



Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project Newsletter

Spring 2009

An affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society

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President's Perspectives

By Nancy Fraser

On this February morning I was greeted with dawn and snow -- those tiny particles that sometimes mean business and begin to accumulate in little piles and pristine coating on all of the trees and bushes. As I walked the drive to pluck the morning newspaper out of the delivery tube, my eye was caught by some bright color look what I spied! I just had to bring in a few stems to cheer the kitchen windows!

By full light, the temperature had risen to 35 degrees, and the snow had turned into big fat flakes that melted as they hit the ground.

The birds were busy at the feeders and at the cracked corn on the ground. I made my way to Champoeg State Heritage Park to pick up the last few items left there after our workshop on 21 February, intending to take what I had

accumulated in my car and these last items to the PBRP storage unit in Sherwood.

While at Champoeg, the sun shone bravely, and I was thrilled to see several pairs of bluebirds loafing about on fence lines. On the way through Newberg and Sherwood, I just had to take back roads, and was delighted to see more bluebirds. I stopped by Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge, and after just a little bit of

looking, saw bluebirds there as well.

So... The nesting season is nearly upon us. For those of us who monitor bluebirds, or enjoy them on our property, it is time to

check the integrity of our nestboxes, clean out any old nesting or roosting material, and brush off our equipment. For me, it means readying my vehicle to once again become a bluebirdmobile.

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Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project

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President's Perspectives

Continued from page 1

This season, I am saddened to report the retirement of several banders and monitors. My personal thanks and those of our project to Carole Hallett, Jim Kreutzbender, Becky Snyder, Charlotte Burke, Tim Stevens, Nancy Laggozino, Nikki Tracy, Barbara Manghelli, Sondra Moroney, Harriett Stevens, and Marsha Sherry.

Zenobia Lapeyre has joined the ranks of our banders, and new monitors beginning this year are Carol Krueger, David Sewell, Lori Loen, Debbie Rashford, Sara Martinez, and Scott Morrison. Welcome to all of you who are new volunteer monitors, and welcome, Zenobia, to the banders' group!

In this year of economic challenges, we will continue to champion the recovery and nesting success of Western Bluebirds. Bluebirds can nest in our nestboxes, and also in natural cavities excavated in trees or wood posts by birds with stronger beaks. Leave snags (dead trees) standing to provide nesting habitat for bluebirds and other species.

Limit use of pesticides and herbicides whenever possible to avoid possible toxic effects and allow the insects that make up the bluebirds' warm weather diet to be available for them. We encourage all of you to engage with our dedicated corps of volunteers and landowners to continue education of the public and our support of native cavity nesting birds, particularly the bluebird.

Fall Wrap Up Session for PBRP Volunteers

Join us on Saturday, August 29, for the annual meeting and fall wrap up. Save the date so that you don't miss the opportunity to attend this event. We plan to have recognition activities for our volunteer monitors and banders, as well as speakers to talk about bluebirds and other items of interest to those involved in natural green spaces and conservation. We will be meeting at Champoege State Heritage Area. More details will follow in group mailings.

June 20, 2009 – Attend Bluebird Day at Champoege State Heritage Park

Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project will assist the volunteers and staff at Champoege in presenting the natural history, conservation status, and nesting habits of the Western Bluebird from 1:00 to 4:00 pm on Saturday, June 20, at Champoege State Heritage Park Visitors' Center.



Lyn Burniston and Pat Johnston greet visitors at 2008 Bluebird Day at Champoege State Heritage Area and Park

Planned events include PBRP volunteers presenting demonstrations, children's activities relating to bluebirds, educational exhibits and slide presentations on Western Bluebirds and bluebird monitoring/banding, chickadee (another native species secondary cavity nester like the Western Bluebird) nest box building (fee), and observation of an active bluebird nestbox with young and adults.

We have a number of PBRP volunteers already involved in helping to present these activities. Join us to help, or come to visit and enjoy the activities!



Upcoming Events...

May 16

Songbird Festival-Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge

June 12-14

Mountain Bluebird Trails, Montana Annual Meeting in Great Falls

June 20

Champoege Bluebird Day & PBRP Volunteer Appreciation Event

August 29

PBRP Fall Wrap Up/Annual Meeting at Champoege

Sept. 9-13

NABS Convention in Grantville, PA

Fall, 2010

NABS Convention in Ontario, Canada

Still Want Your Newsletters to Keep Coming? Update Your Address!

We are changing the way we ask the U.S. Postal Service to handle undeliverable as addressed mail. And we are offering (see Page 17) to email you the newsletter rather than send it to you via U.S. Mail. With these improvements in saving paper and postal costs, it will be critical that you update us with changes to your mailing address or electronic address. Send changes either to pbrpeditor@yahoo.com or through the mail to PBRP, P.O. Box 1469, Sherwood, OR 97140. Please help us keep you current!

Education and Outreach

-By Nancy Fraser



Lori Loen, a volunteer new to PBRP within the past year, has agreed to serve as the Education Coordinator. Lori has a huge amount of enthusiasm and great organizational skills. She loves to talk to groups of people! She is working hard to bring her detailed knowledge of bluebirds up to this high level of skill she brings to the project, attending every event that she can to expand her knowledge.

She will be assisted in her efforts by Becky Snyder, a Board Member who has a particular interest in presentations and activities to introduce children to the natural world, including the bluebird story, and by those of our volunteers who are comfortable making presentations to small community groups. Lori helped host the Spring Workshop on February 21, and I hope that many of you had a chance to meet her.

I would like to develop a gallery of bluebird, bluebird habitat, and bluebird “people” photographs on our website, with the idea of compiling a slide show for visitors to the web site, and a library of photographs that can be used by speakers when asked to do a talk about bluebirds and about PBRP.

If you have photographs you would be willing to share, please contact Charlie Stalzer via the email link on the website, www.prescottbluebird.com, email Charlie at email@prescottbluebird.com, or contact me directly at ptweet2005@msn.com.

Volunteer Naturalist Training Begins Soon

The Refuge and Friends of the Refuge’s Education Committee will host a naturalist training course for a group of 20 volunteers. The course is designed to prepare both experienced individuals and enthusiastic novices with a solid foundation for assisting with the Refuge’s educational program.

Trainings will be held at Refuge Headquarters, in Sherwood, on September 18, September 25, October 2, and October 9 from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. All participants are required to attend all four sessions and to donate 20 hours of service within a school field trip season (September – June) after the training.

Applications are due by September 10, 2009. Contact Environmental Education Specialist - Janice Jenkins, 503-625-5944, Education@friendsoftualatinrefuge.org, for an application.

Bluebird Myths

(Answers on page 14; or ask your Bander)

1. Bluebirds were on the brink of extinction but have now recovered, and do not need your help any more.
2. Bluebirds are in the same family as robins.
3. Put up nestboxes and forget about them. That's the natural way of things, and whatever happens will be Nature taking its course.
4. Bluebirds will remove old nests, so it's not necessary to clean out boxes.
5. Any nestbox that says "bluebird" on it or is marketed as a bluebird nestbox will be adequate.
6. Bluebirds produce only one brood of young per nesting season.
7. I've not had problems with predators in the past on my nestbox route, so I'm not likely to have them in the future.
8. House wrens and bluebirds are compatible secondary cavity nesters, and will peacefully nest side by side.
9. Bluebirds are attracted to sunflower and thistle (niger) seed.
10. If you put up a bluebird nestbox, bluebirds will claim it and nest.

Attending Educational Meetings with Bluebird Content – Funds Available

The PBRP Board of Directors recognizes the importance of our volunteers continuing to learn about native species, especially the three Bluebird species. To this end, money has been set aside to partially offset the expenses incurred in attending regional and national meetings that present bluebird topics. In order to access these funds, volunteers must make an application to the President of PBRP one month before the conference. This application must include the dates and title of the conference along with a request for consideration by the Board for said scholarship funds.

The applicant must agree to present the information that they gained from the conference, either in written form in one of our newsletters, or at a spring or fall PBRP meeting. Reimbursement is provided based upon submission of documentation (conference registration, hotel, or travel receipts) to the Board

Treasurer within the calendar year of the event attended. The ceiling dollar amount for 2009 is \$500 per person, with a total budgeted amount of \$1000 for 2009.

There are several good educational opportunities in 2009 -- the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conference (Montana Bluebird Society) on June 12-14 in Great Falls, Montana, and the NABS Conference on September 9-13 in Grantville, Pennsylvania, in conjunction with the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania. Here are websites that give more information about these events:

Mountain Bluebird Trails:
www.mountainbluebirdtrails.com

North American Bluebird Society (NABS):
www.nabluebirdsociety.org/convention

Memories of 30+ Years as a Bluebird Volunteer

-By Pat Johnston, a Founding Member of PBRP

Pat Johnston, one of the founding members of PBRP, has honored us by writing down some of her memories and experiences as a bluebird volunteer. Thirty plus years of volunteering adds up to a LOT of wonderful experiences, so we have divided Pat's article into two installments. The first installment ran in our Fall 2008 Newsletter. If you missed it, please visit www.prescottbluebird.com and click on our Newsletter section.

In the early 1970s, Hubert began devoting his retirement years to helping the western bluebird, which during his lifetime, had almost disappeared. After rediscovering a small group of bluebirds on Chehalem Mountain, he set about building and mounting nestboxes in likely places over a wide area. He had a small group of volunteers helping him monitor the boxes, of whom I was one.

Hubert accompanied me on a few of my monitoring excursions. One time we were coming up a steep lane from a bottom field and Hubert became quite tired. I suggested that he wait there while I went and brought my car around. I was gone for over a half-hour and when I returned Hubert was nowhere to be seen! Knowing that he was not well, I became quite worried, and began calling out for him! Then, slowly, like a wraith, he arose from the long grass where he had been resting. I breathed a silent prayer of thanksgiving, for never in my life was I so glad to see someone!

Among Hubert's first volunteers was Earl Gillis. He was an outstanding assistant and later became our leader after Hubert was no longer able to get about. He maintained a large bluebird route surrounding the Newberg area and he was instrumental in getting our bluebird group organized. He was the originator and first editor of our newsletter. He had been the principal and wrestling coach at Newberg High School for many years, and was known and respected by the whole population on Chehalem Mountain. It seemed that everyone had either been a pupil or the parents of one of his pupils. He also played the bagpipes, and cut quite a figure in his kilt, marching and piping with his group.

Both Hubert and Earl spent considerable time presenting slide shows of Hubert's bluebird pictures, and explaining the plight of the bluebird. Brenda and

I even presented quite a few slide shows, too, although that in and of itself was not peril free. One morning I presented a little show to a class of kindergartners. They were a sweet and attentive group, and when I finished, I asked if there were any questions. One of the little boys raised his hand, and asked in wide-eyed innocence, "How come you are so old?"

I first met and teamed up with Brenda McGowan in the 1980s when she became a volunteer. Coincidentally, Brenda and I were both registered nurses. We made a great team. We worked out many problems concerning bluebird conservation and it seemed every solution created 10 more questions. Eventually, through attrition and advancing age of other volunteers, she and I were the only people left in the group, so we divided the territory between us. She took the east and south side of Chehalem Mountain and the area around Sherwood, while I took Chehalem Mountain west of Highway 219, and the upper reaches of Parrett Mountain. We worked well together. We didn't always see eye to eye, but we respected and understood the other person's position.

It was in 1988 that we began our banding program with Chet Kebbe as our bander. Chet was a retired master bander for Oregon Fish and Wildlife, and we were very pleased when he volunteered. He was a gentle giant of a man, over 6'4" tall, and it was a marvel to watch him carefully handle the nestlings with his big hands. At first he banded only the nestlings, but after a couple of years he suggested that we try to band the adult birds.

His first trap was quite primitive. The top of the nestbox had to be loosened slightly so that the prongs from the trap would slide through to hold the trap, which fit inside the box. A circle of wire was very precariously fastened to the inside of the box for the birds to land on and spring the lever that covered the entrance hole.

Invariably the birds would grasp the circle with their feet, and when Chet would take them from the box, the circle would drop to the ground, and be lost in the grass. I often wondered what people driving by

thought when they saw two senior citizens crawling around on the ground, pawing the grass!

After a couple of years, we started using Chet's McCamie chickadee trap, which helped immensely. By baiting the traps with mealworms, we could catch the adult birds in a short time, and we became much more efficient. We still use a variation of this trap today.

After Chet's sudden and unexpected death we were left without a bander. Char Corkran came to our rescue and trained Brenda and me to band. We banded with her as our master bander with the Northwest Ecological Research Institute for many years.

One year, one of Brenda's homeowners told her that they had three pairs of bluebirds nesting on their place, and of course we didn't believe them. Everyone knows that bluebird nestboxes must be spaced 300 ft. apart, leaving enough room for each pair to forage for insects to feed their young. But sure enough, here were three pairs of bluebirds nesting within 300 ft., and all three pair successfully raising their broods! How could this be?

Upon closer inspection, we noticed vineyards, which at that time were beginning to be planted heavily in the area, surrounded the home on three sides. Taking the cue, we began mounting nestboxes in vineyards, and the bluebirds are responding favorably, as they like to sit on the posts and search the ground for insects.

One thing in the bluebird's favor is the fact that many farms are going organic. Bluebirds are insect eaters, and the heavy use of pesticides and herbicides since WWII has destroyed much of their food base. Contaminated insects were fed to the nestlings by their parents, causing many deaths.

Birds have a hard enough life, having to contend with the weather, insect shortages, predation from hawks, owls, raccoons, other birds higher on the food chain, and especially cats, not to mention death from disease or by hitting cars and windows. Pesticide poisoning

was an almost insurmountable problem. Thank goodness for the return to more natural means.

In the mid-1990s, Marilynne Keyser came onboard and brought our group into the 20th century, creating a database for our banding data. She worked out the numbering system that we use on our nestboxes, using the Thomas Guide as a basis. We were also able to expand our monitoring area by assigning Marilynne the area east of Highway I-5 and south of the Willamette River, which included the Butteville and Champoege areas. It was at this time that the environmental movement began to flourish, and people were becoming aware of nature. Our number of volunteers began to expand, and we were able to extend our monitoring areas greatly.

In the 1990s we began to be publicly recognized outside of our area. We were featured in a two-page spread in a beautiful coffee table book called "Bluebirds Forever" by author Connie Toops, which was published in 1994. We also received an award from the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) for "Outstanding Contribution to the Field of Bluebird Conservation" which Brenda and I received in 1997 at the NABS convention in California. Marilynne, Brenda and I were also featured on a segment of the PBS program "Oregon Field Guide", which was great fun to film.

Now we are eight years into a new century. A person doesn't realize how much things change during the course of a few years, until one stops and evaluates things. While the bluebirds have remained unchanged for at least 10,000 years, humans have continued to change and impact the environment.

For example, we have removed all the old snags and wooden fence posts that provided homes for cavity nesting birds, putting at risk the future of all native cavity nesters, including bluebirds, swallows, chickadees, and wrens, among others. Therefore, it is imperative that we all place nestboxes in the proper habitat for these birds to use so that they may continue to remain in their natural niche, and so that they may be enjoyed and loved by our children and grandchildren for generations to come.

EARLIEST STATISTICAL DATA YEAR/LAST FIVE YEARS (2004-2008) COMPILED

	1997	//	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Nesting Attempts	293		652	641	678	519	565
Successful Attempts	238		570	445	496	414	349
Per Cent Successful	81		72	69	73	80	71
Earliest Hatch Date	April 22		April 15	April 23	April 15	April 10	April 11
Latest Hatch Date	August 12		August 13	August 17	August 18	August 30	August 28
Total Eggs Laid	1451		3265	3206	3400	2594	2897
Average Eggs Laid	5.0		5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.1
Total Nestlings	1227		2502	2371	2577	2026	2118
Avg. Nestlings/Clutch	4.2		3.8	3.7	3.8	3.9	3.7
Per Cent Eggs Hatched	85		77	74	76	78	73
Total Fledged	1051		1878	1731	1958	1796	1618
Avg. Fledged	3.6		2.9	2.7	2.9	3.5	2.9
Per Cent Young Fledged	86		75	73	76	89	76
Nestlings Banded	939		2108	2143	2134	1950	1770
No. Nestboxes	848		1683	1706	1608	1436	1362
No. Nestboxes Used	199		430	472	472	352	387
Utilization	23%		26%	28%	29%	25%	28%
No. Routes	31		77	81	75	65	60
Avg. Boxes/Route	27		22	21	21	22	23

2008 Contributors

Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project owes its success to its donors. Every dollar you give helps us to help our beloved Western Bluebirds. To all of you, without exception, our heartfelt thanks.

Bob & Bonnie Acker, Nora Anderson, Helen & William Bach, Backyard Bird Shops, Estelle Barbur, Phyllis Bauer, Terry Baylor, Ron and Mary Beamer, David Beltz, Cheryl & Donald Bennett, Ben & Sandra Bole, Patricia & Raymond Boryer, Luis & Mary Brillas, Stephen & Gloria Brown, Robert Burbank, Elida Canales, Peter & Susan Carr, K. Jackson Carter, Dwight & Paula Cash in memory of Barb White, Jeanne Christian, Rachel & G.R. Cornforth, Charlotte & David Corkran, John & Sandra Crossland, Alice Deming, Doris & Rod Diman, Archibald & Adah Doty, Charlotte Elder, Dave & Mary Beth Elliott, Michael & Chris Feves, Larry & Judy Fox in memory of Carol Shillitto, Nancy Fraser, Stan & Colleen Freidberg, Jeff Fullman, Fran Fulwiler, Forrest Gist, Linda Gratteri, Leonard & Anne Grubowski, Dr. Rex & Elisabeth Hagans, Peggy Hanley-Hackenbruck, Darlene & Clifford Hansen, Juliann Hart, Fran & Ed Hepp, Betsy & James Holzgraft, James & Patricia Horrocks, Mallory Jarboe, Jim & Peggy Kessinger, Maggie Knauss, Spencer Krueger, Ron & Lauri Kunzman, Dan Layton, Mary Lefevre, Ray & Evelyn Leninger, Pamela Lindholm-Levy, John & Lynn Loacker, Phillip & Sandra Lockwood, Bonnie Lowe, Jack Lynch, Diann Macrae, Liz Malliris, Barbara & Tom McAllister, Bill McArtney, Cheryl McCaffrey, Patricia & Raymond Martinelli, Jane Miller, Annette Mollitor, Howard and Mona Mozeico, Mary Nelsen, George H. Nelson Jr., Mary Nelson, Berta Neubauer, Fred & Jill Newton, Nike, Lorene Nissen, The North American Bluebird Society, Michelle Othus, Marshall Page, Burl & Margarita Peters, Nicholas & Teresa Peters, David & Kay Pollack, Mama Porath, Robert & Mama Porath, Richard & Elaine Rife, Elizabeth Rillver, Carol Santesson, Grace Schaad, Lewis & Barbara Schaad, John & Jeannine Schmeltzer, Mark Schwartz, Conley Scott, Jerry & Joline Shroyer, Ross & Audrey Shutts, Charles & Marie Smith, Chuck & Marie Smith, Roger & Joan Smith, Bob & Deborah Stevenson in memory of Alan Ware, Peggy Stone, Stoneridge Vineyards, Julee & Kenneth Streeter, Irene Tessman, Conrad Thomason, Diane Trainer, Pat & John Trudel, Madalyn & Fredrick Raymond Utz, Carolyn Uyemura, Marilyn van Dyk, Anne Voegtlin, Westover Inns, Gordon & Rosemary Westphal, Jan Whittlesey, Alf Wyller, Edward & Patricia Zakocs; Brenda McGowan, Thomas & Nancy McIlrath, Nancy Perry, and Carol Santesson, all in memory of Betty Nims.



Thoughts from Two New Bluebird Monitors

-By Nelda and Ron Skidmore

We are new bluebird monitors. Since we retired we were looking for volunteer activities in our interest areas of outdoor activity and bird watching. We saw an announcement in the local newspaper about an introductory meeting in early February 2008 for the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project. The meeting was out at Champoege Park, and much to our delight, we were assigned to monitor the Champoege Park bluebirds with bander Lauri Kunzman as our mentor. For years we had seen the bluebirds and bluebird boxes out at the park during our bike rides out there. We never thought we would be so fortunate as to be able to monitor them.



Ron and Nelda Skidmore, new monitors at Champoege State Heritage Area & Park in 2008

Our knowledge level was pretty low but we were excited about learning all we could about bluebird monitoring and Lauri was a very patient and knowledgeable teacher. We spent a lot of time this last year out at Champoege Park learning how to observe the birds and activities around the boxes, how to maintain the nestboxes, and how to record what we saw and did.

It was a challenging year for us and the bluebirds in the park. It was challenging for us because the nestboxes needed a lot of work. First we had to locate and GPS the boxes. It was sort of like a treasure hunt. Then we had to eliminate, replace or

relocate many of the boxes. The remaining boxes had to be repaired and cleaned out. We went from 48 to 32 boxes. As Lauri reminded us, more is not necessarily better.

For the bluebirds it was a challenging year because the spring was long, cold and wet. The predatory house sparrow population in the park had gotten out of control due to the storage of sheaves of wheat in the adjacent historic barn. We experimented with various traps. The Van Ert traps worked well on the boxes and the rotating sparrow trap worked well in the barn.

Another challenge for the bluebirds was large proportions of Bluebird boxes occupied by competing bird species that have much healthier populations than the Western Bluebird, such as the park's very abundant swallow population. To persuade these more populous competing cavity nesters to find a different home, we installed what we called "eyebrows" on the underside of the roof, overhanging the entry hole. The eyebrows did not completely prevent the swallows nesting in the boxes but they did reduce the number of boxes they occupied. The eyebrows also make it more difficult for predators like Scrub Jays to enter the box.



Lauri Kunzman modifies a nestbox at Champoege State Heritage Area & Park

We also greased the poles underneath the boxes to keep predators such as snakes, raccoons, squirrels and rats away from the boxes. It also deterred nuisance behavior by humans!

In the park there is a lot of activity and maintenance work going on by volunteers, park staff and work crews. We needed an easy and intuitive way to help us and others identify which boxes had bluebird activity. We identified the boxes with bluebird activity by putting blue tape on the pole below the box and screwing a blue jar lid on the top of the box. The lid also served as a good place to put the mealworms.



Monitoring in the scenic park is very rewarding. Frequently park visitors stop and ask us about the bluebirds and our monitoring activities. We also have the opportunity to see other wildlife such as coyotes, blue herons and osprey. The park staff and volunteers are wonderful to work with and they coordinate educational activities.

We are looking forward to being monitors again this year. Humans have significantly reduced the bluebirds' habitat. It is rewarding to help re-establish and maintain habitat for these beautiful and remarkable birds.

Suggestions Needed!

Feeling creative this spring? This newsletter is, we think, overdue for a new title and header. We'd like your suggestions for a name for the newsletter. Send your suggestions to our editor at pbrpeditor@yahoo.com. Or U.S. Mail at PBRP, PO Box 1469, Sherwood, OR 97140. The Board of Directors will select one of the names and it will appear on the Fall Newsletter.

A Shouting of Jays?

Ornithologists have adopted names for groups of different species of birds. Most of us have heard the term "flock" applied to many bird species. Some have heard of coveys of quail, or murders of crows and kettles of turkey vultures. We thought it might be fun and therapeutic to come up with some humorous and whimsical names. To get started, here are some whimsical, unofficial, group designations collected by the Baltimore Bird Club:

A snip of Scissor-Tailed Flycatchers
 A coronation of Kingbirds.
 A palette of Painted Buntings.
 A marathon of Greater Roadrunners
 A bling of American Goldfinches.
 A cawlection of American Crows.
 An outfield of flycatchers
 An asylum of loons.
 A place setting of Spoonbills.
 A hangover of Red-eyed Vireos.
 A castle of kinglets.
 A gulp of swallows.
 An incontinence of yellowlegs.
 A U of terns.
 A ridicule of mockingbirds.

They also came up with some names for groups of birdwatchers:

A spotting of birders.
 A checklist of tickers.
 A chat of birders.

How many whimsical bluebird-related group names can we develop? Dave Flaming challenged that we could accumulate enough for a future newsletter list of our local creations in this vein. Here are a couple of suggestions he made:

A mouth of nestlings.
 A Hubert of Western Bluebirds.
 And a few others:
 A patch of bluebirds.
 A screw-up of nestboxes.

Can you come up with some good ideas? Send them by mail to PBRP, P.O. Box 1469, Sherwood, OR 97140, or to email@prescottbluebird.com.

Mealworms – What’s the Story???

Toward the end of the nesting season in 2008, suppliers of mealworms began experiencing difficulty raising sufficient quantities of mealworm (beetle larvae) in order to market them for the feeding of native insectivore birds and in-home pets. It has been difficult to obtain the reasons behind this difficulty. Suffice it to say that there have been major efforts spent by commercial growers of mealworms over the winter, with only partial success in re-supplying the production lines to sell mealworms to the retail market of pet owners, licensed wildlife rehabilitators, bird conservation organizations such as PBRP, and homeowners accustomed to feeding mealworms to their back yard birds.



The primary supplier of mealworms for PBRP has been Sunshine Mealworms, a local company based in Silverton, Oregon. PBRP has enjoyed a successful and cordial relationship with Sunshine. We are uncertain at this time of how completely our preferred firm will have recovered before the beginning of the nesting season. Because of this, we are investigating other options for mealworms to supplement food sources for bluebirds in our nestboxes for the first spring broods, when natural food sources are unpredictable.

Those of you who feed bluebirds on your property and who volunteer as monitors and banders within our project may see availability of mealworms

change the way in which you have supported bluebirds during this nesting season. The Board will keep our volunteer monitors and banders informed as to the availability of mealworms.



Nancy Fraser holds bags of mealworms ready to distribute to banders in 2008

Please be aware that one of the key elements of our purpose is that in addition to supporting the conservation and recovery of bluebirds, we will not engage in activities that might cause harm to the species.

Please do not provide alternative foods (either natural or self-prepared foods) to bluebirds. When we are not able to provide food sources such as mealworms that we know are beneficial to the birds, it is best to provide nothing and allow the birds to fall back on their natural instincts and natural resources.



Female bluebird brings insect to nestbox for nestlings

Although providing supplemental feeding to the birds has been an important part of our project, please be aware that bluebirds do not depend on our supplemental feedings for the long-term survival of the species. Although it is not our preference, it does not threaten the Western Bluebirds' survival if we are unable to obtain mealworms for the birds this spring.



Anecdote: DOG BITES MEALWORM

One of our banders, after the beginning of the difficulties in obtaining mealworms at the end of last nesting season, raised mealworms over the winter successfully for the first time in five years. She had a Tupperware Tote swarming with thousands of mealworms behind her woodstove. On the morning after our 2009 Banders' Meeting, her dog found this intriguing container. He ate the entire colony of mealworms. The bander reported this devastating loss, and the fact that she nearly executed the dog, to the Banders' Internet listserv.

Eliminate Poisons in Your Yard

"There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was spring without voices."

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson, 1962

Rachel Carson introduced her classic book about the perils of pesticides with this observation in the chapter "A Fable for Tomorrow". Has tomorrow arrived yet again? After the publication of this book and the efforts of scientists and citizens concerned with conservation, no one would think of using DDT to kill garden insects. Yet we assume that lawn and garden chemicals found on shelves in our stores and used by garden services are safe to use around birds (not to mention people). Take a closer look. Many pesticides present significant dangers to birds. While not killers on contact, they reduce available insect food and may contaminate the food chain and water, bringing on a more gradual death by starvation or toxicity or threaten the continued maintenance of a species by causing an inability to reproduce successfully.

What are alternatives to get rid of pests? Mechanical (hose the plants off with a strong jet of water) and biological (predatory ladybugs, friendly bacteria, etc.) techniques to pest control provide less hazardous options. One of the best things you can do is to plant insect-resistant native shrubs and let the birds do the work for you. Western bluebirds search for and catch insects on the ground. While these form the major portion of the adults' diets, nestlings are fed insects exclusively. Swallows, other native bird species secondary cavity nesters, catch insects in the air, as do bats. You can help with the comeback and maintenance of these species of natural bug controllers by curbing your use of pesticides, especially during their sensitive nesting time in the spring and early summer. If you allow them safe access to your plants, they will devour the insects you are trying to control. Access the following websites for information about Integrated Pest Management, and contact the Oregon State University extension office for information about biological and chemical pest control safety and pest-resistant plant varieties.

<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pdf/ec/ec1532.pdf>

<http://www.beyondpesticides.org/info services/pcos/IPM.HTM>

--Based on information from U.S. Fish/Wildlife Service & articles from previous newsletters

Answers to Bluebird Myths *(continued from page 5)*

1. False. Although the Western Bluebird population has increased & stabilized, the factors that caused it to decline precipitously are still present. Non-native and native species compete for the secondary cavities bluebirds use for nesting. Development continues to replace prime bluebird habitat, with removal of dead trees and wood fence posts. Herbicides & pesticides reduce the available insect food source and may render what is gleaned toxic to nestlings.
2. True. Bluebirds (all 3 species-Western, Mountain, and Eastern) are members of the family Turdidae, as are American Robins, Townsend's Solitaires, Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, among others.
3. False. Nestboxes must be monitored at least weekly to check on progress & to control house sparrows, blowflies, wasps, and to remove unhatched eggs and dead chicks. Monitors keep boxes in good repair to ensure they can withstand adverse weather conditions.
4. False. Bluebirds do not clean out used nests, and may have two or three broods per season. They may build new nests on top of old ones, and this promotes disease and parasite infestation. It also raises the level of the nest cup high enough that a predator might be able to reach eggs or nestlings. Bluebird boxes should be cleaned out and disinfected as soon as the young have fledged to allow a clean location for subsequent nesting.
5. False. Nestboxes are sometimes produced and marketed without regard to the adequacy of the materials, construction, weatherproofing and even nest hole opening. Use nestboxes from reliable sources. See the PBRP website (www.prescottbluebird.com) for some suggested plans, or the links on that website to other bluebird organizations.
6. False. Although a given pair may produce only one brood, it is not at all uncommon for Western Bluebirds in our area to produce two, and sometimes three, broods a season.
7. False. It may take time for a bluebird trail or newly placed nestboxes to be discovered by predators. Once cats, raccoons and other predators discover an easy meal, they will continue to come to dinner. Remember that while we are watching our nestboxes, others are watching us. Be on the lookout for predators and take steps to minimize their invasion of the nest.
8. False. House Wrens typically inhabit areas with high tree coverage or dense brush. Bluebirds are residents of open prairie. Occasionally these habitats overlap. Male wrens are territorial and search out every available nesting site in their range, claiming it with sticks. The female later selects one site to make her nest. While the male is claiming all territory, he will destroy and remove eggs of other birds. Do not place bluebird nestboxes within wren habitat and do not attempt to attract both species.
9. False. Bluebirds are primarily insectivorous. They forage for crickets, grasshoppers, spiders, moths, butterflies (both larval and adult stages), ants, beetles, flies, and occasionally angleworms. They supplement their diet year round on fruits/berries, and exist primarily on berries during the winter (mistletoe is especially used). Nestlings are primarily fed insects. It is not necessary to provide mealworms for bluebirds. In order to sustain the population, it is best to encourage adults and young to seek natural food sources so that they can survive in the wild. Our volunteers provide mealworms when bluebirds

are seen at boxes, once a week during monitoring visits. When nestlings are present, the number of mealworms offered is increased. When first spring broods are hatched while food supplies are uncertain, and there are periods of sustained cold, wet weather, mealworms may be offered three or more times a week. Bluebirds are not dependent on our feedings, which truly are only supplemental.

10. Bluebirds are inhabitants of open prairies and low grass or mowed fields. They may nest in vineyards, cemeteries or orchards. They are rarely present in urban areas or brushy/woodsy areas. Their methods of obtaining food are not effective in tall, un-mowed grass or over water. Nestboxes in unsuitable habitat will not attract bluebirds, and might in fact provide nesting habitat for non-native competitor species such as house sparrows.

Swallow Competition

-Excerpted from an article by Keith Radel, Minnesota Bluebird Recovery Program

In our area, Violet Green and Tree Swallows compete with Western Bluebirds for the nestboxes we provide. Many of our volunteers have experienced increases in the ratio of successful swallow to bluebird nestings. A bluebird monitor's recent article in the NABS journal suggested two factors for this change.

1. Too many nestboxes installed too close together.

Often, in our interest to provide bluebird nesting locations, we are tempted to put up more nestboxes. Instead of the increased number (and density) of boxes providing more bluebird nesting opportunities, more and more swallows are attracted. The more young swallows that fledge, the larger the problem. One gentleman reported that initially he installed 25 nestboxes on 5 acres. After watching what happened, on reflection, he now believes that 3 or 4 would have been plenty. He is now installing on his bluebird trail 5 to 10 boxes per mile (either 5 individual boxes or 5 sets of closely paired boxes). He reports having had bluebirds nesting in every location over several seasons. If a given location fails to attract a bluebird pair for two consecutive years, the nestbox is removed.

2. Nest boxes placed by or in wetland areas and by water (lakes, ponds, rivers, etc.).

This type of habitat is just what swallows seek, because of all of the flying insects for food. Well-intentioned individuals and groups often install bluebird nestboxes in this kind of habitat, and they are rarely if ever available for (or chosen by) bluebirds. When this gentleman encounters such nestbox locations on his route, he seeks permission to take them down and explains why.

This successful monitor writes that he finds the best bluebird nesting habitat to be short or mowed grass, on high ground, and about 300 feet from trees. He finds it best that any isolated trees in the area have no brush under them. He likes overhead wires or pasture fencing for perches used by the bluebirds to seek out their insect food. His paired boxes used to always be about 10 feet apart (for the pair). He finds that bluebird occupancy rate is significantly higher in the paired boxes. He finds that if the swallows nest before the bluebirds, they continue to put feathers in the second box. He removes the feathers in the second box, until the swallows stop putting them in. He says that with this approach he has only twice had swallows nest successfully in both boxes. Note that swallows are native species, and protected by the laws of the Migratory Bird Protection Act -- it is against the law to remove nests and eggs.

Fledge More Bluebirds

By Keith Radel (from The BANNER-Bluebirds Across Nebraska)

Ever wonder how our volunteers select a site likely to host nesting bluebirds? Read on . . .

Would you like to have more fun on your bluebird trail? Fledging more bluebirds than last year can make that happen!

Am I suggesting adding more boxes to your trail? Not necessarily -- many bluebirders increase their fledging success by moving unproductive boxes to new locations. Also, increased spacing (at least 500 to 1000 feet between locations) usually improves fledging rates. (500 feet = 0.1 mile)

Set an easy to reach goal of fledging at least three bluebirds per location next year (one location = one single nest box or one pair nest boxes set 10-15 feet apart). Take down one of every two "back to back" nestboxes and relocate it either 10-15 feet away, or 500-1000 feet away or more.

This is a good time of year to review your trail records and take note of nest boxes that have not fledged bluebirds the past two years. Plan to move those unproductive boxes to new locations.



Lauri Kunzman explains box modifications to reduce swallow competition and lessen heat retention in summer

When selecting possible nest box sites for bluebirds, look for as many of the following characteristics in a locale as you can:

1. Easy access for weekly checking-along highways, roads, in golf courses, cemeteries, or vineyards. For the birds' safety, face entrance holes toward a tree or other object, not into the road or highway. For your safety, be mindful of your vulnerability to traffic when you monitor.



Landowner Linda Senkel and Nancy Fraser work on modifying a nestbox

2. Short or mowed grass-makes it easier for bluebirds to find insects. Remember that what looks short at the beginning of the season can grow really tall if there aren't several mowings. Use the last nesting season as a guideline for how the feeding territory will look by June/July!

3. Overhead wires or pasture fencing provides perching places for birds to see insects on the ground and keep an eye on the nestbox.

4. 300 feet from trees and no brushy understory - helps slow wren competition/invasion.

5. High ground- wetland areas have tall grasses and lots of flying insects, which are more attractive to Violet Green and Tree Swallow competitors than bluebirds.

6. Away from cities, towns, livestock farms, and horse barns-these are favorite habitats for House Sparrows.

If four or five of these characteristics can be found at a possible nest box location, it will probably attract bluebirds and fledge young ones. Many times, another person's property will have good nesting potential. Permission is needed and is almost always granted if requested. Remember that permission must include allowing monitors on the property once a week. This is a great way to make new friends and increase your number of bluebirds fledged.



Nancy Fraser adds a nest hole enhancer to a replacement box before mounting it in place

Choose a nest box that is waterproof, easy to open, gives a good unobstructed view of the inside when opened, and one that you personally like to check since bluebirds will nest in almost any style of nestbox. After all, checking weekly means opening

and looking into those boxes 20-25 times each nesting season. If you have 20 boxes, that means between 400 and 500 inspections.

Seek ways to ensure the box is predator proof. Increasing the number of broods and nestlings won't result in improved fledgling numbers if predators take the young or the eggs.

Remember-open and check the contents of your nest boxes at least once a week, keep records, report bluebird nesting activity (egg count, hatch, bluebirds). Have the best bluebird time ever by increasing bluebird fledging success!



Lauri Kunzman and Monitors Ron and Krista McKillip install a nestbox to replace one "knocked off" by grazing cattle on residential acreage

A note from your editor...

You may have noticed a new look to the newsletter with this issue. The most noticeable change, of course, is the fact that this newsletter has been printed in black and white. PBRP makes great efforts to use funds efficiently. To that end, the Board has chosen to reduce newsletter printing costs by printing the Spring issue in black and white. We hope to publish the Fall issue in partial color, as we have done in the past.

However, full color copies of this newsletter are available, both via email and by logging on to our website at www.prescottbluebird.com. If you would like to sign up to receive the newsletter by email, either for this issue or for all future issues, please email the editor at: pbrpeditor@yahoo.com. Signing up for one of a variety of free email accounts that are available to you on the Internet, and then signing up to receive our newsletter via email, is a great way of helping us make every dollar count. It is PBRP's policy to not share your email address or other personal information with anyone.

Thank you for your continued support! -Abby Jaworski

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