



Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project Newsletter – Spring 2008

An affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society



From the President's Nest

Box *-by Nancy Fraser*

Welcome, everyone, to the beginning of another nesting season. We welcome all of the breeding native species, but especially cavity nesters and more especially Western Bluebirds! It has been such a pleasure to be out on bluebird routes already this spring, especially with the predominance of bright, blue weather. Some days, it's even been warm! The bluebirds have not disappointed, as I have never failed to see at least a few birds every time I have been out.

Monitors and Banders are busily checking nest boxes for weather integrity, cleaning out winter roosting debris, and making necessary repairs and replacements. We welcome Caroline and Stephen Brandt as new Banders this year, and are pleased to recognize Sondra Moroney and Zenobia Lapeyre as Assistants to the Banders. Our Spring New Monitor Workshop was very well attended. Please join me in welcoming Marilyn Jones, Debby White, Lauri Skinner, Susan Sokol-Blosser and Russ Rosner, Karen Apland, Marcia Sherry, and Nelda and Ron Skidmore, as new monitors. Sadly, volunteers who have been vital contributors to our project have had to leave due to relocation or other commitments. Thank

you and best wishes to Michael Terramin, Gaila Couch, Marilyn van Dyk, Gordon Craft, and Judi Peterson. I hope that I have not left anyone out.

Brenda McGowan, Pat Johnston, Lauri Kunzman, and I have just returned from the 30th Anniversary Meeting of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS), in Kearney, Nebraska. This was a gala event, loaded with celebration, wonderful speakers, and the extra bonus of seeing and HEARING tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes as they stop over along the Platte River to feed and rest for the last legs of their migration to their nesting grounds in Canada and beyond.

Please review the Important Upcoming Dates section and mark your calendars for important events such as the 2010 NABS Convention in OREGON! Plans are in the early stages for this event in 2010, and you will be hearing more as preparations move into higher gear. We are gathering ideas for speakers, events, exhibitors and vendors, so if you have input, please contact us via our telephone message line (503) 245-8445 or Email at email@prescottbluebird.com.

Meanwhile, birds are singing, being caught with nesting material in their beaks, daffodils and forsythia are blooming, and pussy willows and cherry blossoms are itching to burst out. Finally!

Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project

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Earthworms and Bluebirds

-by Lauri Kunzman, PBRP Monitor and Bander

Fact and Fiction: I always thought that since bluebirds love mealworms and are a 'cousin' to the robin they would love to eat earthworms. **WRONG.** In his speech entitled *Keeping Bluebirds Safe*, presented at the recent BAN/NABS conference, Keith Radel, a veteran Minnesota bluebirder, told us that when you observe earthworms in the nesting box, it is a sure sign of desperation.

Earthworms are at the very lowest end of the bluebirds' food preferences. It is thought the earthworms actually act in breaking down the fecal sacs and what may remain in the nest is a muddy looking guano mess, and very different in appearance to a normally used nest. If you find earthworms **OR** muddy guano please see this as a red flag. It is time to feed additional supplements and please alert your bander immediately to develop a feeding plan. You will find this mostly with the spring clutch when food sources may be scarce.

MYTH: You should collect earthworms and put them in a feeder for bluebirds.

REALITY: Bluebirds love *mealworms*, but should not be fed earthworms. The baby birds' undeveloped stomachs apparently can't handle earthworms because of the dirt castings in the worms' gut. Eating earthworms (sometimes used as a food source by bluebird parents during bad weather, when nothing else is available) can cause severe diarrhea, which can result in dehydration and starvation (*sialia.org*). This might be a good time to supplement with a bluebird-friendly suet.



Spring New Monitor Information Session

The 2008 Spring Information Session was held at Champoeg State Heritage Area on February 9. There was a wonderful turnout of guests interested in learning about bluebirds and in becoming PBRP volunteer nest box monitors.

Lauri Kunzman gave an inspired presentation covering the history and purpose of the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project, the Western Bluebird, and the basics of the bluebird nesting cycle and nest box monitoring. Caroline and Stephen Brandt assisted Becky Snyder in dramatizing the monitoring of a first clutch nesting cycle by first year Monitors and their Bander. The toy bluebird in the nest was an inspiration. None of us was about to mention that it looked most like an Eastern Bluebird.

Many of the attendees volunteered to become bluebird trail monitors, and a further number volunteered for other activities, deferring their interest in monitoring to a future season. We will keep in touch with these individuals through our newsletter and personal contact when events relating to bluebirds are taking place.

At the afternoon session for returning Monitors and Banders, an informal discussion about nest boxes and how to reduce predation by mammal and bird species resulted in a lot of shared information. We talked about how the Wildlife Care Center at Audubon Society of Portland could be used to assist injured and orphaned bluebirds. Dave Flaming and Nancy Fraser reviewed the required year end

reports, and there was a round robin discussion of how monitors could best arrange their record keeping, making it easy and efficient to complete these reports and turn them in to their Banders on time for the year end data deadline.

At both sessions, door prizes were provided by Backyard Bird Shop. Mike Niss, Champoeg Visitors' Services Team Leader, presented an interesting overview of Champoeg State Heritage Area and its role in the upcoming Oregon Sesquicentennial Celebrations, to be held in 2009.



Important Dates

June 21, 2008

Champoeg Bluebird Festival

September 20, 2008

Year-end Reports Due to Database Manager

September 20, 2008

Fall Wrap-Up

TBA

Fall Planting at Champoeg State Heritage Area

October 1-3, 2009

2009 North American Bluebird Society Convention, Gettysburg, PA

TBA

In Oregon
2010 North American Bluebird Society Convention

Native Plant-In at Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge – Impressions

The following story describes the onsite experiences of two volunteers at the Plant-In. This event is the first in a planned two year project funded by a generous grant from the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation. The project plan is to purchase and plant native berry and seed-bearing plants within the boundaries of two local areas where Western Bluebirds are known to winter: the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge and Champoeg State Heritage Area. This project has been coordinated by Jack Carter, PBRP volunteer monitor and Board Member. We thank Jack and Weyerhaeuser for the opportunity to participate in this first planting, and look forward to learning what native plants are attractive to bluebirds, and the second planting to take place at Champoeg.

Is it going to rain, or drizzle, or clear up...or just hang there looking ominous? No way to tell this time of year, so I just had to commit and take what came.

I arrived at 9:00 a.m. on March 1st with gloves, boots, and a rain jacket. We gathered in the Refuge parking lot -- a combination of PBRP volunteers, Friends of the Refuge, Girl Scouts involved in a joint program with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and a scattering of Brownies. We carpooled out to the work site on the Oleson Unit. Fortunately, a “cast of thousands” showed up to help plant what looked like a gazillion bare root and potted shrubs.

I must applaud the U.S. Fish and Wildlife staff's organizational and crowd control skills! Pete Schmidt, the Refuge biologist, explained the project and got us moving!

He also made us aware of sustenance—food bars and bottled water that Jack Carter had arranged to have on hand with the other planting equipment.

We sorted ourselves out into tasks and teams and got to work (in a drizzly rain). I started out rolling up the blue tubes that protect the bare root plants from nibblers and also act as individual greenhouses to nurture the young plants. Then I took a break and warmed up with a cup of coffee. By then the rain had stopped. I went out to help dig holes and plant.

We planted along rows marked out by twine so the area could be mowed next summer without hitting the plants. Each one of those plants required a hole, a tube, and anchoring sticks, and a marker pole with a color-coded ribbon.

It was really a pleasure to work so efficiently on improvised teams. You just found someone and started working with them. Everyone was on the same (albeit muddy) page. *–Carolyn Uyemura, Monitor and Friends of the Refuge Member*

Here I was with my camera, binoculars, and shovel . . . two items to keep under cover and dry in the intermittent rain, and only two hands for that and operation of the shovel. Working side by side with fellow PBRP monitors and banders, and the occasional Brownie trooper, I managed to plant an assortment of bare root shrubs purchased from Scholls Valley Native Nursery. There were in fact 700 bare root and 500 containerized shrubs to be planted. Through the cheerful efforts of this morning's volunteers, nearly all of the bare root plants made it into their allotted spaces. The containerized plants, more tolerant of a brief delay, will go into the ground over the next week to ten days.

As I look out over the field that was previously bare of all but surface roughage, scratch plants and grasses, noting the PBRP nest boxes on the edges, it is tantalizing to imagine what this site will look like as the plants prosper and mature, and good to feel a part of this restoration of habitat and plant community. It will be interesting to see what use over wintering bluebirds will have with our offerings.

As I departed, I felt emotionally taller and in fact I was taller, due to the 2 inches of gumbo mud temporarily solidified on the soles of my boots. *–Nancy Fraser, PBRP Bander*



Volunteering

–Zenobia Lapeyre

I looked into the faces of all the potential monitors and I wanted to say, yes, by all means sign up to be a bluebird nest box monitor, but there are some things you need to know. This is the reason for the information session, to present details of bluebird monitoring -- both the joy and the reality of nature.

When I decided to become a monitor, I thought I would be a sort of third-party objective observer; I did not realize how involved I would become.

I loved the early mornings in rural areas, the air filled with bird songs and farm sounds. I found myself singing “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” more than once - you know, the song that has the line “Mr. Bluebird’s on my shoulder...”

The truth is, these birds are not Disney characters, nor are they pets. They are wild creatures with strong inbred instincts that will keep the species going. They were here long before our arrival and they will be here

long afterwards. Our project provides nest boxes to replace lost nesting cavities. It is a deeply satisfying feeling to know that you have helped in some small way to make the job of procreation a little easier, and maybe even made the difference between life and death for a few nestlings.

It is a hard job for adults to rear a clutch to maturity. There are perils and predators associated with each step of the process, and the chicks won’t all survive. Monitors can help in this process and maybe tilt the scales in favor of the bluebirds.

It won’t be easy. There will be many days of pure misery. In the midst of the rainy season, you will be muddy from the ground up, wet from the head down, and soggy in between from tall wet grasses. It might help to remember that the bluebirds with hungry nestlings don’t have the option of staying in bed; they must be out in search of food for an ever-increasing demand of growing nestlings. You will forget your own physical discomfort as you watch the adult bluebirds quickly gather your offering of mealworms to feed a nest full of hungry young.

You will probably make extra trips to the nest boxes during the extremes in our Northwest weather, to make sure the nests are dry enough or the chicks are warm enough or cool enough.

In spite of it all, there will be losses. The bluebirds are a link in the greater scheme of nature, as we all are, but the losses will feel more personal. But there will be triumphs, too, and they will somehow overshadow the losses. When you see surviving fledglings perched on a fence post, accepting food from a still watchful adult, you will rejoice. And when the sun catches the incredible blue as one of the bluebirds takes flight, your heart will soar, too.

Bluebirds, Sandhill Cranes, and an Anniversary Celebration in Kearney, Nebraska

-Nancy Fraser, PBRP President

Four PBRP volunteers braved the elements and the airways to visit Kearney, Nebraska, along the Platte River, for the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS). The event was held in conjunction with the Great Plains Sandhill Crane and Bluebird Festival. The festival was organized by the Bluebirds Across Nebraska group (BAN), which, like PBRP, is an affiliate of NABS. Unlike our organization, theirs is a statewide network of volunteer monitors and property owners. They have this kind of party every year!!!

One of the birding highlights of the event was the opportunity to go out at dawn or at dusk to a bird blind along the river flats to experience the arrival (dusk) and departure (dawn) of thousands of Sandhill Cranes. During the day, one could see and hear them in modest numbers, and the flights of Snow Geese and Canada Geese of several varieties were massive and truly impressive. Words don't do an adequate job of describing the sight. One of the speakers presented a remarkable video series showing and explaining the habits and social interactions of these very beautiful cranes (The Private Lives of Sandhill Cranes).

Other speakers presented topics from best nest box design practices and predator control, to reminiscences of mischievous childhood days in Minnesota. There were thoughtful and warmly amusing presentations by Bill Thompson (No Child Left Behind--Getting Kids into Nature & Birds) and Julie Zickefoose (creating an 80 acre wildlife habitat, and the plants that go

with it). Julie also talked about her inspiring recent book, *Letters from Eden*, with a book signing after the end of the program.

Good humor was in evidence, and just wonderful hospitality from the convention hotel, to the convention organizers, to the local and distant attendees. Those of us there from Oregon got a warm welcome from our fellow bluebirders from Nebraska, from the NABS board members in attendance, and from affiliates from all over the U.S. and Canada.

We want to welcome these wonderful people who love bluebirds as much as we do to our home in the Pacific Northwest for the 2010 NABS Conference, which, as the local NABS Affiliate organization, we will be hosting. It is our intent that this be an Oregon and Northwest celebration, not a PBRP/NABS celebration only. We returned home to the warmth of an Oregon spring, chilled, but happy with our trip.



Cats and Wildlife

From the American Bird Conservancy, reprinted with permission

Protect cats, birds, and other wildlife by keeping cats indoors!

What do indoor cats miss?

- killing birds
- getting lost
- getting stolen
- getting hit by a car
- fatal feline diseases
- dog attacks
- abscesses
- worms
- fleas
- ticks

What Good Is A Dead Tree?

Originally published in Bluebirds Across Nebraska, Winter 2004, and reprinted with permission

Standing dead trees, called SNAGS, provide birds and mammals with shelter to raise young and raptors with unobstructed vantage points. Woodpeckers and creepers feast on wood-eating insects and provide “sawdust” for ants to process. Deer eat the lichen growing on the trunks.

Snags provide homes and fast food for wood boring insects, ants, and termites, which can help decompose the tree and release its nutrients. Even while rotting, a snag’s roots help anchor soil and prevent erosion. Rich in humus, a fallen tree can serve as a nurse log for seedlings.

Death is a part of the forest cycle. In an undisturbed forest, it may take a century for a 12 foot, 3 inch pine to decompose but the whole forest benefits from the slow release of nutrients and by-products.

Some SNAG facts with major impacts:

-Over 550 species of birds, 300 species of mammals and reptiles, and nearly all fish benefit from snags for food, nesting, or shelter.

-Only 30 bird species are capable of making their own nest cavities in trees. Another 80 animal species depend upon previously-excavated (secondary cavities) or natural tree holes for their nests.

-The insulation of a tree trunk home allows many animal species to survive high summer and low winter temperature extremes.

-Tree cavities and loose bark are used by many animals to store their food supplies. Insects living in dead wood eat thousands of forest pests which can harm living trees.

-Fish and amphibians hide under trees which have fallen into the water.

You make a difference

The forest neighborhood changes, yet the way animals, plants and people depend on each other remains the same. Even as a tree dies, it continues to help sustain life to animal families and eventually to new plants and trees, and the cycle begins again. Hundreds of thousands of SNAGS would be saved each year in North America if people were careful when cutting out dead wood. Leave SNAGS in place to continue the cycle and shelter bluebirds and other cavity nesters, among other bird and animal species. Remember, “There’s life in dead trees.”

Bluebird and Birding Links

Audubon Portland audubonportland.org

Audubon Vancouver vancouveraudubon.org

Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge
friendsoftualatinrefuge.org

Audubon Corvallis audubon.corvallis.or.us

Champoeg State Heritage Area
oregonstateparks.org/park_113.php

Audubon Salem audubons.qwestoffice.net

North American Bluebird Society
nabluebirdsociety.org

Cornell birds.cornell.edu

Wealth of bluebird detail on monitoring, nesting, etc sialis.org/index.html

Nebraska Bluebird Society nbne.org

BYBS backyardbirdshop.com

Please Don't Overfeed the

Bluebirds *-By Nancy Fraser, from information gleaned at the March NABS meeting in Nebraska*

Mealworm Feeding Defined:

-Regular monitor feeding: 10 mealworms (or as many as the bluebirds will eat in 10 minutes) in a tray at/near the nest box on the monitor's weekly monitoring visit.

-Occasional monitor feeding: 10 mealworms (or the amount the bluebirds will eat in 10 minutes) left should the monitor happen to be in the area a second time.

Each of these practices accustoms the adult birds to receiving mealworms and eases their recapture.

-Supplemental feeding during nestling development:

When nestlings are being fed, the quantity of mealworms offered in regular and occasional monitor feeding should be increased to 5-6 mealworms per nestling.

-Supplemental feeding during adverse weather:

When eggs or nestlings are present in the nest and consecutive days of cold rain occur, survival can be supported by increasing the frequency of feeding to daily or 2-3 times per day, when possible.

-Excessive feeding: Feeding of mealworms on a daily basis, and in quantities greater than described, can contribute to very early/very late nesting and/or attraction of competing or opportunistic predator species (jays, starlings, crows, mammals), both of which have an adverse effect on the health or ultimate survival of the adult birds and the young they produce.

Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project volunteers and property owners who monitor bluebirds are encouraged to provide mealworms (as many as the birds will eat in 10 minutes) once a week at their regular monitoring visit. When weather is marginal, extra feedings with a similar quantity of mealworms can supplement natural food during periods of high need and limited availability. This translates primarily to feeding during the bad weather that occurs during the first nesting in the spring.

Adult birds, even in poor spring weather, are sufficiently resourceful to meet their own food needs from natural sources. Once egg laying and particularly nestling feeding begins, this is the time that the birds are the neediest for additional food resources. At this time, providing mealworms in quantities of 6 per nestling can make a great difference in how well the chicks mature and survive to fledge. When bad weather occurs (rain, cold, or both) while nestlings are growing, our volunteers often arrange to feed multiple times a day, in quantities of 5 or 6 mealworms per nestling at each feeding.

Continuous daily feeding of large quantities of mealworms, although enjoyable for we who love bluebirds, provides a high protein diet that can result in too early nesting, larger quantities of weaker chicks, exhausted adults, and late broods. Late brood fledglings are often unprepared for fall/winter dispersal, and suffer high rates of mortality. Should you have bluebirds wintering at your location, the best favor you can do for them is to provide suet with berries for nutrition rather than mealworms. A suet recipe used successfully by Julie Zickefoose (author, artist, conservationist, and a bluebird aficionado) will be included in the fall issue of the newsletter. I encourage you to use suet for feeding bluebirds outside the nesting season.

As new PBRP President, this year I was directly involved in the activities required to ensure Monitors and Banders are assigned to vacant or changed nest box routes. I found this a challenging and rewarding process, working closely with our Database Manager and many of our returning and new volunteers. I thought it might be interesting to hear the impressions of some of those who have new/changed routes. Stay tuned for more stories in the fall! -Nancy

Thoughts on Taking on a New Route

-by Zenobia Lapeyre

When I started high school, I went from a small country school to a big school in town. It was a two-story structure and seemed really huge to me. I stood on the threshold with my class list in hand, staring down the endless hallways filled with strangers, and hoped that I would not get lost. I was definitely out of my comfort zone and faced some real challenges.

Now I am once again moving from the comfort and ease of monitoring a short, familiar bluebird route, and I am facing the challenges of a significant increase in my responsibilities. I stand with my route list in hand and hope I can find all of the addresses around the corners and up the hills. I mutter to myself as I locate the nest boxes behind the barn, facing the barn, or away from the barn. I inspect nest boxes in old styles that are new to me and I experience different environments. I hope that is a friendly dog I hear barking. I learn that llamas are friendly as I walk among them in their pasture. I speak with property owners in their gardens.

Then something magical happens. I realize that I am a nest box monitor no matter where I am. These boxes are MY responsibility now, and I have important decisions to make. And those bluebirds

sitting on the fence post are also my responsibility. I know some of the things to expect during a season of monitoring. Some of it will be new to me, though. All of it will be exciting.

Bring on the challenges, then. I can't wait.



Letters from Eden

-by Sarah McDade of the Virginia Bluebird Society, condensed and printed with permission

Birders are familiar with author Julie Zickefoose because she is a major contributor and illustrator for *Bird Watcher's Digest*, and she travels the country giving talks, promoting her books, and birding with others at festivals. Bluebirders may have read her excellent booklet, *Enjoying Bluebirds More*.

When Julie is home in Ohio, however, she is tending to the myriad of jobs that her large country property affords a devoted naturalist. That is what her book, *Letters from Eden: A Year at Home, in the Woods*, is about. Published by Houghton Mifflin in 2006, this is a compilation of Julie's nature musings and happenings on her many acres of woods and meadows. The essays are offered to us season by season with delightful illustrations. A member of the Ohio Bluebird Society, Julie tells us about the bluebirds and wildlife on her property through words and artwork. A colorful bluebird painting splashes the face page of the winter section.

Letters from Eden would be especially popular with women and would make a great gift. If not in stock at your local bookstore, it can be ordered, and it is also available through a number of online vendors.

10 Ways to Improve Your Monitoring Day -By Dave Flaming

1. Treat yourself. Start your day by going out for breakfast, or at least a latte and pastry at your favorite coffee shop. There is a good chance you will find me there!

2. Tell others. Don't miss an opportunity to tell people why you are out on a cold and wet day. There are a couple of baristas out there who no longer think of me as the "grande, non-fat, sugar-free, vanilla latte, please" guy, but rather the bluebird guy. From time to time they even ask how my bluebirds are doing.

3. Invite a friend. Invite a friend to accompany you on your route, or perhaps a grandchild, niece or nephew, or the neighbor's child. Refrain from being a tour guide, pointing out everything YOU see. Instead ask what your guest is seeing. Take time to see your route through the eyes of someone else, particularly through the eyes of a child.

4. Pack a picnic. Pack a picnic lunch to eat on your route. I love this birding expression: "*The best birds are sandwich birds.*" Isn't it amazing how many birds we see once we lay our binoculars down and pick up a sandwich? Perhaps we can learn to relax and open our eyes to nature through sitting down and eating more sandwiches.

5. Practice listening. After eating those sandwiches, find a comfortable sitting spot under a tree or against a fence post, close your eyes and just listen for 10 or 15 minutes -- not any longer as we don't want you falling asleep!

6. Don't concentrate all your attention on bluebirds. Most of us have "life" bird lists, some of us even maintain state and

county bird lists. Why not a bluebird route list? How many different species of birds can we find on our route? How many mammals? Butterflies? Insects? Wildflowers?

7. Talk to your homeowners. At times we seem to be in such a hurry to check that next box that we fail to say hello to our homeowners. Homeowners are very important to the recovery of bluebirds; they are the silent volunteers of our organization.

8. Unwind your route. Have you ever monitored your route backwards? Why not? We tend to become comfortable by starting with box number 01 and ending with 99. Why not get a completely new perspective of your route? You will be surprised by all the new things you see as you unwind your route.

9. Use Alternative Transportation. Try walking your route, or riding your bicycle (you are allowed to drive to your route). I have a friend who, when her car broke down, rode her horse (she lives on her route). She reported that it took her 5 hours to monitor her route and the next day her bottom was sore!

10. Have Fun! By all means, have fun on your route!

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