

PRESCOTT BLUEBIRD RECOVERY PROJECT

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Photo Credit - Betty Ballentine

Newsletter Fall 2020

Presidents' Message

By Nancy and Gwen

What a year 2020 has been (so far)! Our volunteers pitched in to monitor and maintain nest boxes for most of the nesting season. Some monitors opted not to continue, with some planning to return in 2021. We lost some weeks of data collection, nest box maintenance, and quality time with the bluebirds during the initial uncertainties about COVID-19 just after the start of the season. We resumed monitoring regularly on June 1. The graph of nesting data appears elsewhere in the newsletter, as it has been a Fall issue regular for many years. Be aware that 2020 data is for a partial season and fewer nestboxes, should you be tempted to compare with previous years.

Due to the pandemic restrictions, we weren't able to hold our regular Fall Wrap Up & Annual Meeting. We so missed the opportunity to enjoy each others' tales of the season, network with other volunteers, ponder the mystery of how 2021 will look for our activities (perhaps do some brainstorming?). The board held one socially distanced meeting at a member's home on a lovely deck, and one virtual Zoom meeting. All of this has been a new experience for us. We are uncertain whether this will continue into 2021, but we are somewhat prepared after having used these alternatives to live meetings together in closed spaces.

We added two new board members: Sarah Hatfield and Don Sitko, both experienced monitors.

We elected officers as per our By Laws. Co-presidents are Diane Harris and Lyn Burniston. Treasurer is Lisa Fratianni. Secretary is Susan Mates. Nancy and Gwen will continue on the board, as will Karrie Duckworth and Michelle Harrington. Members are excited to use some of the tools we learned setting up meetings this year to apply to meetings and perhaps events in 2021 and going forward.

One of the happiest things we did with our new Zoom virtual meeting skills (thanks to Gwen) is to hold a Zoom coffee meeting with board members, new and old. It was not scheduled to be a working meeting, but an opportunity to meet Don and Sarah, and just chat.

Gwen and I want to thank board members for serving for the past 2 years, our two new members, our returning members, and our new Co Presidents. We believe we are prepared to make changes as needed and we would be naive to think that they won't be necessary at least for the near future.

And though there is a special page for thanking all of our volunteers, we take this opportunity as past presidents to extend that same heart-felt thank you here in the President's Message.

*Thank You
to all our
Volunteers!*

Everyone on our volunteer roster contributes and does it so cheerfully and well. This was an unusual year for monitoring and maintaining nestboxes due to pandemic precautions. Despite the challenge, we collected data where we could, and the bluebirds, of course, did what they do well - claimed, built, laid, hatched, and fledged. Some volunteers helped in capacities other than field work. Some volunteers did both. We are seeking to expand these kinds of roles, because while very rewarding, field work is not possible for everyone. See you next year!

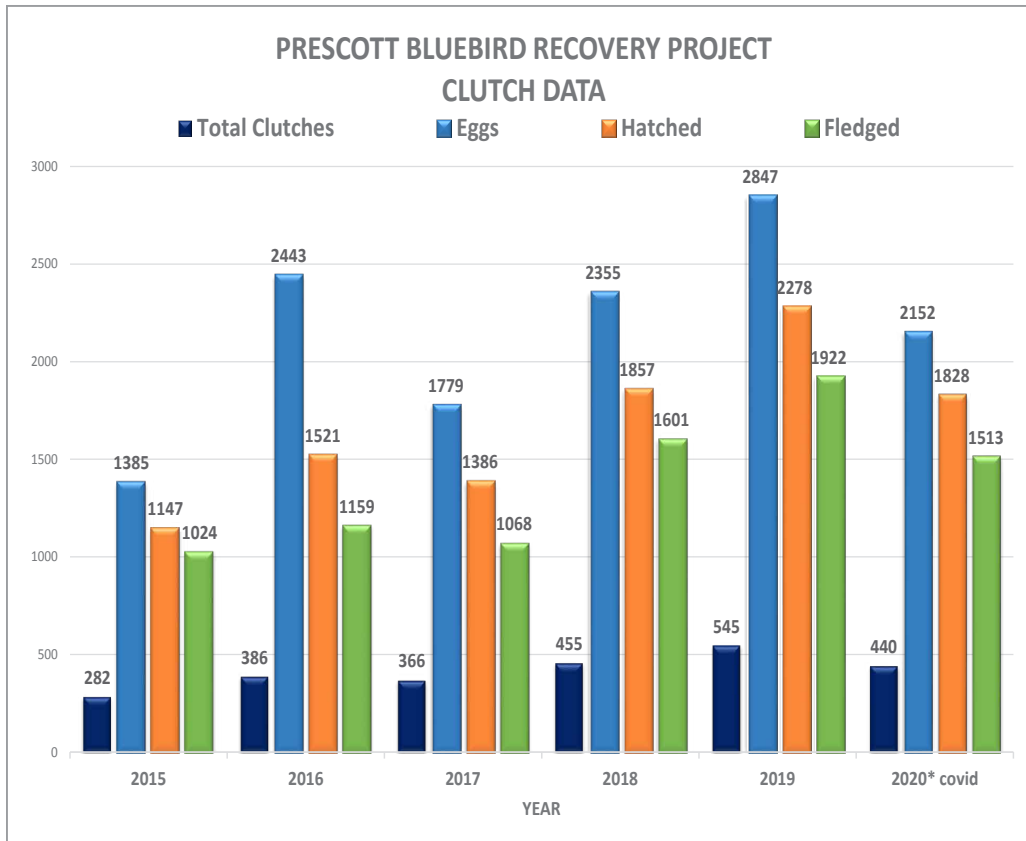
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Photo Credit - Nancy Fraser



Interpreting This Data

By Nancy Fraser

During and especially at the end of the nesting season, everyone seems to want to know “how did the bluebirds do?” As we can only draw conclusions on the clutches we observed, we can’t generalize this observational data to the larger population.

When comparing this data year to year, consider these limitations: the data set changes year to year. EG: Different # of monitors, some boxes have been removed, some new boxes have been installed, routes have been changed or restructured, etc.

In 2020, we had an incomplete season of observation due to COVID-19 restrictions. A number of the first clutches were near fledging or completed before we reopened routine monitoring on June 1. Those numbers are not all included. Instead, look at percent comparisons in a given year (for example: eggs hatched vs. young fledged). Compare the same percent calculations to previous years’ data. The results are quite consistent.

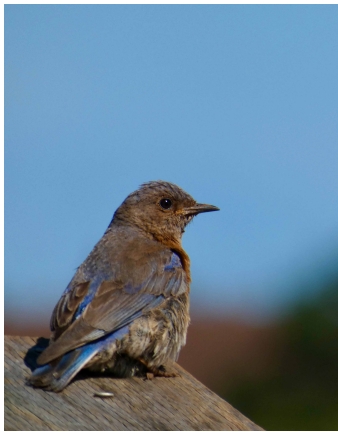


Photo Credit - Betty Ballentine

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Because we are an
all-volunteer

organization and we do not require memberships or sell items, we depend solely on the generosity of our financial donors. If you are able to contribute financially, we hope you’ll consider a donation. You’ll find a donation envelope included with this newsletter, and we also accept contributions through PayPal; you’ll find a link on our website, prescottbluebird.com to donate.

Thank you for helping us help our Western Bluebirds!



Photo Credit - Laurie Frajola

On the Lookout, with Bluebirds Added

By Susan Mates

In June, my husband and I set off for Eastern Oregon where we were to be fire lookouts near the Hells River Canyon. I was sad to be leaving behind my bluebird nest box route, but looking forward to spending the summer at 7000' in a remote cabin on a tower near a wilderness area.

We jounced over the rough 4WD ride up to the cabin, and the first thing I noticed was a beautiful male mountain bluebird greeting us from the guy wires of the cabin, sunlight glinting off his brilliant blue feathers. He and his mate were making frequent trips to the awning-like shutters over our windows. I figured that the shutters were being warmed by the sun, and that the insects were particularly active there, a bluebird attractant.

A few days later, it began thundering, then snowing. We were struggling to get our heater working and wanted to make sure the pipe was clear. John stuck his head up through a trapdoor in the roof and discovered a bluebird nest, tucked into the eaves! Shortly after, we began noticing fragile peeping that we could hear from inside the cabin. I feared for their lives, but those poor parents continued to search out food for their babies despite days of snow, 40 mph winds, chilling rain, and consistent temperatures in the 30's.



One day I kept track of the number of times the bluebirds fed those nestlings. It was an astounding 25 times an hour, and I know that I missed many visits when they flew in from a different direction. That translates to each 1.79 minutes when it was partly cloudy, and then each 2.9 minutes when we were socked in by a cloud and visibility was poor. They worked from the first feeble light until the last fading glimmer.



The strength of the cheeping grew noticeably stronger as the days passed, and then raucous. Finally, one evening we took a walk just at dusk. The parent bluebirds were perched on the radio tower, keeping watch, as usual. But this time, one of the nestlings had ventured out and was clinging to a wire above the eaves, testing its wings. As we came up the stairs, another was perched right at the edge of the shutters. Its little beady eye looked into mine, almost on the same level, its subtle pattern of blue and gray smooth now, no baby feathers left. As we readied ourselves for bed, John noticed one of the baby birds fluttering down to the ground. We worried about its fate, but... that's nature.

The first thing we did the next morning was search for the baby bluebirds. There they were, being herded around by the parents in a nearby clump of subalpine firs and snags just to the north. It was the perfect spot for them to get accustomed to their wings: lots of cover, plenty of nearby branches, clouds of insects swirling in the air. I watched the female shove something into the mouth of one of them. It was impossible to make a count, but it was a good sized group, mixed in with some Cassin's finches and juncos who were hovering around in the same area.

Within a few hours the bluebirds vanished. Like squabbling, demanding teenagers, they leave a hole when they are gone. I missed them, and the feeling of being a part of their daily lives. Monitoring nest boxes over the years has been rewarding. Now I am grateful to have been given this different, more intimate look into the life of one family of these brave, gentle, and hard-working birds.

Fighting the Squirrel and Winning!!

By Ralph Stemp in the NABS journal BLUEBIRD,
Vol. 42 No. 3, Summer of 2020
A review and personal experience by PBRP Team Leader
Dan Dickinson

Last summer while monitoring my bluebird route, I found a squirrel had taken up residence in one of the boxes and in order to do so enlarged the entry hole. After evicting the squirrel, I needed to repair the hole. I looked on line and in different bird shops for solutions. All that I found were more preventative than restorative and seemed more expensive than they should. The least expensive was over \$8. Fortunately, I had just received my summer 2020 edition of Bluebird, and in it found an article by Ralph Stemp. His solution (using a metal electric switch plate) worked great, is simple, looks good and the price is right.



Rodent Enlarged Hole Photo Credit - Nancy Fraser

The circular opening is 1 1/2 inches and plate itself 2 1/2 x 4 inches. The plate is reflective silver and should be painted with camo tan paint (allow to dry completely before installing). Use 1/2 inch # 8 wood screws (those provided with the plate are not suitable for wood) to

secure the plate so that it is tightly screwed into the wood. You may need to turn the plate vertical or horizontal to get the best grip into the wood. Make sure the nest hole is completely unblocked by the plate to allow the birds inside.

To my estimate, purchased at a local large box Hardware & Building Supply, the entire cost was about \$1.30 for plate, screws and paint.

I made some very modest adjustments to his plan. I did not find it necessary to drill a third screw hole. I pre-drilled the screw holes at home, making for easier installation in the field. I painted the metal plate with camo tan paint. Camo has the least amount of reflection.

This installation does not replace wooden nest hole extenders we use to make it more difficult for clever-pawed or -beaked predators to reach inside the box. It prevents or discourages gnawing or pecking at the nest hole to widen it.

Bottom line, if you are having problems with squirrels taking over your boxes, I suggest you take a look at the Ralph Stemp article in Bluebird: Journal of the North American Bluebird Society. Interested? Write to info@prescottbluebird.com for more information.

Do Nest Boxes Grow on Trees?

By Ed Hepp & Nancy Fraser

Our project relies on the willingness and generosity of our supporters and volunteers. How might you help with the process of providing nest boxes?

Raw materials and hours of careful work by box builders are the important components. We are fortunate to have had dedicated builders over the years. As they retire, equally committed volunteers waiting in the wings step forward. See Page 6 to meet two volunteers who have recently provided their time and space in this effort.

We are forever in need of weather-resistant woods such as cedar, redwood, juniper and teak. Is a neighbor taking down or replacing a cedar fence or wooden structure? We can turn those old boards into nest box parts. The same applies for discarded outdoor furniture of teak or redwood. We can also use solid hardwoods such as oak, walnut and mahogany. Wouldn't it be gratifying to know that your old oak bookcase is now sheltering bluebird nestlings?!

If you have any such wood available, please contact us at info@prescottbluebird.com. We will be pleased to arrange a pickup at your convenience.

Thank you for your help in alerting us to opportunities to replenish our wood supplies. This makes it possible to continue to provide alternative nesting "cavities" for Western Bluebirds.

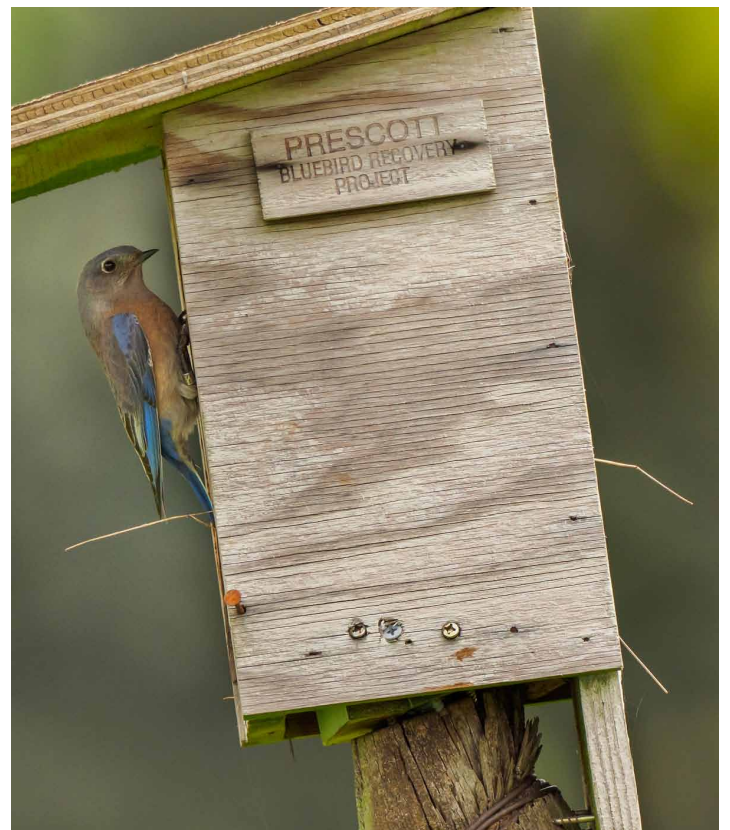


Photo Credit - Richard Sorensen

Notes from the Nest Box

By Gwen Martin

Over the years, PBRP has been the grateful recipient of nest boxes constructed with donated material and volunteers who generously donated their time and woodworking skills. A well-built nest box



Harold Potter Photo Credit - Gwen Martin

will last many years, but every year some succumb to the natural elements, some to heavy road construction equipment, some to vineyard trimmers, and, sadly, some to human vandalism. Currently we are so fortunate to have two skilled volunteers making nest boxes and accessories for us, and we'd like to shine a well-deserved spotlight on them.

Harold Potter, a Canby resident, spent his working years first in the technical business of broadcasting and later starting a business selling and servicing electronics used in aviation. Harold has been a licensed pilot and an avid fisherman. Like all dedicated fishermen, he says woodworking was

“a lesser hobby.” Regardless of ranking, we're grateful for Harold's woodworking skills! His latest venture is a tiny video camera he mounted to photograph the nesting Bluebirds at his home.

Like Harold, Ed Hepp's working years weren't centered around wood—he was in the steel industry, ultimately as owner of Hepp Steel Resources before recently retiring and “downsizing” from a Stafford country property to Lake Oswego. Ed's been building nest boxes for years for himself and his neighbors, and he particularly enjoys using



Ed's Nest Boxes Photo Credit - Ed Hepp

reclaimed, salvaged wood. (You can read more about donating wood products for nest boxes on page 5.) Ed says he's been interested in wildlife and the natural sciences since childhood, so we're not surprised that he's also an avid fly fisherman.

This summer Ed has been especially helpful with the installation of many replacement nest boxes.

And so we give a special shout-out to our woodworking volunteers.

Thank you, Harold and Ed!!



Ed in the shop Photo Credit - Fran Hepp



Photo Credit - Zenobia Lapeyre

SAVE THE DATE For Spring New Monitors Meeting

It is too early to give the date at this time. The Board is evaluating and brainstorming how this meeting will look compared to our historic spring meetings. Keep an eye on our Facebook page for updates.



Which Way to the Nest Box? Photo Credit - Betty Ballentine

Notes from the Bluebird Trails

We were unable to hold our regular fall meeting due to the state's restrictions on indoor meetings the size of ours. We wrote to alert our volunteers, and asked if they had an interesting finding or anecdote from the season, that they share it. Here are some things we heard during and at the end of the season.

- Monitor Ellie reported: I found a wren nest started in a box at my home. One day I saw a bluebird fly in, so I peeked inside. Sure enough, 5 blue eggs. They threw in a little grass on top of the twigs placed by wrens and called it good. 5 young fledged.

- Monitors Dee & Don shared this memorable moment: We have a group of goats on our route on property that borders on a nest box. Most weeks when we visit, they are curious, coming to check out why we are there. In late August, one of them was particularly forward, and reared up on his hind legs, leaning against the fence, as though to lick us. I was handing out mealworms not too far away. The aggressive goat came over and ate the mealworms out of the peanut butter lid!!

- Monitor and Team Leader Lauri noted: This was a summer like no other. Despite challenges, bluebird lovers persevered. My team and I were richly rewarded with a continuation of the success in 2019, with multiple clutches and several new nesting sites. Thank you to my monitors Dee & Don Sitko and Lynn Erdman. We all enjoyed getting out into nature and interacting with our beloved bluebirds. Thank you to bluebird landowners who stepped up to help us stay safe (social distancing) and keep an even closer eye than usual on their boxes.

Despite our consistent expectations and routines each bluebird season, every year has something I've not before experienced. This season it was how totally devoted the bluebird parents were to their clutches. I already believed that, but this season I was concerned, especially about predators. Though we visited weekly, I was used to going out 2-3 times extra when there was a problem. I couldn't do that this year. A few boxes had 6-7 chicks. To my surprise, they all fledged!

I also had more 2nd clutches than usual . . . fun to watch male do double duty training the new fledglings to "survive out of the nest" and to help feed both the brooding female and the new nestlings. We did NOT have a single House Sparrow to threaten our native cavity nesters. Previous years' diligence has definitely paid off. My team also found nesting boxes, unused for years but maintained, now having bluebirds nesting. That was especially rewarding. Sadly, we also had a small stretch of boxes where the eggs were never fertile. At a single box, over two clutches, only one egg hatched.

- A previous landowner in Banks reported that 7 nestlings had been orphaned when both adults had been found deceased. She carefully took them to the Wildlife Care Center at Portland Audubon (which, by the way, has stayed open 7 days a week during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, using staff only rather than the 8 or so volunteers usually working each day). Five nestlings survived. They were returned healthy and released at the same site where they hatched. Flying free!

- Chelsea and Christie, team monitors, discovered a new bluebird clutch in a nestbox, but 2 weeks later found the box overtaken by Tree Swallows. The very next week, the box was filled with sticks and a Bewick's Wren was very possessive of it. Subsequent checking resulted in continuous presence of the wren, and eventual fledging. Last bird in wins!

- Monitors Sarah and Jeff experienced their first observed fledging in late July. The estimated fledge date coincided with their regular day to monitor. Activity at the box suggested the estimate was accurate. Three of the expected five fledglings were outside the box with the adult male. The box is adjacent to active farming. We suspect end of season activity at just the critical time spooked the parent birds. The next week, sadly, the two remaining nestlings were found deceased. But three new bluebirds flew free!



Photo Credit - Wendall Belknap

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