

PRESCOTT BLUEBIRD RECOVERY PROJECT

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"Feeding Time" Photo Credit - Scott Peavy

Newsletter - Spring 2022

New Resource for Young Birders

It is never too early to spark an interest in bluebirds. With that thought in mind, the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) has just released a new publication aimed at young nature enthusiasts, *Get To Know Bluebirds, A Guide For Young Nature Lovers*. This book was written by Myrna Pearman a retired biologist and nature writer/photographer. The book is full of color photographs and lots of information about bluebirds, from Native American legends and the bluebird in popular culture to the nesting cycle of the birds and the need for conservation. All three species of bluebirds are covered, including the Western Bluebird.

While the book is aimed at young people, it is a good resource for anyone interested in bluebirds and bluebird conservation. It is currently available in digital format on the front page of the NABS website www.nabluebirdsociety.org.

PBRP would like to thank retiring Board member, Nancy Fraser, for her many years of service. Nancy first joined PBRP as a monitor more than 20 years ago, eventually becoming a Bander and a Team Leader. She was elected to the Board a few years after joining the Project. She served as President twice and Newsletter Coordinator. She contributed a wealth of knowledge about bluebirds and was a mentor for the monitors she trained and led. She will be missed on the bluebird trail by the many friends she made over the years, both feathered and nonfeathered.



Photo Credit - Tara Baker

A Search for the Trifecta

By Tara Baker

In March 2021, I was a newbie bluebird monitor under the mentorship of Nancy Fraser. She taught me about the three bluebird species: Western bluebird (*Sialis mexicana*), Mountain bluebird (*Sialis currucoides*), and Eastern bluebird (*Sialis sialis*). We monitor the Western bluebird, but the Mountain bluebird can be found in the Western region though usually at higher altitudes. I had many Western bluebird observations in 2021 and was able to capture some photos of our sweet, local birds.

My husband and I were able to get away in late March for a trip up to the Olympic Peninsula in Northwest Washington. I had my camera and was looking for early migratory birds along trails and the coast. To my happy surprise, I spotted a bright flash of blue along a wooden fencepost on a coastal trail. I whipped out my camera and long lens to capture photos of this inquisitive bird and was delighted to find it was a Mountain bluebird. It was almost entirely a rich blue with only a bit of creamy white on its underbelly. I was so excited to see a second bluebird species, I sent the photo to Nancy who challenged me to now finish the trifecta: pictures of all three bluebird species.



Photo Credit - Tara Baker



Photo Credit - Tara Baker

I was intrigued; now to find the Eastern bluebird. Its range is east of the Rocky Mountains and then from southern Canada all the way to Nicaragua from north to south. So, finding an Eastern bluebird here in the Pacific Northwest was not an option. This was not too much of a deterrent for me, as I grew-up in Iowa and visit family there every year. In fact, I was traveling to Illinois and Missouri in early September 2021 to visit family and drive my daughter home to Oregon after her year-long Americorps assignment in Jefferson City, Missouri.

In Jefferson City, I visited a cute little bird shop named Birds-I-View. Steve and Regina Garr own the shop and are both bluebird enthusiasts. In fact, Steve is a past president of the North American Bluebird Society and current president of the Missouri Bluebird Society. Luckily for me, Steve was in the shop and we had an enthusiastic discussion. I asked for some ideas on where to find some Eastern bluebirds in the area. Because it was late Summer, it would be difficult to find them as they were no longer around nest boxes and could already be migrating to warmer climates. I left the shop with some possible locations to spot the birds and also some great bluebird Christmas ornaments!

Trifecta continued...

My daughter, who is not a bird enthusiast, humored me and we visited two lightly-wooded prairie locations Steve suggested. We were both eaten up by mosquitos and left without spotting any bluebirds. However, I was not deterred! We began our drive back to Oregon but stopped for a brief family visit in Kansas City. I quickly checked my eBird app to see if anyone had recently spotted Eastern bluebirds in the area. Yes! Someone had reported seeing a small group of juvenile bluebirds in a suburban neighborhood park. My daughter and I drove out to the park. It had a lovely walking path and I spotted some cardinals and blue jays, but no bluebirds. I would not get another chance to scout for the elusive Eastern bluebird on that trip. I decided I would have to wait for another visit to the Midwest, perhaps in the Spring when I might catch them at a nesting box. So the year continued into Fall and Winter. I had given up on achieving the trifecta this year.

In late January, my husband and I were able to get away to Western Florida for warmer weather, some sun, and to swim with the manatees. I was enjoying the wildlife there: the strange swimming Anhinga bird, many black vultures, the pileated woodpecker, great and little blue herons, mating ospreys on their nests, river otters, and, of course, hundreds of the famous giant manatees (aka sea cows). It was a wonderful vacation.

However, one day I had received some very difficult news while parked in my car. I was really struggling. Then, out of my tear-filled eyes, I saw a flash of blue on the blacktop. I wiped my eyes to see a bit better and saw a small bluebird about 20 feet from me. It couldn't be! I quickly pulled myself together so I could investigate. My little bluebird flitted away into a palm tree and began eating its berries. As I walked towards it, another bluebird sprinted away from higher in the leaves. "A pair of what must be Eastern bluebirds!" I thought. I quickly whipped out my SLR and captured some photos of the last species of my trifecta: the Eastern bluebird! The male's chest was almost entirely bright orange and both had a rim of white feathers around their eyes, like eye-liner. I had done it: achieved the trifecta! But, I think even more importantly, this pair of bluebirds had given

me a reprieve from my troubles and replaced it with a moment of joy.

So I had photos and experiences with all three of the bluebird species: our local Western bluebird, a Mountain bluebird vacationing at sea level, and now the Eastern bluebird munching on palm berries in Florida. It was a wonderful and successful search for the trifecta!



Photo Credit - Tara Baker

Save the Date!

Fall Wrap-Up Meeting

We sincerely hope to be able to hold our annual meeting in person this fall. We have so missed seeing our volunteers in person and swapping tales from the bluebird trails. The Board will evaluate COVID-19 guidelines and make a decision at the end of the season. Please keep an eye on our Facebook page for updates.

Premature Fledging

By Bet Zimmerman Smith

What is premature fledging?

Premature fledging is when a baby bird leaves a nest under their own power, accidentally, and earlier than expected. Premature fledgers that are unable to fly are much more susceptible to predation and bad weather. If they survive on the ground (e.g., by hiding in a shrub or tall grass), the parents will care for them until they can fly up into a tree. (Bluebird parents feed their young for about a month after fledging, until they are independent.) Fledging dates for Eastern Bluebirds is usually 17–18 days, Mountain Bluebirds 17–22 days, and Western Bluebirds 18–24 days, plus or minus.

How to avoid premature fledging

To avoid premature fledging, typically monitors should: Stop checking a bluebird nestbox 12–13 days (remember unlucky “13”) after bluebirds hatch. This is one key reason why it’s important to keep good records, so you are able to calculate the age of nestlings. If you’re not exactly sure about dates, you should generally stop opening boxes when nestlings are fully feathered. Note that some species like House Wrens and chickadees are quite prone to premature fledging when disturbed late in the nesting cycle.

NOTE: If you suspect problems (parents not observed feeding or removing fecal sacs, or seem very agitated, unexpected delay in fledging, horrifically unusual weather, etc.) it might make sense to carefully check inside the box even though it is after day 13.

Monitor carefully. Nestlings MAY stay put if experienced monitors are careful, the nestlings are used to checks, the box is opened slowly and quietly, and the check is brief.

Top-opening box. Premature fledging from a top-opening box is less likely, especially if the entrance is covered while checking. Top-opening boxes can be harder to clean out, and are harder for short people to monitor. BUT you can make your boxes open multiple ways—e.g., top and side or front, and use the top for later checks.

I photographed in a (top-opening) Gilbertson box from egg to empty nest every day up through a late fledging, and never had any fledging attempts or even an indication of agitation on the part of the nestlings. It may be because they became accustomed to regular checks.

Use a mirror. You may be able to see inside without opening the box, or only opening it a crack, using a mechanic’s inspection mirror and a flashlight.

Use a boroscope camera. These days you can buy an inexpensive scope with a light that attaches to a smartphone. You stick the lighted end, which is equipped with a lens, into the nestbox entrance and can view the contents on your phone. Be aware that a boroscope resembles a snake, which may alarm an adult (e.g., I’ve had a chickadee adult brooding eggs do a snake display when I inserted the scope into the nestbox hole).

Put a cloth or sock in the entrance hole before opening the box, check the contents, and then **withdraw the cloth after closing it.**

What to do if bluebirds fledge prematurely

If they start to exit while you are monitoring, do NOT slam the door as they are exiting—you could seriously injure or even kill them if they get caught in the closing door! If bluebird babies do fly or jump out and you can try to catch them—e.g., by throwing a T-shirt or a towel on top of them—pick them up gently and place them off the ground on a tree branch or in a protective shrub. The parents will find them and care for them. If you try to return them to the box, it can be VERY difficult to get them to *stay* inside. You can try stuffing a sock/paper towel in the hole for about 15 minutes until they settle down, or putting a 1” hole restrictor over the hole until they are really ready to go. This prevents them from jumping out again, but allows the parents to continue feeding by dipping their heads in the hole. However, the parents will not be able to remove fecal sacs to keep the nest clean. **Be SURE to remove the hole restrictor in time to enable appropriate fledging.**

Why birds might fledge prematurely

- Bluebirds might fledge too early for a variety of reasons, including:
- Box disturbed late in the nesting cycle (by monitors, activity near box, etc.).
- Predators—e.g., snakes, raccoons, cats, large predatory birds, House Sparrows. Parents will become very agitated, which might encourage young to leave the nestbox.
- Nest infested with mites or lots and lots of blowflies.
- Dead baby in nest. (I have no evidence that this can prompt premature fledging, but have seen it occur when there was a corpse in the nest, especially if it was not dried out and was covered with maggots.)

This article originally appeared the Summer 2021 issue of *Bluebird*, Journal of the North American Bluebird Society. Reprinted with generous permission from NABS and Bet Zimmerman Smith.



Photo Credit - Carolyn Hyink

Spring Box Cleaning

One of our intrepid volunteers prepared for spring cleaning of bluebird boxes



Photo Credit - Tara Baker

Welcome New Monitors!

The following new volunteers have joined PBRP as monitors:

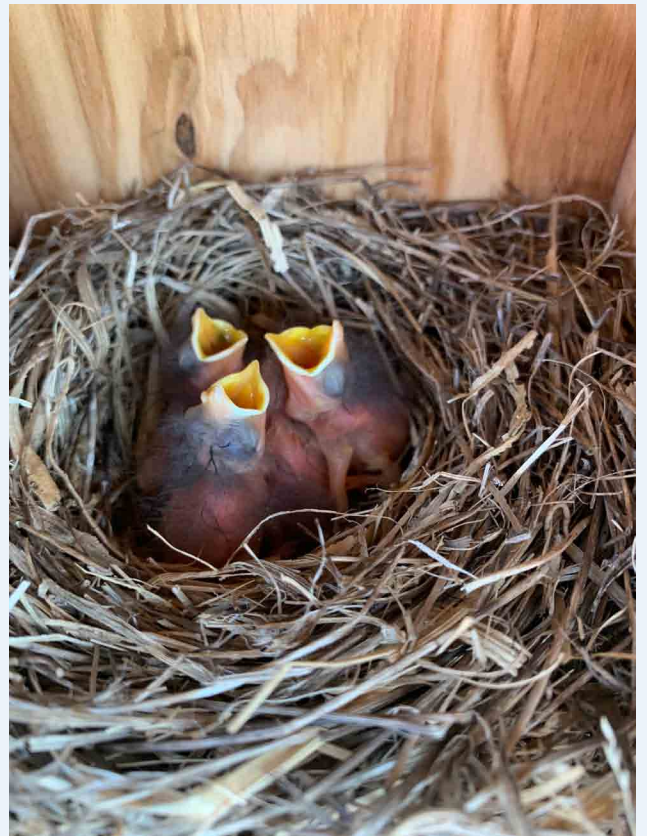
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"Are you looking at me?" Photo Credit - Tara Baker



"Hatch Day" Photo Credit - Sarah Hatfield



"Hungry" Photo Credit - Sarah Hatfield

Bluebirds at Stone Creek Golf Club

By Michelle Harrington

While golfing at the Stone Creek Golf Club in Oregon City, you may encounter a Western Bluebird. Stone Creek has a long history of providing exceptional habitat and housing for our blue friends.

Approximately 20 years ago, Dave Phipps, the head groundskeeper at that time, was working with the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) to bring more environmentally friendly grounds to Stone Creek. That included adding a few bluebird boxes to the course. The first few years, although bluebirds were sighted, and many other birds that used their boxes, no bluebirds were found nesting there. A few years later a member of the golf course, Dave Koch, and his wife Juliann, a volunteer for Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project, put up additional boxes. After shifting the boxes around the 120 acre course and trying to find the most optimal site for bluebirds, around 2011 they had their first pair. With much excitement they anticipated their first hatchlings.

The following few years brought good news of more bluebirds finding their boxes but they did have battles with green swallows and house sparrows who also enjoyed the birdhouses, view, ponds, and the beautiful lawn habitat of the golf course. Eventually the bluebirds won.

Steve Mathre has worked at Stone Creek for 21 years. He is their Equipment Manager and a Prescott Bluebird Monitor. He reports that for the last five years or so they now have had regularly 50 bluebirds fledge from their many boxes. Steve has said that in early spring you can see 10 to 15 lined up on the fence.

With Stone Creek using the Environmental

Stewardship Program Protocol, which uses environmentally safe practices, including testing of ponds and of the nearby Beaver Creek, they have ensured that all of the wildlife on their course can thrive along with the many participating golfers and staff. Stone Creek Golf Club is Audubon Certified as well. Dave Phipps who now works for the GCSAA, helps golf courses all over the US to use these safe environmental practices and he encourages them to put a bluebird trail on their courses.

Many Stone Creek golfers and staff have delighted in watching the blue bird activity around the boxes. Watching these blue jewels flying, feeding themselves and their hatchlings is a beautiful sight. Needing a large insect population for survival, the golf course provides excellent feeding grounds. There are many folks who would have never seen a Western Bluebird if it were not for the patience and dedicated staff at the Stone Creek Golf Club.



Photo Credit - Steve Mathre





"Bluebirds on Fence" Photo Credit - Tara Baker

Thank You!

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