

PRESCOTT BLUEBIRD RECOVERY PROJECT

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Photo Credit - Sarah Hatfield

Newsletter Fall 2021

Presidents' Message

Diane Harris & Lyn Burniston,
Co-presidents PBRP Board

To Volunteers and Homeowners - the 2021 nesting season for bluebirds -WHAT A CHALLENGING YEAR!

We started the year excited about a new season without Covid 19 constraints. Then we were hit by an historic ice storm and a devastating heat event.

This season had many disheartening aspects. The high temperatures affected our clutches in different ways. Depending on stage of development - we lost many clutches where eggs failed to hatch and lost nestlings that perished - all due to extreme heat.

The project will be researching methods to deal with future heat extremes. We will be looking at studies that are in progress to address this situation.

At our October 9 Annual Meeting three new board members were elected. Susan Mates has retired from the board. We will miss her input and long time volunteer activity with PBRP. Welcome to the newly elected board members Carolyn Hyink, Madeline Ishikawa, and Katie O'Toole!

On the brighter side, we are pleased to report that Champoege Park has had a very successful resurgence of nesting bluebirds over the last few years. We have a project to establish a new bluebird trail in Lake Oswego and are working on a presentation for establishing bluebird habitats on golf courses. Additionally, several volunteers from the community have been able to replenish our bluebird box supplies.

Most of all - we want to thank EVERYONE for their patience and persistence this year as we await the challenges of 2022.



Photo Credit - Scott Peavy

Celebrating

Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project Volunteers

*Thank you volunteers for staying the course in this season of difficult conditions for nesting bluebirds.
Bluebird eggs and nestlings were lost due to consecutive days of excessive heat and dryness at just the wrong time.
We never lost you. We are grateful for your work and dedication under these circumstances.*

Jeannette Adlong
Sharon & Jim Bailey
Tara Baker
Betty & John Ballentine
Lyn Burniston
Fiona Carey *
Vivian Chang
Sharon Coan *
Christine Darby
Lynn & Dan Dickinson
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Nancy Southard
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Sally Visser
Michal & Dave Wert
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Kit Whittaker

* Inactive this season

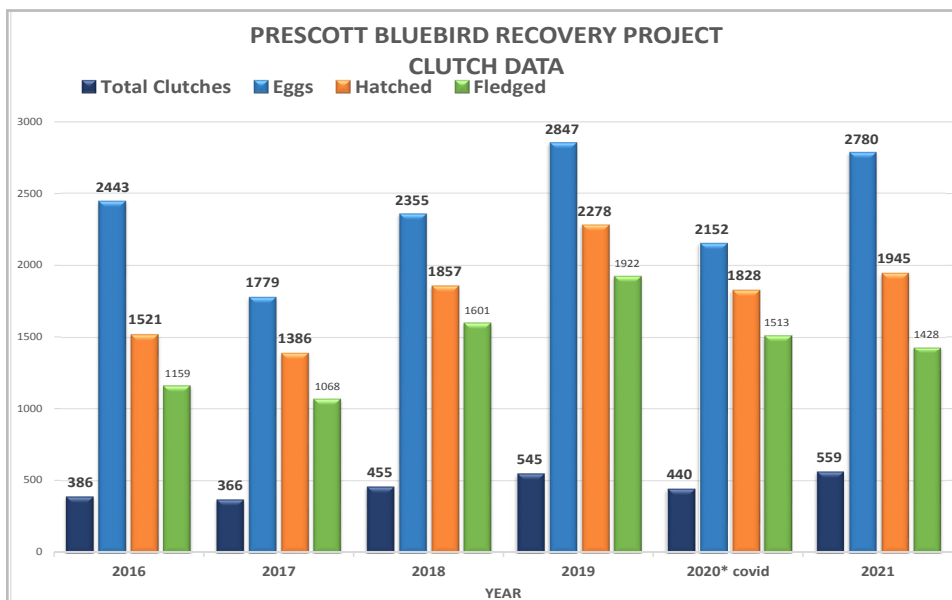


Photo Credit - Rick Sorenson

GCSSA Webinar

Elaine Newland, Sally Visher and Karrie Duckworth, volunteers with The Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project, are creating a webinar for The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSSA).

The mission of this GCSSA webinar is to get participants interested in attracting bluebirds to their golf course. Golf courses attract many kinds of wildlife, and, with a few exceptions, are welcomed. Bluebirds are certainly a favorite in many locations with nest boxes often seen. Each February, male Western Bluebirds visit The Oregon Golf Club course on the rolling hills west of the Willamette River, to choose a nest box to show to their female.

In this 60-minute webinar, several speakers will discuss The Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project. Russ Vandehey, CGCS, is the golf course superintendent at The Oregon Golf Club in West Linn, Oregon. He has championed bluebird nestings and our monitoring for over 20 years there. Vandehey will explain how he and The Oregon Golf Club interact with PBRP, how to encourage bluebirds in out-of-play areas by using nest boxes, and how to communicate the positives of such a project to their community. It will be live to their members October 26th.

Superintendents from golf courses across US are the main audience, mostly U.S. based members but there are a handful of “regulars” who are International and take these webinars. Assistant superintendents, general managers and equipment managers also participate. Live participation has been running between 30 and 50. GCSSA records these events and they are available for several years in their Learning Management System. We hope to be able to arrange opportunities for our volunteers to access the recording once the Association has shared it with their members and staffs.

Dundee Bluebird Possession Squabble

By Eleanor & Herb Sims

There are several Bluebird nest boxes positioned by Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project near our house and garage. These sites provided with intention of supplementing available “cavities” for nesting are visited and monitored weekly by volunteers. Our property is located in the Dundee Hills and we enjoy watching the coming and going of the visiting and nesting Bluebirds.

In late May my wife and I were walking towards our garage and noticed a lot of squabbling by a couple of male bluebirds near a nest box. They were flying around chasing each other. The closer we came to them the louder they got. Then all of a sudden the two birds landed on the ground, engaged each other and started rolling around with their wings flapping. This had all the appearances of a real knock down, drag out fight. When the birds were rolling on the ground my wife stepped closer and yelled at them but they paid no attention. They soon leapt into the air and started chasing each other again.

At the same time two female bluebirds were also squabbling among themselves. They both landed on a nearby post, flapping their wings at each other, making a lot of noise, then jumped into the air and like the males started chasing each other again.

Unfortunately we did not have a camera handy so we missed taking pictures of all this activity.

We have never seen such behavior from bluebirds.



Photo Credit - Daniel Piquette

This degree of active competition for nesting sites is infrequently observed between bluebirds, but not unheard of. It may go on without volunteers or property owners noticing. Male bluebirds from the previous year's hatching often return to a site close to where they were fledged. Adult birds return to the site where they have successfully nested in the past. That could have contributed in this case. Bluebirds are territorial and defend an area for gleaning food for their young. Usually, other bluebirds are not tolerated within 300-500 feet of the nest site. The monitors quickly brought another box and installed it, hoping to relieve the competitive pressure. Although one of the males flew to the new box immediately, it was unclear whether this showed intent to claim the box or it was an example of the “winner” of the observed battle defending a new box very close to the one he had chosen. No nesting activity was observed in the newly installed box, and it was taken down at the end of the nesting season.

Notes from the Nest Box...

Eagle Scout Projects

by Gwen Martin

PBRP volunteers monitor over 700 nest boxes during the Bluebirds' nesting season. In addition to collecting nesting data, they are responsible for maintaining the boxes on their routes. This includes cleaning them out, adding feeder cups for meal worms, replacing number tags, and minor repairs. Ultimately, however, nest boxes succumb to weather, storm damage, collisions with road construction or agricultural equipment, or, sadly, human vandalism. We rely on volunteer nest box builders to construct new replacement boxes, and we have been very fortunate the past couple years to have some terrific contributors.

This year we were fortunate to have two local scouts choose PBRP as the beneficiary organization for their Eagle Scout Projects. Together, their projects contributed 39 new nest boxes to our program! Early this spring, Rachel, a member of Troop 5339, led a team of volunteers who constructed nest boxes, following plans we provided.

Once the construction phase was complete, Rachel spent several days in the field removing old boxes and installing new ones. She also learned where the birds prefer to nest, how to "paint" the inside of the box with soap to deter wasp nests, and how to apply the metal tag that carries the box number.



Rachel in the field
Photo Credit - Gwen Martin

Later in the summer, Carter, a member of Troop 515, led his team in the construction of nest boxes, again following the plans we provided. Carter's goal was to donate nest boxes to help replenish our depleted inventory of new boxes. About half of Carter's boxes have already been requested by monitors and team leaders for their routes.

The Eagle Scout project is intended to build leadership skills. The scout must plan his/her project, recruit and direct volunteers to accomplish the task, and do any needed fundraising to cover the project costs. For both of these scouts, pandemic restrictions added extra complexity to their projects. In the end, both Rachel and Carter donated leftover funds to PBRP. Thank you, Rachel and Carter—we're grateful for your contribution, and we salute your accomplishments!!



Carter with one of his nest boxes
Photo Credit - Gwen Martin



What happens when a wren finds FAR TOO MANY twigs!
Photo Credit - Nancy Fraser

A Bluebird Haven in West Linn

By a bluebird nestbox property owner

Not far south of downtown Portland, where the Tualatin River joins the Willamette, a country road twists upward along the cliffs of Pete's Mountain, then flattens out at a bright elevation. Schaeffer Road immediately branches off to the right and leads into rolling farmland where, in 2008, Cecie Starr Carey took it into her head to restore all but one acre of her newly purchased, marginal farmland to wildlife habitat. She designed an open grassland punctuated by Oregon white oaks. She planted rows of cedars around it and added a large, shallow-edged pool of circulating fresh water. Given her history in science education, she knew that serious nature lovers are supposed to watch and not disturb wildlife. She made a firm resolution to maintain emotional distance, which crumpled when Western Bluebirds moved in. Inadvertently, she had designed ideal bluebird habitat. All year long, she listened to them chortle softly in the cedars and at the habitat pool, where they spaced themselves a few inches apart and sprayed water at one another with flapping wings. Sometimes they immersed their bellies and just sat there, staring out across the grassland. In winter, they piled into a communal fluffed-up heap near the house to keep warm.

Volunteers from Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project were already monitoring nestboxes down the road, at the Oregon Golf Club. PBRP volunteer Elaine Newland, urged Cecie to put up two nestboxes. That same afternoon, two bluebirds moved into one of them. Just as fast, a squadron of twelve Violet-green Swallows tried to drive them off. The swallows already had claimed the sky over the grassland. Each morning, they took off in tight formation and swept low to the ground through clouds of flying insects, over and over again, bills agape. Then they raced to the nestbox and sky-bombed the male bluebird until sunset.

The female laid five eggs anyway. Cecie tried to be neutral, but the swallows vexed her. She tried chasing them off and they started sky-bombing her, too. Refusing to duck, she ran around the driveway next to the nestbox, flapping her arms and squirting water from a garden hose at birds in the sky.

The parent bluebirds understood what she was doing or were indifferent to it. They sat side by side on the nestbox, calmly watching her histrionics. Unexpectedly, the male stopped showing up and the female could not leave her eggs. With Prescott's approval, Cecie helped her survive with a daily offering of live mealworms, which had been dusted with calcium carbonate. The eggs were successfully hatched.

And so Cecie embraced the concept of more nestboxes. And helpful snacks. By the time bluebird nestlings were big enough to chirp, she delivered scoops of worms daily through wind, rain, and fog. From the moment the kitchen door closed behind her, she gave the males a heads-up by chortling softly. Hers was a distinctively inept chortle, given that she does not have an avian vocal organ in

her throat. And then she happened to listen to online recordings of bluebird chortles. Her fledglings did not sound like that. They did not sound like that at all! They sounded just like her. Each one had learned the Cecie Starr Carey chortle, which they had come to associate with breakfasts of mealworms.



Photo Credit - Cecie Carey

In many such ways generations came to accept Cecie as the bluebird mothership. In time, Prescott's count of bluebirds that Elaine banded in the habitat exceeded 100. Some of them ended up as far away as Newberg and Sandy.

In 2016, personal circumstances demanded that Cecie put aside thoughts of bluebirds. It was not until 2021, when an ice storm owned the night, that she discovered the bluebirds had not forgotten her. A flock abruptly formed and clustered under the roof eaves as more than a dozen large, ice-laden trees snapped apart and crashed all around them. Were they terrified? She certainly was. The next day, a pair of bluebirds would not stop pounding their feet and wings against windows on all three floors of her house. They slept on a window ledge where they could peer inside. They did not want worms. Apparently, they just needed to know Cecie was there. Many birds died on Pete's Mountain in 2021. That pair of bluebirds survived and created a new generation in the primest of prime locations.



Photo Credit - Sarah Hatfield

Annual Meeting of PBRP Volunteers October 9, 2021

The PBRP Fall 2021 Wrap-up and Annual Meeting was held on Saturday October 9th over Zoom. This was an opportunity to thank our volunteers and meet our board members.

Co-presidents Diane Harris and Lyn Burniston thanked volunteers for their tenacity and continued monitoring during and after this very difficult season.

Treasurer, Lisa Fratianni, presented her report showing the financial overview of the project. A question about resuming scholarships was brought up. The board will consider this at their next meeting.

Gwen Martin updated the group on the Eagle Scouts who have been building and installing new nest boxes. Lyn Burniston shared how volunteers Ed Hepp and David Schaff have been building new nest boxes to



replenish the project's inventory. Finally, Elaine Newland shared some details about exciting new partnerships with The Oregon Golf Club in producing a webinar about bluebirds and golf clubs for their national organization The Golf Course Superintendents of America and expanding nest box numbers at Luscher Farms in Lake Oswego.

Lisa shared the end of season reports and nesting data for the year. There are reports outstanding from three monitors. She also shared the Google Map she has developed to show all of the monitoring locations. This map is extremely helpful when planning routes, filling vacancies, and redistributing monitoring and team leading assignments.

Three new board members were brought forward from the Nominating Committee and elected to the board. Welcome Carolyn Hyink, Madeline Ishikawa, and Katie O'Toole.

Diane Harris led a discussion about the unprecedented heat events over the summer and how it affected the bluebirds. Some volunteers shared various methods they used to try and alleviate the heat. There was a general consensus that this is something that the board and volunteers will continue to study and try to come up with recommendations in the future that best alleviate excessive heat inside nest boxes without resulting in nest abandonment or other unintentional consequences.

The board expressed hope that the Spring New Volunteer and Recruitment meeting will be held in person in late February or early March of 2022.

We (Always) Need Wood for Nest Box Construction

PBRP is always in need of wood for use by our volunteer nest box builders. We can arrange pick up of any suitable lumber which includes cedar, juniper, and redwood for the box itself, plus hardwoods such as oak, maple, teak and mahogany for the hole extenders. Do you know someone who is replacing an old cedar deck or fence? ...or discarding outdoor furniture or an old hardwood item? Would the owner be willing to donate the wood? If so, contact us by sending an email to info@prescottbluebird.com.

We have been fortunate to have recently received generous wood donations from the following PBRP supporters:

Bob & Shannon Harding, Tualatin
Drs. Barbara & Bass Wagner, West Linn
Charlie Jagrow, Sherwood
Judy & Thad MacMillan, Cornelius
Cecie Carey, West Linn
Roger Hirsch, Dundee
Parr Lumber (*preferred customer discount*)

Thank you all!

Photo Credit - Nancy Southard



High Heat *(this is not a baseball story)*

By Nancy Fraser

Several episodes of temperatures in excess of 100 degrees during the nesting season just ended had a major impact on plants and animals. Our work involves regular visits to nest boxes that host bluebirds and other native secondary cavity nesters. Because of this, our volunteers observe joy at bluebird success and sorrow when there are nesting failures.



Photo Credit - Betsy Dowell

Eggs are particularly sensitive to high temperatures. Based on observations in late June when temperatures exceeded 110 degrees, hatchlings and nestlings less than a week old appeared to be at similar risk. Bluebird pairs that had clutches falling into these two vulnerable periods experienced higher losses and most reacted to this by laying another clutch of eggs. Some instead abandoned and did not return to the site. Some stayed over-long (several for a week or more beyond the expected hatch date for the eggs). In several

cases, eggs were laid for another clutch while the heat-damaged eggs were still in the nest.

Older nestlings seemed to do better, surviving the heat and fledging at the estimated time or a bit earlier. Based on anecdotal information from other areas of North America and information released from the animal rehabilitation center at Portland Audubon, many bird and animal species were in difficulties with the heat. A number of our monitors reported nestlings fledging a number of days earlier than predicted to escape the overheated nest boxes.

How hot does it get inside a box? What is the temperature tolerance level for eggs and freshly hatched nestlings? Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology gives optimal range for bird egg development as 96.8 to 104.9 degrees Fahrenheit. If egg temperatures are lower, egg development slows. Higher temperatures can be lethal for the embryo. Bluebird eggs and nestlings cannot survive temperatures exceeding 107 degrees F.

Inside a nest box, temperatures can reach 120 degrees F and often are at least 10 degrees higher than the outside temperature. When outside temperatures are 100-104 degrees F, the percentage of eggs that hatch drops, and nestlings up to 9 days old temperatures may die from dehydration and heat stress.

Animals and plants can adapt to changing conditions, though it can be a slow process. Onset of unusually high temperatures in 2021 was sudden and left no room for adaptation. Some of the interventions we think as humans are likely to help manage heat may have adverse or very limited, instead of truly beneficial effects.

During the intervening months before the 2022 nesting season is upon us, our board and our community of bluebird conservationists across the country will brainstorm and share what actions or changes might best mitigate effects of heat. We will need to adapt as the affected wildlife will. It is important that we select the modifications that will truly make a difference for bluebirds. Is it nest box design? Is it location of nest boxes? For sure, I believe we don't want to use crisis management going forward if we can instead plan ahead.

It can be a harsh world out there, both inside and outside the box.

SAVE THE DATE

For New and Returning Monitors Spring Meeting 2022

These uncertain times make it difficult to plan for a future meeting. We have missed seeing and chatting with volunteers face to face and sincerely hope that we will be able to hold an inperson meeting in the spring. The board will evaluate current COVID-19 precautions in the spring and make a determination then. A date/time will then be chosen. Keep an eye on our Facebook page for updates.



Photo Credit - Scott Peavy

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