10	60,000	57	Carolina Wren	7	13,000,000
26	Gila Woodpecker	10	400,000	58	Eastern Bluebird	7	19,000,000
27	Black-crested Titmouse	10	500,000	59	White-breasted Nuthatch	6	8,300,000
28	Black-backed Woodpecker	10	800,000	60	Hairy Woodpecker	6	8,600,000
29	Am. Three-toed Woodpecker	10	1,100,000	61	Red-breasted Nuthatch	6	20,000,000
30	Red-naped Sapsucker	10	2,000,000	62	Black-capped Chickadee	6	41,000,000
31	Pygmy Nuthatch	10	2,000,000	63	House Wren	5	42,000,000
32	Bewick's Wren	10	4,000,000				

were omitted). Subsequently, Partners in Flight has revisited the population estimates and made some changes; those changes have resulted in some changes to the ranking. Also, I realized that in my earlier article I inadvertently presented population totals for each species' entire population, rather than just their North American populations.

These revised rankings are presented in the table on the opposite page. One thing that bears special mention: The five most common native cavity-nesting birds in North America are (in decreasing order) House Wren, Black-capped Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Eastern Bluebird, and Tree Swallow. Yes, NABS members and other bluebird enthusiasts have done such an excellent job of bringing back the Eastern Bluebird that it is now one of the most common cavity-nesters on the continent, with an estimated population of *19 million!*

The recommendation (the plea?) printed in my earlier article still stands: NABS members and other conservation-minded individuals should seriously consider working to help other cavity-nesting birds in addition to helping bluebirds. A good approach:

1. Identify the highest-ranking species in Table 1 that are found near your home (for many of you, a good starting point might be Prothonotary Warbler or Brown-headed Nuthatch).
2. Learn as much as possible about the factors that are impacting the species' populations (for many species, it's a lack of suitable nesting sites, a shortfall that can be overcome with careful placement of properly sized nestboxes).
3. Take concrete steps to address those factors,

bringing the same level of enthusiasm and dedication that have served so well to restore bluebird populations.

Resources abound for learning about birds and their habitat needs. I haven't seen it yet but I've heard very good things about the new book by Barker and Wolfson (2013)—this might be a good place to start.



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Fly the Friendly Skies with a Friendly Bird

Torrey Wenger

Perhaps no other bird in North America is as well loved as the Purple Martin. The bluebird has its supporters, the turkey and ducks have whole societies, but for sheer dedication, Purple Martin landlords have them all beat. Stories abound of landlords trying for years to attract a nesting colony and of people flinging crickets into the air to feed their martins during cold snaps. For their part, Purple Martins are perfectly willing to live in human-made housing in human-dominated landscapes.

The largest of our swallows, weighing in at over twice that of a Barn Swallow, the Purple Martin is a bit of a specialist. It likes fairly open habitat, especially near water, and it requires an existing nesting cavity. While some housing manufacturers tout the martin's mosquito-eating prowess, mosquitoes account for a measly 3 percent (or less!) of its diet. Large birds prefer large prey and Purple Martins prefer dragonflies and damselflies, both mosquito predators, rather than the insignificantly sized pest.

As any landlord could tell you, Purple Martins exhibit site fidelity, returning to the same area each year. The oldest birds return first and claim the best nesting sites. As the younger martins arrive, they get the less-preferred sites. Once a colony outgrows its location, the "overflow" birds have to find new cavities somewhere else. This site loyalty can cause problems. If a colony succumbs to bad weather, that location can go unclaimed until excess birds from a different colony discover it.

Declining Populations

Unfortunately, Purple Martins are declining in many areas, including here in Michigan, so overflow birds are hard to find. Comparing the two Michigan Breeding Bird Atlas periods (1980s and 2000s), these large and noticeable birds were found in 40 percent fewer townships. The decline is steepest in the north: In the Upper Peninsula, occupied townships fell from 133 to only 11, a drop of more than 90 percent. The Breeding Bird Survey has also documented this species' difficulties, showing an annual decline of 8.2 percent in Michigan. The survey-wide trend is an annual decline of 0.5 percent, so the core population seems to be doing fine. At the edge of the range, the story is different.

There are several theories about why this species is in trouble. The first is, of course, the weather. Martins are aerial insectivores, catching bugs in midair. A prolonged cold snap, especially with rain, means insects aren't flying and so martins aren't eating. (Hence the dedicated landlords flinging crickets.) Cold wet conditions are responsible for more mortality than all the other causes combined. With our erratic weather over the last few decades, the lack of martins in northern Michigan is not surprising.

Other limiting factors include nest competitors (House Sparrows and European Starlings), predators at the nest especially (since one hungry raccoon can wipe out a whole colony's young), and pesticides (fewer bugs means less food, and poisoned bugs can pass those poisons on to their predators).

How to Help

Luckily, helping Purple Martins is easy. It begins with using fewer outdoor chemicals and continues with putting up housing (and diligent "landlording"). If you're interested, check out Michigan Purple Martins online at www.michiganmartins.com

or the Purple Martin Conservation Association at www.purplemartin.org. Penny Briscoe, manager of a successful colony near Vicksburg for more than 20 years, has shared her tips at the annual Michigan Bird Conservation Initiative conferences. Once you have the Purple Martin bug, you're never quite the same.

The Purple Martin is just one of over 200 species featured in the two editions of the Michigan Breeding Bird Atlas, available online at www.mibirdatlas.org. Each species has a map showing the results of both atlases, so changes over the intervening two decades can be easily seen.

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While some tout the Purple Martin's mosquito-eating prowess, mosquitoes account for a measly 3 percent (or less!) of the martin's diet

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Torrey Wenger, a volunteer with the Kalamazoo Nature Center's Kalamazoo Valley Bird Observatory, has been a birder since college. Her favorite early migrant is the Prothonotary Warbler. Contact her at torrey.canyon@gmail.com.

This article was printed with permission from Michigan Audubon. Author Torrey Wenger's piece was part of a year-long series featured by Michigan Audubon in its award-winning member magazine, the Jack Pine Warbler. For more information about Michigan Audubon and becoming a member of the state's oldest conservation organization, please visit www.michiganaudubon.org.

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Using Technology to Track Purple Martins and Mountain Bluebirds

Myrna Pearman

Over the past two years, Ellis Bird Farm (EBF) has teamed up with Dr. Kevin Fraser of the Stutchbury Lab, York University (Toronto) to track Purple Martins using light-level geolocators. Dr. Bridget Stutchbury and her team at York (www.yorku.ca/bstutch) have pioneered the use of geolocators on both Wood Thrushes and Purple Martins, a technology that is revolutionizing the understanding of migration and how bird populations are connected in space and time.

Charlie and Winnie Ellis, founders of Ellis Bird Farm, had martins nesting on the farm in the 1960s and 1970s. Numbers gradually declined as tree growth crowded the houses, then a severe spring storm in 1982 killed the few remaining pairs. The martins returned in 1999 when new houses were put up by EBF under the mentorship of a local martin organization, the Purple Martin Conservancy (PMC). Martin numbers have increased each year and the 70 pairs that now nest on the site are enjoyed by more than 10,000 visitors each summer. Needless to say, we were keen to get involved with the geolocator project when extended the invitation by the Camrose Wildlife and Stewardship Society. Our sites are of particular interest to researchers because these birds are breeding at the northern edge of their range.

In 2012, a total of 22 geolocators were deployed at EBF and 29 in the Camrose area. Under the guidance of PMC our staff assisted with trapping and other



A Purple Martin is removed from a martin house so the geolocator can be recovered.

logistics, and Dr. Fraser trained our team to quickly and gently attach the units. The deployments were watched by a fascinated public as well as several school groups. Several adults and many thrilled children were able to release the birds, newly outfitted with their tiny backpacks.

As soon as the martins began arriving back at Ellis Bird Farm in late April, 2013, staff and volunteers—armed with spotting scopes and binoculars—spent hours searching for returned birds. We also put out the call to all martin keepers in the area, asking them to watch for geo'd birds at their sites. With only the tiny probe visible, and then only when the feathers were in a certain position, the search was a challenge.

Finally, on May 15th, we were able to confirm our first geo'd bird, a female. Using a very low-tech capturing system (a long-handled paint roller!), we trapped the bird, lowered the house and gingerly removed her from her compartment. In the safety of my office, with the door closed perchance she escaped our grasp, we carefully snipped off her little pack and packaged it for shipping to Dr. Fraser. Within a few days he had downloaded the data and, for the first time ever, was able to share with us the remarkable journey of the first northern-nesting martin ever to be tracked. We named this bird Amelia in honour of the world's most famous female aviator. Logging the longest journey of any martin ever recorded, Amelia travelled more than 13,000 mi (21,000 km) on her round trip journey between Brazil and Ellis Bird Farm. The geolocator data showed that she left Ellis Bird Farm on August 24th, headed east, then turned south, crossed the Gulf of Mexico, spent 28 days in Belize, and then spent the



A Purple Martin is released after being fitted with a light-level geolocator.

remainder of the winter in three different roosting sites in the Amazon Basin. What is most remarkable is her return to the farm: She left Brazil on April 24 and rocketed back to Ellis Bird Farm in only 21 days, averaging 375 mi (600 km) per day! The map Dr. Fraser prepared of her journey is shown below.

Over the next few weeks, six more geo'd birds were captured (five at Ellis Bird Farm and one in Camrose). Maps and travelogues were created for all units except one, which disappointingly had a dead battery. Summaries of these journeys can be found at www.ellisbirdfarm.ca.

Not only was this project remarkable because it revealed information new to science, it provided us with a wonderful opportunity to share the journeys with our visiting public and through local media. It was amazing to see how transfixed visitors were to learn of these birds' remarkable travels. In my many years of teaching the public about nature, I have never witnessed visitors becoming so touched, in such a transformative way (some even to tears!), upon hearing the real-life stories of "our" birds.

In 2014, we are hoping to expand the scope of the project to track Mountain Bluebirds between their breeding grounds in Central Alberta and their wintering areas in the southern US and northern



Mexico. This expanded project will use light-level geocators as well as new GPS technology.

As readers of this magazine are well aware, Mountain Bluebirds are a much-loved species. In Alberta, as elsewhere across North America, dedicated organizations and many individuals have established nestbox trails in an attempt to bolster the bluebird populations. Educational efforts by EBF and other bluebird organizations in Alberta have served to increase public awareness about bluebirds and encourage participation in their conservation through the establishment of nestbox trails.

Despite valiant conservation efforts, however, Mountain Bluebird populations are showing significant regional declines. The bluebird population has declined 75% in the Ellis Bird Farm Management Area (a 100-square-mile area surrounding the farm) since a population high was recorded in the early 1990s. While spring weather, especially a devastating snowstorm in the spring of 2008, has no doubt had an impact on Alberta populations, there may be other factors contributing to this alarming trend. These factors may occur within Alberta, along migratory routes, and/or on their wintering range.

Although extensive data have been collected on Mountain Bluebird productivity on most major bluebird trails in the province, significant data deficiencies remain. For example, post-fledging movements of Alberta Mountain Bluebirds are unknown, and migratory routes and overwintering routes are known only from a few banding records. It is hoped that the use of these technologies will help identify specific post-fledging movements, migratory routes, stopovers and year-round habitat. Ideally, this information will lead to a better understanding of the threats and perhaps assist with mitigation measures.

Bluebirds can be considered the proverbial "canaries in the coal mine" of ecosystem health. By linking Alberta breeding populations to their overwintering sites in the southern US and northern Mexico, we can examine impacts not only of local factors on Alberta's environment, but also those outside of Alberta's borders. We look forward to sharing the results from our bluebird research in future issues of *Bluebird*.

Since 1987, Myrna Pearman has managed Ellis Bird Farm (www.ellisbirdfarm.ca), an organization dedicated to the conservation of native cavity-nesting birds. She has authored several books about bluebirds and gardening for wildlife, and is a newspaper and magazine columnist. She is the recipient of a NABS award (1996) as well as a Nature Educator of the Year award from the Roger Tory Peterson Institute.



Love is Powerful Stuff

Judge Rembert

They came from many states....
They came from several countries...
They arrived many different ways...
They had one plan....

In their hearts was a common love...
Love of a little blue bird...
Love of the outdoors...
Love of nature....

That common love can lead to more loves...
Love of any kind is a strange critter....
Love divides and multiplies...
Love of a bird can multiply into...
Love of more animals...
Then into love of nature in general...
Then into love of humans....

This special group of people...
People from different places...
People from different walks of life...
Male, female, sorta old and sorta young...
Immediately these strangers bonded...
Bonded into one family....

A family bonded by a love...
One sunny afternoon there was a miracle...
No one noticed as it happened...
It just happened...
Love is powerful stuff....

There were smiles...
There were hugs...
There was laughter...
There was real caring...
This is 2013 and thank God...
Love is still powerful....

For four and one half days...
In a little town called Aiken...
In the state of South Carolina...
This miracle lived....

Many people were touched by this miracle...
The town was touched by this miracle...
Miracles are powerful as well...
All who were touched felt the love....

Some may not have recognized love...
But they felt something...
Something that made them feel better...
Something that made them smile...
Something that made their heart warm....

Unselfish love is not common...
Unselfish love is rare in 2013...
It is the fast pace of the times...
Maybe little blue birds are more than birds.

Maybe they are locators...
Maybe they are God's locators...
Locators of hearts that spread love...
Maybe not... but....

But there was one old lady in that group...
She had the honor of spending time...
Watching love work...
Watching love work that miracle...
She will draw off of that experience...
She was touched by each smile...
She was touched by each caring heart...

She will carry that memory of love...
She will share it with others...
She will go to bed at night and thank God...
Thank God for allowing her to learn...
Learn about the power of love....

It was called the Annual Meeting of the
North American Bluebird Society...
But it was so much more...
It was a love in action...
It was a quiet miracle....

BluesNews

It Takes a Village to Raise a Nuthatch

In November, the National Audubon Society and Toyota announced the recipients of grants provided through their conservation program, Toyota TogetherGreen. Audubon North Carolina will receive \$40,000 for its plan to promote bird-friendly communities in North Carolina by engaging building owners and architects to create bird-friendly structures and helping landscape architects and homeowners utilize native landscape materials to improve habitat for birds and people. In addition, the program will engage partners and the public to erect **10,000 nestboxes** for the Brown-headed Nuthatch, a cavity-nesting species of conservation concern found in the southeastern U.S.

Hard-Headed Hammerers Help with Human Helmets

A bicycling accident left British designer Ani Surabhi with a concussion and an idea: The world needs a lighter, more protective cycling helmet. He looked to nature for inspiration, and found that woodpeckers can strike trees 10 times per second with their beaks without suffering any brain damage. Their secret is found between the base of the beak and the skull: a corrugated cartilage structure that absorbs the force of each impact, rather than passing the force to the brain. Ani created a similar corrugated structure from cardboard and cut it into interlocking strips that fit inside a hard plastic helmet. The result is a helmet that is lighter than conventional cycling helmets but can withstand up to three times the impact. Nature knows best!

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!



Mary Roen spied this very nice sign in Leland, Michigan this summer while on vacation. “Besides loving the name, the food was great too!” she says.



“Here’s another example of ‘Bluebirds Everywhere!’ I’ve had this for years.” –Shelly Cucugliello, Secretary, New Jersey Bluebird Society



Marci Swanson reports that “Brian and I saw this brand of pineapple juice in Martin’s Country Store in Moira, New York. It was not one we were familiar with and so took a phone photo.”



Diane Allison sent this image of another eating establishment—this one in Norwich, New York.



BlueBird is a Charlotte, NC-based manufacturer of landscaping equipment such as sod cutters, stump grinders, and this lawn vacuum system owned by Herb Unkrich. Herb is a member of NABS and the East Central Illinois Bluebird Society.

Research Review

A Summary of Recent Scientific Research on Bluebirds and Other Cavity Nesters

Scott W. Gillihan

Uh, Oh—Are We Putting Nestboxes in the Wrong Places?

Conventional wisdom says that bluebird nestboxes should be placed away from woody or brushy areas, which might favor the sometimes-destructive House Wren. Following this convention results in greater nesting success, with more bluebird young fledging from each box.

But what happens after fledging? A recent study examined the postfledging period, and the results offer a challenge to the conventional wisdom.

A two-year study of 473 nest attempts in Virginia found that bluebird fledglings from nestboxes that were located away from trees and shrubs had a *lower* survival rate than fledglings from nestboxes close to woody vegetation. This bears repeating: Bluebirds that fledged from nestboxes in areas of **dense forest** and **little grass** were more likely to survive than bluebirds from nestboxes placed in open areas.

Most fledglings that did not survive the first 10 days were killed by hawks, and almost half of those deaths occurred in the first two days after fledging. Newly fledged bluebirds are weak fliers; if they cannot quickly and easily get to dense cover, they are easy prey for hawks. Dense trees and shrubs offer superb protection for fledglings, whereas open areas with scattered trees leave fledglings vulnerable to attack as they attempt to move between trees; in addition, the foraging activities of adult bluebirds in very open areas may attract the attention of hawks who then discover the hiding places of fledglings.

The study's authors recommend that nestboxes be placed "near areas of dense forest or close to trees with perches for fledglings."

Allyson K. Jackson, Joshua P. Froneberger, and Daniel A. Cristol. 2013. Habitat near Nest Boxes Correlated with Fate of Eastern Bluebird Fledglings in an Urban Landscape. *Urban Ecosystems* 16:367–376.

Purple Martin Fall Migration Rate

Members of the eastern subspecies of Purple Martin breed throughout much of eastern North America and, in the fall, they travel more than 7,000 km (4,300 mi) to South America to spend the winter. The path taken on the first leg of the journey, to Central America, depends on the breeding site: Martins from the western part of the range follow the eastern coast of Mexico into Central America; martins from the East travel south through Florida, then hopscotch across Cuba to Central America; martins from areas in between travel south to the Gulf shore, then fly straight across the Gulf of Mexico.

This long, taxing flight across open water should, in theory, force those martins to spend more time resting and replenishing their exhausted fat stores once they reach land in Central America. After all, during their flight they have no opportunity to perch anywhere and limited opportunity to forage.

But the theory is wrong. Based on results from a study using birds fitted with light-recording geolocators, martins that make the long flight across the Gulf of Mexico *don't* need extra time to recuperate in Central America.

It appears that the migration pattern for Purple Martins follows a set pattern, regardless of the breeding area, date of departure, or path taken to Central America:

1. Spend several weeks gathering in large groups near the breeding area.
2. Migrate rapidly to Central America, flying 2,000 km (about 1,250 mi) in less than a week.
3. Take a leisurely break of 1–3 weeks to fatten up on bugs and molt flight feathers.
4. Migrate the rest of the way to South America.



So even though different subpopulations of martins leave their breeding grounds on different dates and take different routes, they all take about the same amount of time to get to their South American wintering grounds.

Kevin C. Fraser, Bridget J. M. Stutchbury, Patrick Kramer, and nine other authors. 2013. Consistent Range-wide Pattern in Fall Migration Strategy of Purple Martin (*Progne subis*), Despite Different Migration Routes at the Gulf of Mexico. *The Auk* 130:291–296.

Confusing Coloration of Some Female Mountain Bluebirds

Female Mountain Bluebirds are virtually always presented in field guides as having a plain gray throat and breast. But many females sport a pale orange patch on the throat and breast. This patch is especially obvious in the fall, after bluebirds have finished their annual molt of feathers. It gradually fades as the feathers wear down.

Such an orange-ish female may be mistaken by observers for either a Western or Eastern Bluebird. Some of these females have no doubt been misidentified as hybrids of Mountain Bluebirds and one of the other bluebird species. According to

plumage and identification expert Tony Leukering, the way to identify it as a Mountain Bluebird is to look for “the longer, paler-blue wings and tail and the thinner bill lacking pale tones.”

Tony Leukering. 2013. Warm-Colored Mountain Bluebirds: An Unappreciated Identification Pitfall. *Colorado Birds* 47:297–299.



Female Mountain Bluebird showing a rufous tinge on the throat and breast, which could cause some confusion when identifying to species. Photo by David Waltman

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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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