

# PRESCOTT BLUEBIRD RECOVERY PROJECT

## Newsletter Fall - 2023

Photo Credit Sarah Hatfield

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## President's Message

By Lisa Fratianni

As many of you know, PBPR has been in existence for decades. We even have some current property owners were recruited by Harvey Prescott himself! Much of this time we have been diligently collecting nesting data (and previously, banding data). The first entries in the database are from 1997. Each fall we have published a graph of that season's results in our newsletter. SO, you can imagine how thrilled we were when a researcher from OSU contacted us about our work.

Suzanne Austin is professor at OSU with a PhD in Wildlife Science. Her research centers around gaining a wider insight into how environmental factors and climate change influence breeding songbirds in the Willamette Valley. This spring we gave her our entire database and, hopefully, she will eventually layer weather and elevation information on top of our nesting data.

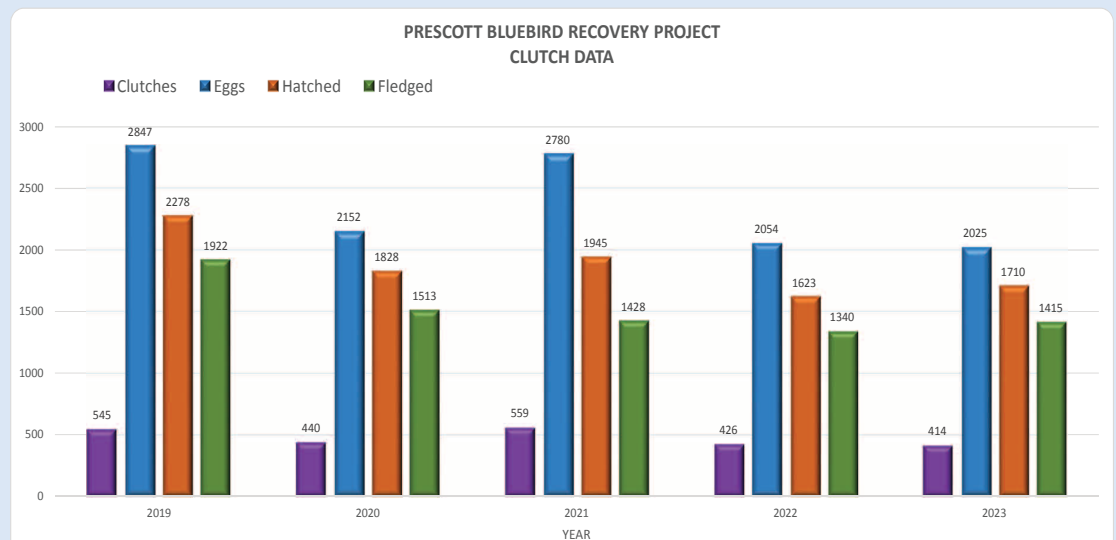
Some of her current projects include:

Untangling urban-rural dynamics in breeding songbirds: "This is an ongoing study researching how breeding secondary-cavity nesting songbirds navigate an increasingly urbanized environment."

Demography of PNW birds: Effects of climate change of avian demography and The effect of climate change on Western Bluebirds: "I am investigating how climate change, weather, and land use change has affected the reproductive timing and nest success of western bluebirds"

2021 PNW Heat Dome: "The heat dome in June 2021 caused record-breaking temperatures throughout the Pacific Northwest. In our work, we found that increased rates of nest failure in breeding western bluebirds, violet-green swallows, and tree swallows. I'm compiling data from local researchers, wildlife rehabilitation centers, and organizations to illustrate the impact that this extreme heat event had on wildlife."

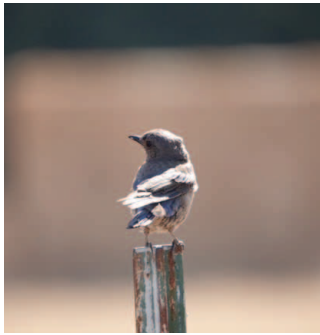
Suzanne is also working with the Corvallis Audubon Bluebird trail and collaborating with other researchers at OSU. If you would like to learn more about Suzanne and her work, visit her website at <https://suzanneaustin.weebly.com/>



## One Tough Mother

By Dee Sitko

This nesting season presented some unusual challenges, and some bluebirds taught me a lesson or two in survival and love. My husband Don and I have a route in the Wilsonville-Sherwood area, and one particular bluebird impressed us with her fortitude. The first shock came when we discovered the nest box with 5 chicks and the adult male dead after being attacked, presumably by a house sparrow who was sitting outside the box.



GERT  
Photo Credit - Don Sitko

We removed and buried the nest and birds, soaped the interior of the box and hoped for the best. Amazingly, within 2 weeks, a new nest was built and eggs were laid, though the hen was sitting on the nest, and from the glare in her eye, I knew not to mess with her.

The next week, I thought it was so sweet, as she was laying across her partner's back. Unfortunately, the week after that, we saw the same thing, and, looking closer I realized the male was dead!

We fed the female a few mealworms, and she gained enough strength to leave the nest and hunt for insects. We removed the dead male, and think he probably died defending his family. Some blood is seen on his back in the photo, and his left leg was raised as in defense.

We did not know if the 5 eggs were fertile, so we just had to wait and see. Amazingly, all 5 eggs hatched! It was miraculous! We visited more than weekly to offer more mealworms and fresh water, though we knew she had to do most of the work. She was looking very thin when we saw she had recruited a helper, another male bluebird, to help her feed her brood.

That hen is "one tough mother," as the saying goes, as she saw her brood fledge. We decided to name her Gert, after Gert Boyle, the Columbia Sportswear owner, who, faced with raising 2 kids after her husband passed away, was able to build a strong business and a legacy. We say a toast to all the strong, capable mothers, human and avian!



GERT WITH HER PARTNER'S BODY  
Photo Credit - Don Sitko

## The Blueberry Lady Who Loves Bluebirds

By Dee Sitko

We meet some fascinating people on our bluebird route. One such person is Dorene Steffek. Dorene is a retired biology teacher who loves nature and bluebirds. She runs their organic blueberry farm, "Sweet Home Organic Blues", cares for her husband, Don, and son, Evan, and occasionally has her grandson and his dog stay as well. She buys mealworms and has raised them as a biology lesson for her grandson. She also grows a sizable garden!



BLUEBIRD LADY, DORENE  
Photo Credit - Don Sitko

Although the bluebirds in the area have not used her box for nesting lately, they have found her to be a soft touch for mealworms and a drink of fresh water. She reports they even tap on her kitchen window when they are hungry! Oddly, bluebirds apparently don't eat blueberries. We keep her posted on how the neighborhood broods are faring, so hopefully next season an offspring will choose to nest in her box. Hope springs eternal for Dorene! She is always welcoming, smiling and funny, and always down to earth. The world needs more Dorenes, and we are lucky to know her!

## Bluebirds and Vineyards

Vineyards have proven to be wonderful habitat for the Western Bluebird. Many local wineries have bluebird boxes on their property and it is not uncommon for visitors to see these lovely birds flitting about the grape vines.

This year, PBRP was pleased to receive multiple donations from local vineyards and wineries. Once again, Sokol Blosser donated a percentage of sales from their 2021 Bluebird Cuvee' Brute Sparkling; this year's donation totaling over \$650. We also received a generous donation from Carolyn Loacker from Adelsheim Vineyards, as well as donations from Blakeslee Vineyard and Nemarniki Vineyard & Winery.



Photo Credit - Sarah Hatfield



## Bath Lessons

Local photographer, Karen Herzig, was lucky to document a family of bluebirds using her birdbath. She has generously shared the the photos with us.



Photo Credit - Karen Herzig

# Thank you volunteers!

*Thank you to all of the volunteers who make up the PBRP team. We couldn't continue our mission without all of the time and energy that you commit to the bluebirds.*

Jeannette Adlong

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Judy & Stephen Page

Janel Pahl

Ruthann & Ken Panck

Russ Rosner

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Sally Visher

Dave Wert

Michal Wert

David Wesley

Kit Whittaker

Pamela Woods



Photo Credit - Lauri Kunzman



## Fall 2023 Annual Meeting



On the first full day of fall in 2023, Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project held their end of season wrap-up meeting on September 23rd, which just happened to be the day before National Bluebird of Happiness Day. This meeting also serves

as the annual meeting we are required to hold as a non-profit. Steve Hernandez was introduced as the State Park Ranger who is new to Champoeg and the Project's liaison to the park. He was very enthusiastic to work PBRP.

Gwen Martin served as emcee for the morning. She began by welcoming and thanking all of the volunteers and introducing the board. Minutes from the fall 2022 meeting were reviewed and approved. Then Don Sisko presented the Treasurers' report. Donations were down by about \$2000 from last year but our expenses were similar to last year. Nest box building remains one of our top expenses and we have funds to continue that next year. Over 60 new boxes were installed this year, some new and some replacements. He noted that there is an uptick in donations when the newsletter goes out and that we have had an increase in online donations since we have added our PayPal link to the donation envelope. A good deal of our donations came from vineyards and wineries this year, as well as several memorial gifts.

Preliminary end of season numbers were presented but at the time of the meeting not all of the data had been compiled. See the graph for more comprehensive numbers.



Next, Michelle Harrington presented a lovely tribute to longtime PBRP volunteer, Bob Burbank who passed away earlier this year. Bob was a bluebird enthusiast who contributed a great deal to the project over the years. Please see more about Bob and his remarkable life elsewhere in this newsletter.

Sarah Hatfield introduced Lauri Kunzman, a 25 year volunteer, who is stepping down from her team leader role. Lauri gave a presentation of some of the many things she has learned over the years and shared all of the things that have kept her involved with the bluebirds, from being in nature to meeting people and forging friendships, to the sheer joy of opening a nest box and seeing those blue eggs.



Gwen then welcomed and thanked our new volunteers. Team leaders trained 9 new volunteers this year to fill vacant routes. Sally Visser gave an update on our partnership with Luscher Farms and made a compelling case for planning a visit to this lovely Lake Oswego treasure.

Gwen wrapped up the meeting with a few interesting slides, including a rare nest of white bluebird eggs, as well as PBRP's longtime photo contributor, Scott Peavy's featured photograph in the North American Bluebird Society's journal, *Bluebird*.

The meeting was officially adjourned and volunteers and board members continued to chat and swap bluebird tales.

Photo Credit - Tara Baker



## White Eggs: A Memorable Monitoring Experience

By Trish Ames and Gwen Martin

Everyone, even a brand new PBRP volunteer, knows that bluebird eggs are blue, right? So when I, a brand new nestbox monitor, discovered 4 white eggs in one of the boxes on my route, it was a surprise. I had thought it was going to be a bluebird nest, as there had been a bluebird on top of the box the previous week and the nest looked like a bluebird nest. Well, it seemed a swallow must have taken over the box and laid those white eggs. There were very few feathers in the nest, but still.... When I visited the nest box the next week, there were 5 white eggs, no swallows seen, but no bluebirds observed either. By then I had seen swallow nests elsewhere on the route, with all their feathers, so I was certainly confused.

When four of the white eggs hatched the following week, the hatchlings sure looked like bluebirds, and there were definitely bluebird parents very present and coming for mealworms. And as I thought about it, these eggs were larger than the swallow eggs I was seeing elsewhere. Much texting back and forth with my team leader ensued. A quick Google search on "Are bluebird eggs always blue?" helped to explain. Bluebirds can and do sometimes lay white eggs—mystery solved!

According to the Sialis website [www.sialis.org], white eggs are uncommon, occurring in only 4-5% of nests. They have been reported in all three species of Bluebirds: Eastern, Western, and Mountain. The eggs may be pure white or have a pinkish tinge. A female who

lays white eggs will generally continue to lay white eggs. The eggs are fertile, and the young are colored normally. That was exactly what I experienced; the female laid two clutches of white eggs. The first clutch of 5 eggs successfully fledged 3 chicks.

The second



Photo Credit - Gwen Martin

clutch of 4 white eggs is pictured in the photo. All the chicks had normal coloring.

So where does that beautiful blue color come from on "normal" eggs? The shell color comes from pigment that is added to the shell from a gland in the female's oviduct. This doesn't happen in white eggs. But why? Theories range from an infection in the gland to a genetic trait, but research has yet to give us a definitive reason.

Given the thousands of nesting observations PBRP has collected over the years, who else has seen this rare phenomenon? An informal query of long-time volunteers quickly turned up several who had also experienced clutches of white eggs. Our stories were similar: white, fertile eggs that hatched normally colored young.

We know that bluebirds often return to previous nesting sites, so now we look forward to next year. Will the same female return to this location? Perhaps we'll see her again and we'll recognize her by her clutch of white eggs.

## In Memoriam

### Robert "Bob" Burbank

April 28, 1924 - March 17, 2023

Bob Burbank, a longtime PRBP member, passed away this spring.

Bob served in World War II as a navigator on 28 missions in a B-17 in the European Theater. If you are familiar with the famous Memphis Belle, that plane flew 25 missions, so 28 is quite impressive. When asked why he kept going, he simply said they were short on navigators. Around 2019 he was invited on a Hero Tour to go to Washington DC

with fellow WWII veterans where he was presented with an American flag. He went with retired PRBP President Dana Robinson as his escort and they had an amazing time.

Bob was married and had two children. He worked in the maintenance and building department for Jantzen, Inc., a Portland based apparel company, where he traveled all over the United States. He also worked for McCoy Door in Portland as a master carpenter. Bob is also well remembered as the builder of the 1991 replacement of the iconic Moon



One of Bob's paintings of his beloved bluebirds

Photo Credit - Michelle Harrington

Bridge in Portland's Japanese Garden, a project that took two years and included repurposing wood and planing and laminating it himself. The bridge stands as a testament to his artistic dedication.

His creative talents took many other forms. In addition to woodworking, which included a collection of carved Santas, he did stained glass, built mason bee homes, and was a painter.

Bob retired from PRBP in 2018 after volunteering more than twenty years. Over his many years with the Project, he served on the Board and built numerous nesting boxes, setting the standard for the Prescott Box at the time. In addition to serving on the Board, he was a Team Leader and bander. During the last year of banding, Bob banded over 200 bluebirds. Multiply that by the number of years he banded, and one can only imagine how many birds he banded.

Current Board member and Team Leader, Michelle Harrington, has many fond memories of Bob, who trained her. She remembers him as funny. "One time I brought him some blueberries I picked. I thought he would like, but no, he only liked strawberries. Another time he said he got involved in the Bluebird project so he would stay out of the bars." She goes on to describe him as Brave, Courageous, Creative, Artistic, Kind & Generous, and a Bluebird Enthusiast. She remembers him fondly, "Bob was an amazing personal such a friend to the bluebirds. I imagine Bob being surrounded by bluebird angels in Heaven, and Bob telling them they should have a band on their legs."



Bob at a box building party  
Photo Credit - Lauri Kunzman





Using my DeWalt skills while installing a box

Photo Courtesy of Lauri Kunzman

## Lauri Kunzman

Lauri Kunzman, a longtime volunteer with PBRP, is stepping down from team leader after more than 20 years. Here, she shares some of her story and what she has learned along the way.

Having recently retired and wanting to find something to do outdoors and in nature, I joined Prescott during the spring mating/egg laying season of 1998. Although not a traditional birder, I loved birds.

Learning that the Western Bluebird was listed as a “sensitive” species, just under “endangered” really caught my attention and monitoring this beautiful, amazing, small bird seemed like a good way to help. With the bluebirds being close to Champoege, which was close to home, I decided to look into the Project as a guest of Marilyn Kaiser who would become my mentor as a monitor.

That first year of monitoring I learned so much about the the habitats and needs of both the adults and nestlings and why this species is considered “sensitive”. As they are secondary cavity nesters (their little beaks can’t peck through most woods), they used to live in old, wooden fenceposts. Would you believe it was not unusual to find them in downtown residential areas of Portland as well? After World War II, steel fenceposts became popular, decreasing nesting opportunities for the birds. The use of DDT was deadly to a lot of the robins and bluebirds. In fact, many of the chemicals used today on lawns, gardens, and pastures continue to contain lethal ingredients. The English Sparrow, or House Sparrow, and Starlings, both non-native species, became much more prominent in the Western USA. They both use cavities for their egg laying and nestlings and compete with the native birds for habitat. All of these are threatening issues for the Western Bluebird.

Becoming a bander and team leader provided a much deeper knowledge of the bluebird world, as well as utilizing my leadership skills by helping the monitors learn and gain information and skills to help in protecting this precious bird.

This work would continue for over 20 years. Among the many things I learned over the years is how box location, environment, noise, etc. can affect the Western Bluebird. Grazed pastureland is primo, and timing during nesting season is everything! We know the male bluebird is territorial during the mating and nesting season. So why would he let a single adult male hang out with him and his mate in the following year? Well, by recapturing the adults, we learned any single adult male allowed around the nest was one of the male youngsters from “Dad’s” previous year’s batch! We called this male bird the “Uncle.” Love this! This small, blue bird brings a smile to mine and others faces. Precious.

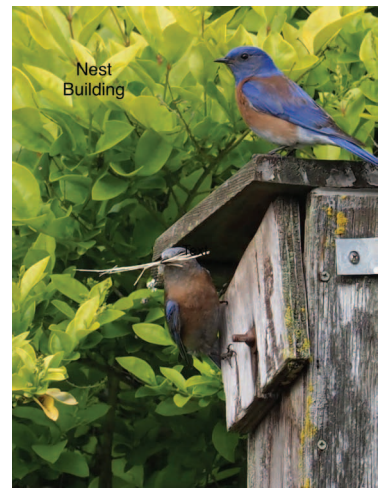
During my tenure, PBRP was very active on the social scene, especially at Champoege Park. We would have picnics and work parties where folks could come to learn about bluebirds and make bluebird boxes. Bob Burbank was instrumental in showing both kids and adults the building and assembling tasks. We would also have picnics for just the PBRP membership. I still use the recipe from Nelda Skidmore for the Calico Bean Soup that she made for our group. Being involved with the Project has given me access to the most wonderful people, landowners. There have been so many lovely gardens and I’ve met so very many lovely people. Of course they are always curious and supportive in any way they can help the bluebirds and PBRP.

The North American Bluebird Society (NABS) was quite active and 2-4 members of PBRP would attend the yearly seminars. One year we did a presentation at a NABS seminar in Montana. Nancy Fraser and I even flew to Athens Georgia!!! We all learned so much from the other bluebird groups that represented all three species of bluebirds: Eastern, Mountain, and Western.

I was fortunate enough to serve on the Board for PBRP for several years, some of those as Treasurer. Lots of work and energy went into making our group a success, a legacy that continues today. Dave Fleming was a fabulous resource, a true birder.

Eventually it was time to step back, starting with decreasing the number of teams for which I was responsible and stepping down from the Board. Three years ago I further reduced my team to 3 members and their routes, all of whom are very responsible and knowledgeable folk. This 2023 season was my last as a team leader, however, I will continue to monitor my personal route which is close to my home. I’m very proud of my 25 years of involvement with this wonderful project. Our project has a large footprint and I hope it continues to reach a great many people about the importance of protecting our native Bluebirds.

Photo Courtesy of Lauri Kunzman



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