

PRESCOTT BLUEBIRD RECOVERY PROJECT

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Fledgling bluebird enjoys fruit. *Photo Credit - Dave Kinner*

Newsletter Spring 2020

President's Message

The day before our Spring Volunteer Workshop, Oregon's first presumptive case of Covid-19 was in the news. Little did we know then how much and how rapidly things were about to change. Over the next two weeks, we reconfigured several nest box monitoring routes and assigned new volunteers to vacant routes. At the same time, news reports about the Corona Virus became more urgent. As training of new monitors began, we implemented social distancing guidelines and advised volunteers to not share equipment and tools. Everyone was excited to begin monitoring. As the situation changed daily, we talked about PBRP's role in the emerging crisis. We didn't have long to wonder. Gov. Brown's stay at home order was issued on March 23, and the board of directors voted unanimously to suspend all field activities until the order is lifted. The safety of our volunteers is a top priority, so as quickly as we ramped up to begin monitoring, we pivoted to suspend our fieldwork.

For experienced monitors, it feels strange to not be out on our routes every week. We miss

our friendly talks with property owners, and we miss the Bluebirds. We'll miss finding the first beautiful blue eggs, observing the hatchlings grow into hungry nestlings, and cheering each successful brood that fledge. But we know the birds are untroubled by our human affliction, and they will carry on building nests, laying eggs, and raising their chicks. We hope to resume monitoring yet this season, but we need to be patient and see what the future brings.

With more time at home, we have more opportunity to observe what goes on in our own backyards. A Chestnut-backed Chickadee has claimed the nest box in my backyard, and I've noticed the Anna's Hummingbird only visits the feeder for a quick sip now that it is time for nesting. What are you observing? Take pictures, write to us . . . we'd like to hear your stories.

For now, we're doing our part and staying home. We hope all of you and your loved ones are safe.

Be well, Gwen and Nancy

What's For Dinner? -- Or Not

Based on material by Bett Zimmerman Smith
in BLUEBIRD, Vol. 42, No. 2

Like all wild creatures, what bluebirds eat depends in part on what is available.

Studies undertaken over a hundred years ago, analyzing stomach contents, suggested that roughly 68% of a bluebird's diet is made up of insects: grasshoppers, crickets, katydids, beetles, spiders and caterpillars. In colonial times, farmers recognized this and put up nestboxes around their fields to provide pest control with help from birds.

The proportion of insects in food bluebirds collect during nesting season is probably much higher than 68%. Why? Growing nestlings need lots of protein.

One study documented that bluebird parents primarily fed nestlings caterpillars (32%), followed by Orthoptera like grasshoppers (26%) and spiders (11%). Occasionally, larger nestlings were fed earthworms; this can cause severe diarrhea.

Bluebirds also eat ants, wasps, bees, flies, myriapods, angleworms, snails, sow bugs, black olive scales, moths, weevils, and termites.

Prey is usually spied from a perch and then captured on the ground. Bluebirds occasionally catch insects in flight, especially when flying insects are abundant. This is not their preferred hunting method. The energy expended is jealously guarded, and hawking for insects is most likely if other food is not available. Of the three bluebird species, the Mountain Bluebird is more likely to hover to capture insects.

The rest of the bluebird diet is mostly small fruit such as flowering dogwood, holly, mulberry, wild grape, Virginia creeper, pokeweed, and viburnum. In the NW, elderberry, Oregon grape, chokecherry, and mistletoe are sought when insects are in short supply.

Rarely, bluebirds may eat small vertebrates (snakes, salamanders, tree frogs, and lizards). Vertebrate prey or insects with hard exoskeletons may be bashed and beaten against the ground or perch before consumption. Bluebirds rarely eat birdseed. If they are seen at a seed feeder, they may be seeking insects or larva in the seed or dried fruits or nutmeats mixed with the seed. Seeds found in a nest box have passed undigested through the bluebird system.

Bluebirds may eat suet, preferring homemade (www.sialis.org/suet.htm) to commercial.

Bluebirds do love mealworms (MW). Overfeeding MW can cause calcium deficiency. They are not a complete food for adults or nestlings. If you do offer mealworms:

- Use it as an occasional treat, during bad weather or to assist a widowed parent.
- Limit quantities to no more than 15 MW per day, per bird.
- Grind up leftover dried eggshells & sprinkle on the MW to add calcium.
- Avoid feeding "superworms" (hormone enhanced) or dried MW from Asia. They offer no moisture to baby birds & there is no regulation of additives.
- Avoid putting feeders close to nestboxes, as they can attract competitors.
- Read more about MW at www.sialis.org/feeder.htm

The best thing you can do to help provide a healthy diet is to encourage planting of native, fruit-bearing vines, shrubs & trees to vary their diet; & help when insects are scarce. Choose plants that provide berries throughout the seasons. Native plants of all kinds attract insects. Caterpillars are a juicy meal for nestlings! Discourage use of pesticides, which kill bugs and can hurt or kill birds. Place nestboxes in the right habitat for hunting. Bluebirds prefer semi-open grassland habitat, such as mowed meadows, large lawns, cemeteries, orchards, roadsides, & areas with scattered trees & short ground cover. Fence lines, medium-sized trees, or telephone lines provide perches for hunting and nest-guarding. Western Bluebirds are less attracted to large, open meadows. Unmowed or tall croplands are not friendly for ground gleaning of insects.



Ed Hepp, volunteer, replaces damaged nest box
Photo Credit - Gwen Martin

Eeew – Fecal Glue

By Bet Zimmerman Smith in *Bluebird Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 2

After an extended period of cold, rainy New England weather, I found an Eastern Bluebird nest in the condition shown in the photo to the right. This used nest was sopping wet, black, stinky, and looked like a tar pit. Some of the fecal material was white (a typical fecal sac) and the rest was black.

The nest had contained six nestlings, all of which fledged successfully, although one was a runt and fledged at least a day later than the others.

I had been offering supplemental mealworms, as I often do for bluebirds that nest in my yard. Some mealworms were stuck in the goo, probably dropped by the parents during feeding. However, I have never seen this glop in a nest with other broods that have been fed mealworms.

In my experience, a bluebird nest post-fledging is spotless on top, and looks almost unused with the exception of being flattened. Bluebirds usually continue removing fecal sacs until fledging occurs. This is in contrast to the tarry mess I usually find in a swallow nest post-fledging. Swallows stop removing fecal sacs 4–8 days before fledging, so there is a build-up.



A fecal sac is a sort of contained, white “birdie diaper” that comes out immediately after each nestling is fed. The baby actually sticks its rump up in the air, “offering” it to the parent for removal. Fecal sacs are typically removed from the nest by the adults and dropped some distance away, often in a single dumping area, probably to avoid attracting predators.

I had stopped opening this box after Day 12 to avoid premature fledging; then we had a nor’easter. I observed the parents actively feeding the nestlings, and assumed all was well. However, I am lucky that no babies got pushed into this mess by larger siblings, as they might have gotten stuck in it. The waste can build up into a cement-like substance that can prevent a nestling from fledging. I wonder if these birds fledged sooner than they should have to escape (leaving the runt, that was not well-feathered, to fledge a day or two later).

Some people don’t believe that “fecal glue” exists at all. Having seen it firsthand, I believe. Theories on what causes it include the following:

Build-up occurs when parents are under stress—e.g., a single parent frantically trying to feed a clutch (especially a large one as was the case here) and/or spending so much time trying to find food that they cannot attend to removing fecal sacs.

Severe diarrhea. This may occur in nestlings fed earthworms, and can result in dehydration and death. The young baby birds’ undeveloped stomachs apparently can’t handle earthworms because of the dirt castings in the worm gut. Earthworms may be used as a source of food by bluebird parents during bad weather, when nothing else is available. Some believe earthworms break down the fecal sac. Diarrhea could also occur from feeding excessive amounts of fruit.



Shadow of a Monitor

Photo Credit - Thomas Houseman, monitor @ Anne Aime Vineyard



Audience at the Spring Workshop
Photo Credit - Gwen Martin

A Surprise Every Time You Open a Nest Box

By Susan Mates

In February of 2011, I was deciding whether I wanted to be a bluebird monitor. I was looking for a citizen scientist project that would get me out-of-doors and allow me to feel that I was doing something to help birds survive better. I expected to have a weekly commitment that would require keen observation, good record keeping, and, secretly, an excuse to wander around in pretty places.

All of those things happened, but what I didn't expect was that:

Each time you open a nest box, it is like a treasure hunt. You will never know what to expect. You will catch your breath when there is the first egg in a beautifully designed nest, and laugh when you see a brand new baby chick with its clump of fuzzy down on its head. You might even startle a miffed Douglas tree squirrel that decided to occupy a box. Eight years in, there is a surprise every time.

You will be rewarded by bluebirds fluttering in to greet you at their boxes. You will watch their courtship, take pleasure in witnessing how they feed their hungry brood, and learn the personalities of some of them.

You will learn more than you guessed about the other birds in the area, their songs and their nests, where their favorite places are, and how they pay attention to each other.

You will be humbled by the property owners, who so generously allow us to traipse through their beautiful land, and some of them will become true and dear friends

You will be struck by spotting close up, a turkey vulture airing its enormous wings, or seeing a line of pigs running pell mell toward a food bucket, or catch the eyes of a mother coyote hunting across a field in the mist.

Our project helps to supply nest boxes that replace habitat lost to human intervention, and we hope the boxes provide a boost for their survival. You will be amazed by the determination and bravery of the parents defending their brood. There are vulnerabilities and dangers for them at each stage, and their struggles and triumphs become more personal for us through this work.

You are, at times, going to be sticky with sweat, drenched with rain, covered by mud, or spend an hour picking weed seeds from your socks. And yes, sometimes you are surely going to encounter death, because you are, after all a witness to the whole cycle of life, and not all of the birds are going to survive.

When you see a line of fledglings sitting on a fence, waiting for a meal, you will feel hopeful that nature can heal, and that maybe you have been a tiny part of that. And I can guarantee that you will also, each time, find deep joy and awe.

Welcome, New Volunteers!

Our Spring Volunteer Workshop was full to capacity, and we are so happy to welcome some outstanding new volunteers to PBRP. New folks bring new ideas, fresh energy, and new skills to our volunteer base. We have 66 volunteers this season, including fourteen new monitors and several folks doing special projects for us. We warmly welcome our new volunteers:

Jim and Sharon Bailey	Ed Hepp	Barbara Siminski
Joyce Casey	Carolyn Hyink	Mark and Lucy Summers
Vivian Chang	Madeline Ishikawa	Caleb Taylor
Christine Darby	Eliz Linser	Stacy Watts
Betsy Dowell	Katie O'Toole	David Wesley



New Volunteer - Christine Darby
Photo Credit - Gwen Martin

A Generous Donation In Memory of *Iris B. Fournier*

Iris was a volunteer and contemporary of Hubert Prescott. She monitored a trail for many years in the 70's and 80's, and loved to go out and check "her" birds and nest boxes. Her son told us he always looked forward to joining his mom on bluebird outings and attending meetings, where they enjoyed conversations with Mr. Prescott.

He also said that his mother would be thrilled that this donation would be supporting her beloved bluebirds. PBRP honors her memory. Her family fondly remembers photographs of Iris monitoring bluebirds wearing the original light blue Prescott Bluebird ball cap.



Balloons on ground being fired up,
Luxor, Egypt, Valley of the Kings
Photo Credit - Nancy Fraser

THANK YOU TO OUR DONOR SUPPORTERS IN 2019!

We truly could not do this without you. We thank you for supporting our conservation work for the bluebirds.



What we saw before we Stayed Home
A nest with bluebird eggs.
Photo Credit - Michelle Harrington

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