



Bluebird Monitor

OBS encourages good stewardship
by **Monitoring** our Trails

Spring 2016



Two Very Adaptable Species By Jim Jablonski



What do you suppose I was thinking when I saw a giant excavator approaching an active bluebird nest at Lorain County Metro Parks High Meadows Park in Elyria, Ohio? If you guessed, **“there goes the neighborhood!”** you are exactly right. Not long before, box#10 had produced five bluebird fledglings and its companion, box #9, had just released five tree swallows. But when EG Excavating began working on the extension of the North Coast Inland Trail through High Meadows, I assumed that was the end of the breeding season for those two boxes.

Little did I know! Box #9 was likely to remain empty anyway since swallows only produce one clutch a season but days after work began just a few feet away, the courageous bluebird parents began their second nest in #10. Talk about hometown loyalty! There must be something about that corner of the park with its large, nearby tree that attracts this pair since the boxes have always been productive.

As the work progressed, becoming even more invasive of the birds' territory, our late spring rains became continuous, flooding the area as you can see in the photo to the right. The parent bluebirds bravely kept at their primary instinct, finishing the nest and producing four eggs while the heavy equipment crept closer. Box #9 was removed but Eric Gyory, the owner and operator of EG Excavating, promised he and his crew could, and would, work around #10.

They were as good as their word, despite being buzzed at times by the parent bluebirds. Meanwhile the hatchlings

arrived and grew rapidly. The rains continued and the box's pole threatened to tip but Black River Audubon Society bluebird co-coordinator Fritz Brandau quickly added a support that held up the pole as mud was pushed against it.



The addition helped as the mud rose so high around the pole that eventually I had to look down into the box rather than up into it. I'm sure by now you have guessed the final outcome. The ability of two species, *Sialia sialis* and *Homo sapiens sapiens*, to adapt paid off in the long run. With some compromises along the way, all the hatchlings fledged. Eric Gyory, who enjoyed seeing the bluebirds develop as he worked around them said, **“It would have been easier if they weren't there but it wasn't that much trouble to watch out for them.”**

Words we should all consider in the modern world!

This article was originally published in the September 2015 issue of The Black River Audubon Society's newsletter *Wingtips* and is reprinted with permission.



Blooming Bluebirders



Dear Mike;

I wanted to contact you to let you know that we received the package and grant check from Mr. Brindo. We were so very excited to receive it and thank you for all of the educational materials that were included, especially the OBS patches!!! They will look awesome on the backs of our vests! We have a date of October 24th scheduled to install the trail at the park weather permitting and we have almost all of our supplies ready to go! We have completed a log book as promised so we can keep track of the birds next year and we have a website put together to help inform others about our project and spread the word for volunteers to get involved. Here is the link – <http://portagelakesbluebirdtrail.weebly.com/>

We will keep you posted as well as send pictures of our progress. We just wanted to thank you again for your time to show us part of your trails and for your faith in us to follow through with this project! Please thank the board as well. We will send out a formal letter to them once the trail is installed.

Sincerely,

Shannon Saikaly
Grace Lambert
Kayla Saikaly

Girl Scouts of North East Ohio
Manchester District
Cadette Troop 90559



Getting in Contact with Our OBS Area Contacts

OBS Activities in Greene County

By Bethany Gray, OBS Greene County Area Contact



Editor's Note: Bethany Gray is an OBS Area Contact for Greene & Clark counties since 2014. Formerly she served as a Franklin County Area Contact and helped coordinate the bluebird trail

program for the City of Dublin Parks. In 2014, she and her husband Jordan, who assists in the building of nest boxes and establishing trails, moved to Greene County in the greater Dayton area. Bethany is currently a 2016 intern in the Ohio Certified Volunteer Naturalist program (Southwest Ohio Chapter) and hopes to be certified by the end of May. She is enjoying the enthusiasm of local organizations who have recently established or are newly establishing bluebird trails.

Beaver Creek Wetlands Association (BCWA)

is a private all-volunteer organization that manages a network of preserved habitat along the Beaver Creek corridor. Their work has been critical to preventing residential and commercial sprawl over these important habitat areas that continues at a rapid pace eastward from Dayton. They established a small bluebird trail at the **Fairborn Marsh** in 2015. They are establishing more trails in 2016 at two of their additional sites, including **Koogler Wetland and Prairie Preserve** in Xenia Township and **Phillips Park** (Beaver Creek Wetland Area) in Beavercreek. A bluebird workshop was hosted by BCWA on Jan. 31 with over 45 people registered. Bethany has also been writing articles for their quarterly newsletter, and they have asked for native plant referrals to help bluebirds through the winter, to ensure they are being planted on their properties, particularly when invasive plants are removed. More details about this organization can be found at www.beavercreekwetlands.org

The Greene County Park District has established a small bluebird trail at **Russ Nature Reserve** in Beavercreek, a 90-acre prairie and woodland habitat acquired in recent years (formerly private property, the house is being converted to a nature center). A development volunteer, Ken Bish, has overseen many startup projects including a garden, bluebird trail, apiary etc. and then turned over the management of such activities to another volunteer with expertise. Jordan and Bethany recently became the points of contact for their bluebird trail and future educational opportunities. More details about this organization can be found at www.gcparkstrails.com

The Tecumseh Land Trust (TLT) is developing a pilot bluebird trail to assist the Project-Based Learning (PBL) requirement for students in the **Yellow Springs School District**. The planning committee is fondly entitling this project "Operation Bluebird." A Board member whose property has a conservation easement through TLT is willing to open her property for this new trail. As this project unfolds in the future, it is possible it could expand to include other properties and schools. OBS brochures and ODNR "Hit the Trail" brochures have been provided for the TLT office, since their clients often have prime bluebird habitat on their own properties. More details about this organization can be found at www.tecumsehlandtrust.org

Glen Helen Nature Preserve in Yellow Springs (1000 acres privately managed by Antioch College) is hosting a bluebird workshop on Feb. 27 with more future opportunities for bluebird education. Glen Helen's director is an ornithologist and leads many bird counts yielding important data for scientists. More details about this organization can be found at www.glenhelen.org

Bluebirds in Cemeteries

By Dean Sheldon, OBS Advisor



Pick almost any Sunday afternoon for a pleasant drive all across the Firelands counties of Erie and Huron. You will be amazed at the huge number of lovely cemeteries within these two counties. Huron County, for example, shows over 80 locations. Many of them are located within cities and villages close to urban development. Almost every township has one or more locations.

Churchyards abound and there are

dozens of ancient burial sites in isolated areas and rural road intersections. Family plots surrounded by trees are scattered at the edges of woods or in the center of active, plowed fields. Some of these spaces are forgotten, some are tended and still others are just “cleaned up” on a seasonal basis. Many of our Firelands cemeteries are situated along or within some of the most scenic vistas of the area...and those are strikingly beautiful.

What is it about a cemetery that draws the attention of Eastern Bluebirds? What causes these areas to be of interest to the birds as possible nesting sites? What features make these quiet places suitable for the placement of man-made nestboxes and the development of small bluebird trails? Let's take a look:

- Sheer remoteness, isolation and solitude seem to make it easier for the birds to find natural nesting sites without the extreme press of competition from other bird species. Even when surrounded by highway systems and high urban developmental activity, cemeteries seem to offer a quiet oasis for courtship and nesting.
- Even when newly developed, most cemeteries have an abundance of older trees which are past their prime growth. Modest amounts of decay have set in throughout the trees. This offers an abundance of natural cavities which have been rotted out, stubbed off by bad branch pruning and then excavated by a variety of woodpeckers seeking nest sites of their own. Many of these sites have been enlarged by owls, wooducks, squirrels, coons and other wild creatures. Starlings and House Sparrows compete heavily for these same locations. Starlings are known for stealing nest cavities after waiting patiently for Flickers to complete their extraordinary excavations in such trees. Nonetheless, these cavities often become available to bluebirds and make for excellent shelter for nesting and for roosting during the cold winter months.
- As the years have gone by, many cemeteries have undertaken considerable landscaping to enhance the beauty of the locations. We often see the introduction of open ponds with aeration devices, natural ponds with native vegetation and other water features. Small ornamental trees are grouped in plantings for the beauty of spring blossoms and fruiting in the

fall. Ornamental shrub plantings and vine trellises are used, as well. Many, if not most, of these plants become food sources for bluebirds. Many different berry and fruiting varieties are being planted for this purpose. Insects associated with these plants provide food as well.

- Perhaps the most important feature of cemeteries is the acres of mowed grass which provide the principal insect food source for the foraging bluebirds. Except for the use of Roundup around headstones and monuments, chemical use at cemeteries has generally declined in cost saving measures.
- Bluebirds do their grass foraging hunts for insects from perches. Of course this is where monuments and taller headstones make the scene. In addition, mausoleums, rostrums and other ornamental outbuildings make for handy hunting perches, as well. Maintenance buildings and storage sheds work into this whole perching picture. Fencing and fence posts complete this picture.
- Because they are off road and without through traffic, graveyards are safe locations for the monitoring visits to nestboxes which are required throughout the nesting season. Gravel or hard-surfaced roads make for easy access to box sites no matter what the weather conditions may be throughout the nesting season.

Special Notes:

Cemeteries are owned/ governed by a variety of political and private entities: cities, villages, townships, golf courses, park districts, other governmental entities and institutions, churches and commercial funeral businesses. It is IMPORTANT that some kind of relationship or understanding (formal or informal) be established between the owner/operator and the bluebirders seeking to place nestboxes at these locations. Sometimes it is necessary only to seek the permission of the cemetery sexton who maintains the property. In other cases, a board must give permission by passing legislation to permit the bluebird trails to be established.

Many cemetery managers are VERY touchy about their requirements for the use of the cemetery area. Bluebirders must be thoughtful in following any special directives given for the use of the property. A main concern is that the bluebirding activities not interfere with the ease of maintenance of the area. There is also a concern that the bluebirding standards for box construction and placement will not match the special maintenance considerations which are being applied to the property.

The soothing, calm presence of bluebirds can be a very special addition to the atmosphere of cemetery and churchyard lands. The development of a clear pattern of bluebird use can add to the beauty and meaning of the area.



Wildlife Preservation

Carolina Chickadee

By Jim McCormac



*“Come up and see me sometime”
“Mmm, I will, my little chickadee”*

So went the exchange between W.C. Fields and Mae West in the 1940 movie classic “My Little Chickadee”. The latter line was delivered by Flower Belle Lee (Mae West) to Cuthbert J. Twillie (W.C. Fields).

Real chickadees are a long jump cuter than Mr. Fields ever was, and rival Ms. West in flashy good looks. Not only are chickadees cute, they are bold, inquisitive, and charismatic. I once was toting my scope and tripod through a wooded patch, and looked back to find that a chickadee was hitchhiking along, perched on a tripod leg!

We have two species of chickadees in Ohio, the Carolina chickadee and black-capped chickadee. All of them in and around Columbus are Carolinas; the more northerly black-capped occupies about the northern one-quarter of the state. The two look nearly identical, and are best told apart by voice. Black-cappeds have a distinctly slower, huskier chick-a-dee-dee-dee call. Their clear whistled song has two parts; that of the Carolina is four-parted. Occasionally black-capped chickadees make it as far south as Columbus in the winter.

These 10-gram black-bibbed acrobats are a treat to watch. Industrious and hard-working, chickadees search tirelessly for insects among the branches of trees and shrubs, often dangling in impossible positions as they seek their quarry. They also willingly take our handouts, and are frequent feeder visitors. If you are patient and willing to work with the birds, chickadees can be trained to alight on your hand and take seed from your palm.

Fortunately for us, Carolina chickadees are among our most common birds. Adaptive and opportunistic, they fare well in city and suburbia. Trees and shrubs help immensely, as chickadees prefer foraging in woody plants, and native plants support far more beneficial insects than

non-native plants do. You can help chickadees and other birds by going native in your plant selection.

Chickadees nest in cavities, often making use of old woodpecker holes. They readily adopt suitable nest boxes, and can be enticed to breed in close proximity to homes. Their nests, hidden within the cavity’s confines, are things of beauty. Most people do not loaf on a bed as luxuriant as a chickadee’s nest. The cavity is stuffed with the softest moss available, and the eggs are nestled in a down-filled central cup. Animal hair is often intertwined, and pugnacious chickadees have been known to land on basking dogs and pluck tufts of fur. Create a wildlife-friendly yard, and slap up some nest boxes. Maybe you’ll have a little chickadee come up and see you sometime.





Member News

"Sometimes you belong so you can give, not just receive. The membership dues to OBS allow us to do so much to help birds, our communities and ultimately ourselves."

~ Chuck Jakubchak

Donations

Jo Marie - \$25

Rod and Melissa Scheidler - \$10

Ronald Swart - \$10

Fred Glock - \$50

Karen Harris \$25- in memory of Patricia Jacobs, who enjoyed feeding bluebirds)

Patricia Dove - \$85

Welcome to New Members

Joan Demirjian

James Jablonski

Jerry Pleiman

Larry Plummer

Tyler Scott

David Zimmerman

OBS News Email Edition

In order to save OBS significant cost for printing and mailing the quarterly journals Monitor we would like to ask members to consider changing to email versions of the Monitor. It is always sent out earlier than the printed version, is full color throughout the issue and is a green alternative that saves trees and money. If you would like to start receiving the email version instead of the printed one please send an email to info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org.

OBS Gift Memberships and Legacy Program

Give the gift of an OBS membership to a bluebird lover in your life. See page 13 for membership application information. Another very special way to honor a bluebird enthusiast is through the Legacy Program. Information and details can also be found on the our website under the link titled "OBS Legacy Program."

OBS Annual Meeting 2015

On Saturday October 24, 2015 the annual meeting of the Ohio Bluebird Society was held for members at the Wilderness Center in Wilmot, Ohio from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and was followed by a board meeting from 12 to 2 p.m. and then an optional tour of the Foxfield Preserve, a nearby nature preserve/cemetery.

The morning agenda was full and included opening remarks by President Jay Brindo followed by the awarding by OBS Advisor Mel Bolt of the Blue Feather Award for 2015 to Marcella Hawkins. Our Treasurer/Secretary Diana Plant gave a financial review and update and then Vice President Mike Watson gave a quick overview of Nest Box Results. Trustee Carrie Elvey discussed the many workshops and activities which OBS was involved with in 2015 and then OBS Advisor Dick Tuttle and Trustee Penny Brandau talked about educational DVD's. Mike Watson led a discussion on the Overview Plans for the 2016 Conference and then Penny Brandau reviewed recent changes in the newsletter. Trustee Chuck Jakubchak gave a presentation on the OBS Legacy Fund to those attending and President Jay Brindo wrapped up the members meeting with a question and answer time.

There's Still Time to Register for the OBS Annual Conference!

Visit our website to download and print a registration form:
www.ohiobluebirdsociety.org/conference/

You must pre-register for the conference as there is no walk-in registration this year.

We look forward to seeing you there!

Ohio Bluebird Society Annual Conference
Saturday, Feb. 20, 2016
ohiobluebirdsociety.org

Registration Form
Registration Deadline: Feb. 5th

You must pre-register - there is NO walk-in registration this year.

Price (includes conference and lunch): \$25 OBS members, \$30 non-OBS members
(no outside food allowed at conference venue)

Name: _____ (OBS Member? YES / NO)
Organization: _____
Address: _____ City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
E-mail: _____ Phone: _____

Lunch Option: ☐ O'Grady Wrap ☐ O'Han Club ☐ Turkey Club

Additional participants (if different address, please use separate form):

Name: _____ (OBS Member? Yes (YES) / No (NO))
Organization: _____
Lunch Choice: ☐ O'Grady Wrap ☐ O'Han Club ☐ Turkey Club

Name: _____ (OBS Member? Yes (YES) / No (NO))
Organization: _____
Lunch Choice: ☐ O'Grady Wrap ☐ O'Han Club ☐ Turkey Club

Make checks payable to "OBS"

Total Enclosed: \$ _____ Mail to:
Ohio Bluebird Society
P.O. Box 115, 142 W. Williams Rd.
Wilmot, OH 44091-7214

Additional information and registration forms available at OBS website: ohiobluebirdsociety.org

Member Profile – John Barber

Editor's Note: John Barber is a newer member to OBS after a gap of many years in membership. He has run a bluebird trail at the TRC Fieldstone Farms in Bainbridge with 20-25 houses for over 10 years and is a licensed master bander who bands Eastern Bluebirds and Tree Swallows. Most of his recoveries, incoming and outgoing, are between Holden Arboretum and Fieldstone Farms in northern Ohio. Recently he started banding bluebirds on a smaller trail at Jackson Field in the Cuyahoga County Metro Parks. We welcome John back to our OBS membership and would like to share the profile he wrote!

I've been monitoring bluebird trails for almost 50 years, primarily in northeastern Ohio. Bluebirds were my entry into the world of birds, and led to my acquisition of a master banding permit. My curiosity about the nesting success and local movement of bluebirds continues to this day.

I assisted trail monitors at the Holden Arboretum in the 1960's, learning the critical skills of consistent protocols and data recording. I also began banding nestlings and adults at Holden and saw firsthand the importance of tracking individual birds. The monitoring study at Holden continues to this day, surely one of the longer longitudinal studies of one population in a single geographical area.

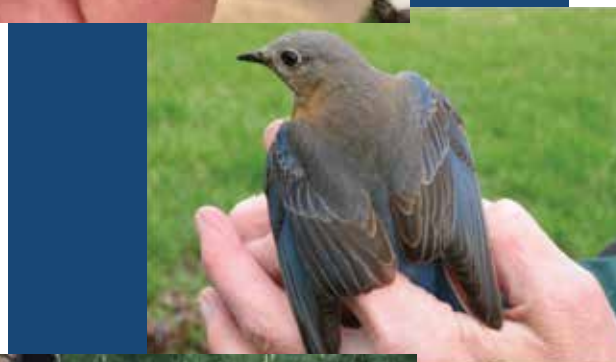
I monitored bluebird trails in Indiana, Arizona, and Maryland before returning to Cleveland over fifteen years ago. In each of these areas I had the opportunity to learn various study protocols from other citizen scientists, and share my experiences with nest box designs, predator controls, and other aspects of trail monitoring.

I currently monitor two trails in Cuyahoga and Geauga Counties in northeastern Ohio, one in its 13th year, another relatively new. These trails are within 50 miles of Holden Arboretum, and as a result, have yielded banded bird recoveries among the trails. I'm looking to add banding on other nearby trails to gain further insight into how bluebirds move among nesting sites.

I also have a nascent bluebird trail in my suburban neighborhood, where this year for the first time, bluebirds successfully nested and fledged five young. There is now a waiting list for houses – neighbors eager to understand how to manage their yards for bluebird success. In October, a banded female was part of a small flock hanging around the neighborhood.

I see several challenges for citizen scientists monitoring bluebird populations that we can solve together.

The first challenge is to ensure the widest communication among bluebird monitors, not only to share best practices, but also to compare seasonal notes on nesting success, bluebird and tree swallow trends by trail, and



long term population trends. The Ohio Bluebird Society is a critical communication link. National bluebird groups and Cornell's NestWatch program also gather data of various types, often duplicative. Can we, over time, bring this data together for access by all?

The second challenge I see is that we need much more publication of results – both in refereed journals and other publications. Many of us, myself included, have many years of good data on bluebird, tree swallow, and other cavity nesting bird populations, factors affecting their success and failure, and changes over time. How can we encourage monitors to continue to submit data but also provide venues for sharing this data with others?

Thirdly, can we use and/or add additional banders working on existing bluebird trails?

A fourth challenge I see is that we can have a major positive impact on bird populations by increasingly planting native plants in our yards, public spaces, and parks. Native plants are hosts to the insects they co-evolved with, and thus ensure a large supply of insects for birds during the critical nesting period, and insects and berries through out the year. Each planting is a decision that can help our bird populations – please plant only Ohio natives!

Tossing Feathers for Multiple Swallow Species

By Dick Tuttle, OBS Advisor and Past OBS Blue Feather Award Recipient



Several years after my first nesting Tree Swallows in 1977, I tossed pheasant feathers for Tree Swallows in Delaware State Park. I was elated when for the first time an adult swallow snatched a floating feather from the air and delivered it to its nestbox. Swallows prefer gray or

white feathers from less colorful birds than pheasants, but I was an avid hunter then, and like the swallow, had to make do with what I had.

Researchers have found that nests with more feathers have greater hatching and fledgling rates. Feathers lining a nest cup insulate eggs and nestlings from cold spring temperatures. Feathers also help camouflage and hide white swallow eggs. As I recorded data from nests that fledged more than 26,000 Tree Swallows since 1977, I have found nests with black feathers from crows, grackles, and more recently, cormorants, but these are rare extremes. Most swallows prefer white, gray, and light brown feathers. Each spring, as I start seeing Canada Goose goslings, light brown goose

feathers appear in my nest boxes proving that Tree Swallows know how to recycle feathers from used goose nests.

As the latest swallow season approached, my feather supply was low and I needed a local feather source. I contacted the Poultry Barn near Ostrander and as the owners processed chickens for markets, they gave me three handfuls of wet and steamy feathers in a zip-lock plastic bag. I improvised and discovered a successful technique to convert wet feathers back into fluffy floating specimens that I can offer to my Tree Swallows.

Most oranges are sold in bags of red plastic webbing with ¼ inch openings. I cut off the paper labels from three of these bags and tied one of their ends into a knot. I placed globs of wet feathers in each bag and knotted their remaining ends. I put the bags of feathers in my washing machine, added detergent, and washed the experimental load on the cold wash/cold rinse cycle.

When I lifted the washer's lid, I found that nearly every feather had escaped from its bag and had stuck to the wall of the washers drum. Even though I was disappointed, the good news was that any flesh that came with the feathers remained inside their bags. Not to be deterred, I used my hand to scrape feathers off the drum's wall and placed them into a pillow case. I used ribbon to tie the pillow shut near its open end and placed it in my drier for a 30-minute cycle. When I untied the pillow case, I had a bag full of fluffy feathers ready to be tossed. Since most of the feathers will be tossed by others, including children, I can also declare that my feathers are clean and safe to handle.

Stratford Ecological Center sponsored an appreciation event for its volunteers on May 3 and I was asked to toss feathers during two of the farm's wagon tours. We stopped alongside the farm's Tree Swallow nest

Hopefully, these Cliff Swallow nests at Delaware State Park's beach had enough feathers for a successful nesting season.



box grid and I dismounted from the wagon to address the group as to what to expect. I encouraged children to toss the feathers and on each tour about a dozen children of all ages dismounted, along with some adults. I passed out feathers and the tossing began. As always, the children really got into the action and several made three or more running trips back to me to receive more feathers. Active Tree Swallows won over many fans that afternoon and hopefully some of the children will blend avian conservation into their future lives.

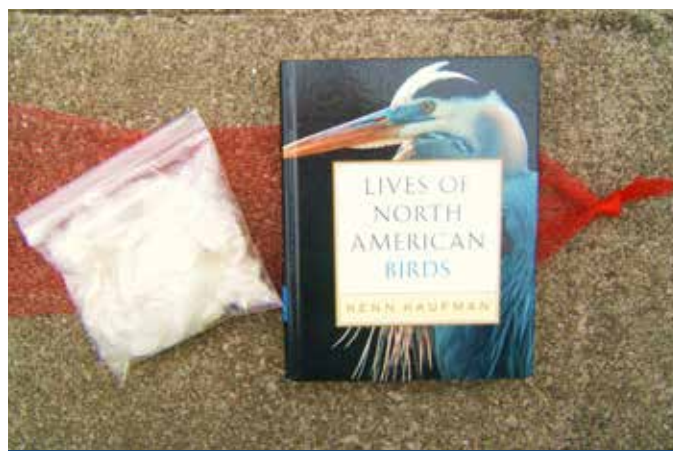
I was invited back to Stratford on May 21 to speak to their photography club and toss feathers for photographers so they could capture the action with their cameras. I arrived early and found that Tree Swallows and Barn Swallows were zipping back and forth as they gleaned flying insects above the mowed grass in front of the center's main building. At the meeting I described possible photo shots. The most difficult would be to catch the image of a swallow snatching a feather in midair, or record a feather thief as it plucks a feather from another's beak, and the easiest shot would be to record a swallow landing at the entrance of the nest box with its feather. Of course, seeing a male deliver his trophy to his mate waiting in the entrance hole is an inspirational sight that I have only seen a half dozen times. The resident Purple Martins don't use feathers in their nests so they did not take part in the action.

Inspired by the Barn Swallows snatching feathers earlier, once I returned home that day, I consulted one of my favorite books, Ken Kaufman's *The Lives Of North American Birds*. I looked up the swallow family to find that in our region, not only do Barn Swallows add feathers to their nests, but so do Bank Swallows, Cliff Swallows and Cave Swallows. There were Cliff Swallows nesting at Delaware State Park and I eagerly planned to share my first experience tossing feathers for Cliff Swallows.

I have been teaching "Bluebird Trail Management" for the past 27 years at the OWJl Academic Camp for talented and gifted middle school students at Ohio Wesleyan University. The students live in a dorm for one of three weeks prior to the week of July 4th and

attend classes each day and enrichment activities in the evening. I teach only the first class period of each day and on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays the students visit my nestboxes with me at Delaware State Park. On June 10 the class and I visited a field of 18 nestboxes and I handed out chicken feathers. The swallows did not disappoint. The campers were excited to see the birds snatch feathers in the air and take them to their nests. I then announced that we were heading to the park's beach where a small restroom building is home to Cliff Swallows that have built their vase-like mud nests under the roof's eaves. We arrived at the area with less than 10 minutes before we had to leave the park. The cliffies did not disappoint. The students were happy to see another species collect feathers that they had tossed into the air.

To sum things up, tossing feathers for swallows is fun and most bird-themed stores sell feathers for tossing. Also art supply stores sell feathers although they may not be light in color. Make sure your feathers are legal and small. Chicken breast and belly feathers work best. If you are an avid bird watcher, by next spring, add feathers to your equipment list and try to entice swallow species to come closer to you. And if you plan a trip to regions west of the Rocky Mountains, take feathers for when you see the nest boxes for Tree Swallows and Violet green Swallow. Also find out when different swallow species nest since feather collecting drops off after their eggs hatch. Have fun and toss on!



A sandwich bag full of feathers and Kenn Kaufman's book rest atop a plastic webbed bag that is used to prepare feathers for tossing.



Eastern Bluebird Early Egg Viability Outcomes: A Mini-Study

By Penny Brandau and Paula Ziebarth

“Ask Madame WingNut” for this issue of the OBS newsletter is coauthored by two Madame WingNuts: Penny Brandau and Paula Ziebarth. Penny lives in Lorain County (northeast Ohio) and Paula lives in Delaware County (central Ohio).

Early last spring, both of us had Eastern Bluebirds laying clutches in our backyard nest boxes. The laying of both clutches began on 3-24-15. We were concerned because weather forecasts had temperatures dipping well below freezing during nighttime hours. We decided to keep weather data and observe the outcomes of these early nesting attempts.

Both of us feed Eastern Bluebirds during the winter months. Penny always feeds dried mealworms and often adds dried currants. Sometimes she sets out sterilized crushed eggshells in the spring and summer and usually live mealworms once or twice a day. She also feeds “Bluebird Nuggets”, little balls of suet mix that can be bought online or at her local bird supply store. Paula feeds a homemade suet mix containing suet, corn meal, whole wheat flour, shelled sunflower seeds, chopped peanuts, currants, and peanut butter. During winter months, birds flock together for safety and warmth and forget their territorial disputes. It is not unusual to have over a dozen Eastern Bluebirds at the feeders or heated bird bath during winter months.

Paula and Penny have noted that suburban Bluebirds receiving supplemental feeding during winter months often begin nesting earlier than their rural brethren that rely on natural food stores. Last spring, it seemed the well fed birds were making early nest attempts for both of us, but how would these attempts fare with cold weather in the forecast?

Penny's Backyard Nest History

Penny noticed that nest building actually began on March 4, 2015 by the bluebirds in her back yard and their nest was complete by March 16th. The following photos are of her bluebirds' nesting attempt.



Nest building started on 3/4/15 – A few grasses were seen on the floor of the box.



Date of above photos: 3-16-15, 5:08 p.m. – Complete nest



Date of above photos: 3-25-15 6:22 p.m. and 6:27 p.m. – Two eggs/sparrow spooker

On 3-25-15 at around 6 p.m. Penny noted 2 bluebird eggs in her nest box. Her husband installed a sparrow spooker over the box roof. Sparrow spookers have routinely been used by Penny in previous years (after the first bluebird egg in a clutch is laid) and so the nesting pair readily accepted its presence on that day as evidenced by the female's prompt entry into the box after the spooker was put up.



Date of above photo: 3-27-15, 5:40 p.m. – Snow and cold! Second photo: 3-28-15, 7:55 a.m.

On 3-26-15, Penny observed 3 eggs in her nest box. One female and two male bluebirds were almost continuously observed in the back yard from 6 p.m. until 7:50 p.m. when the female was observed to smoothly fly into the nest box where she remained. The following day, the female had laid her fourth egg, but was observed entering the box several times during the day. Was she beginning early incubation before the clutch was done due to cold weather conditions or was she somehow just adding her body warmth to the box to keep the eggs from freezing? All five eggs hatched on 4-11-15, fourteen days after the last egg was laid. If she had started incubation early, it would seem eggs would have had an asynchronous hatch. These young all successfully fledged on 4-28-15. This bluebird pair had a second nesting attempt started on 5-11-15 with five eggs which hatched on 5-28-15 and fledged on 6-13-15. A third nesting occurred on 6-24-15 with four eggs which hatched on 7-10-15 and fledged on 7-27-15

Paula's Backyard Nest history

On 3-25-2015 Paula observed two eggs in her backyard bluebird nest. This first nesting had four eggs by 3-28-15. Paula did not observe her female spending the night in the nest box during egg laying and typically this is not the case. The female abandoned this first attempt and covered the eggs with nest material (i.e. eggs not viable) so Paula removed this clutch and left the nest.

On 4-4-15 the female laid the first egg of her second clutch. There were five eggs in this clutch but two of them were cracked and removed by Paula. Although three eggs remained in this second clutch they apparently were not viable as the female went on to start a third clutch, laying four new eggs in the nest with the three old ones. (Picture of seven taken on 4-16-15) It can be seen in the photo that one of these seven eggs is cracked – probably one of the three from the second clutch. It is unknown why the second clutch did not hatch but weather was unlikely to be the culprit since the only night below freezing was the night the first egg was laid and the low temperature was 30 degrees

that night. Paula's photo dated 4-21-15 shows six eggs in the nest. Four of those eggs hatched on 4-30-15 and all fledged on 5-16-15. Incidentally the nest actually fledged five as a foster chick was placed in there!

The birds started their second successful clutch/brood on 6-7-15, laying five eggs and fledging five on 7-11-15.



Paula's 4-16-15 photo

Paula's 4-21-15 photo

Why did Penny's birds have a successful first clutch and Paula's didn't? Did nest box design have something to do with it? There are differences in the two box designs. Both boxes are front opening.

Penny's box is an inexpensive cedar nest box purchased from Walmart. Side walls on this box are 11/16" thick and the inside floor dimensions are 3 1/2" by 4". Height from the floor to the bottom of the entry hole is 4" and the height of box from center of floor to center of ceiling is 8 1/2". Entry hole is 1 1/2" diameter circle. A ventilation slot is 5/8" by 4" at the top of the front panel.

Paula's box is a Triton, built by Tom Comfort. Side walls are 3/8" thick LP siding (engineered wood). Floor is 7/8" thick pine and inside floor dimensions are 3 1/2" by 4".



Paula's Triton Nest Box

The sloping front provides a 15 square inch area at nest height. Front of box is constructed of 7/8" thick cedar and has a Gilwood entrance (2 1/4" by 2 1/4"). Box has a double roof: 7/8" thick pine topped with 3/4" thick white PVC trim. There are no vents in box and it is designed to turn in the wind, orienting entry hole away from prevailing winds.

Looking at weather data, as expected, temperatures in northern Lorain County were colder than those in central Ohio during this period. According to Keith Kridler, eggs can actually survive a light freeze or two or three if they have not started incubation.

Below is weather data from Wunderground for both our locations, along with egg laying schedule. On several days during the egg laying period the temperatures dropped below freezing. In both locations this occurred on day one, day four, and day five of the laying period. The low temperature in northern Lorain County on day two was also below freezing. The low temperatures on day five were 15 degrees at Penny's nest site and 16 degrees at Paula's location.

This little mini-study was interesting. The success of Penny's birds proves that an experienced female Eastern Bluebird can successfully hatch her eggs when temperatures dip below freezing during early spring. Did Penny's female keep her eggs viable before incubation began by her frequent trips to the nest box? Did nest box design (smaller entry hole) allow for better insulation from cold? We don't know.

Our little study also shows the tenacity of these birds, trying again until successful if that first clutch doesn't make it as evidenced with Paula's birds.

All early nests don't make it, but sometimes they do! All five of Penny's nestlings fledged on schedule and Paula's birds had successful nestings later in the season. We cannot know what the critical determining factor(s) were which made the difference in the success of the two early bluebird nestings discussed in this article. It is always fascinating to study the behavior of bluebirds, observe the environmental factors which impact their breeding and nesting successes and failures, and share information and observations with others. Don't give up hope if you are faced with an early nesting – bluebirds are resilient and committed to success!

Penny's Nest

Paula's Nest

| DATE | High Temperature | Low Temperature | # Eggs | High Temperature | Low Temperature | # Eggs |
|---------|------------------|-----------------|--------|------------------|-----------------|--------|
| 3-24-15 | 37 | 19 | 1 | 48 | 23 | 1 |
| 3-25-15 | 55 | 27 | 2 | 64 | 42 | 2 |
| 3-26-15 | 44 | 34 | 3 | 46 | 36 | 3 |
| 3-27-15 | 35 | 19 | 4 | 34 | 21 | 3 |
| 3-28-15 | 27 | 15 | 5 | 32 | 16 | 4 |
| 3-29-15 | 43 | 19 | | 48 | 19 | 4 |
| 3-30-15 | 54 | 37 | | 57 | 36 | |
| 3-31-15 | 53 | 30 | | 64 | 34 | |
| 4-1-15 | 60 | 28 | | 64 | 28 | |
| 4-2-15 | 62 | 44 | | 64 | 46 | |
| 4-3-15 | 60 | 37 | | 62 | 44 | |
| 4-4-15 | 48 | 30 | | 52 | 30 | 1 |
| 4-5-15 | 63 | 42 | | 62 | 39 | 2 |
| 4-6-15 | | | | 66 | 45 | 3 |

Ohio Bluebird Society

Number of bluebirds
fledged in 2015
by county

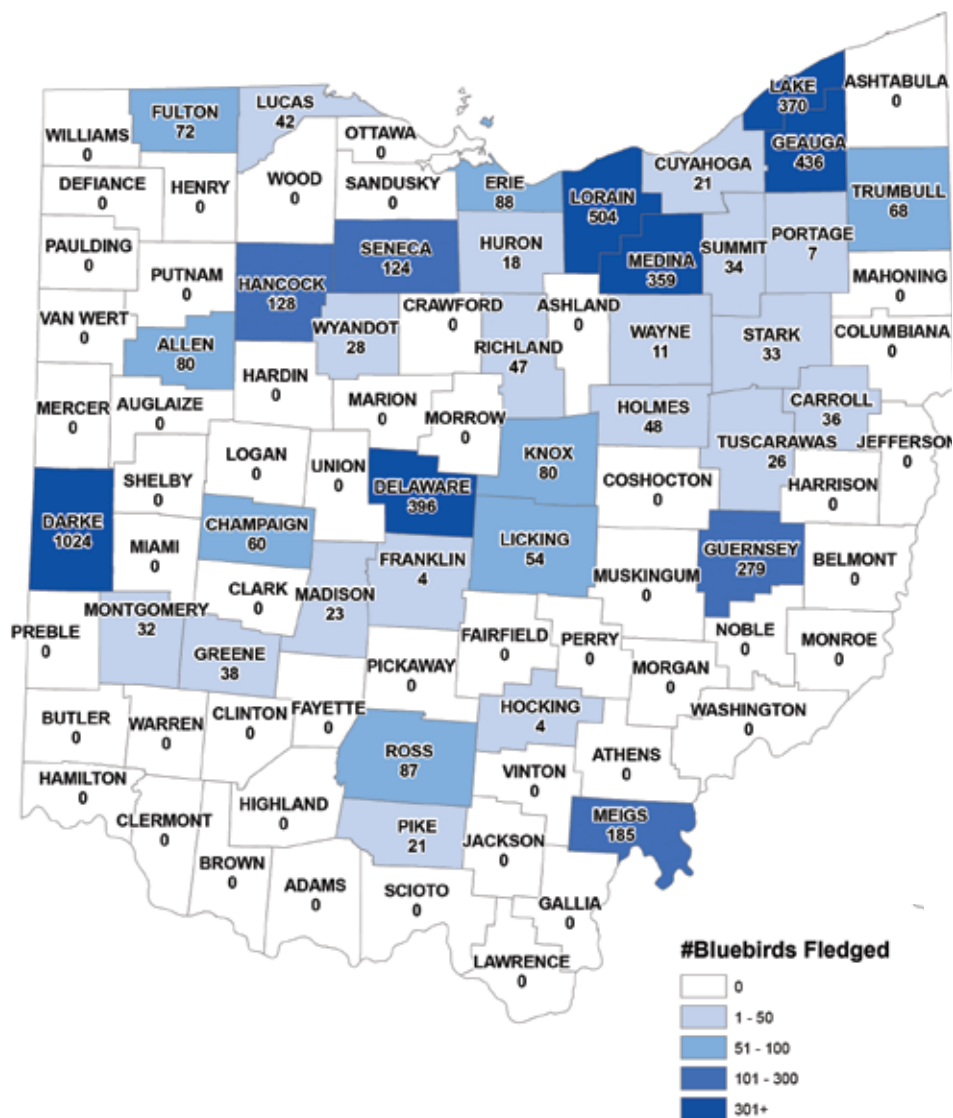
REPORTED AS OF 1/20/16:
Eastern Bluebird - 4,885

In accordance with our Mission Statement, we
support all native cavity nesting birds in Ohio.

Tree Swallow – 5,069
House Wrens – 1,455
Carolina Chickadee – 90
Black-Capped Chickadee – 141
Carolina Wren – 101
Prothonotary Warbler – 64
Purple Martins – 1,589
Eastern Tufted Titmouse – 0
American Kestrel – 81
Barn Swallow – 153
Wood Duck – 4
Osprey – 6

House Sparrow Eggs Discarded – 698
House Sparrows Dispatched – 477

Send info to:
info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org
Download fillable form -
see FLEDGLING REPORT tab



Ohio Bluebird Society Membership Application

| Membership Class | Annual | 3-years |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student (under 21) | \$10 | \$25 |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular/Family | \$15 | \$40 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Organizational | \$40 | \$110 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting | \$100 | \$275 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Life | \$300 | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tax deductible gift to OBS \$ _____ | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Membership renewal <input type="checkbox"/> New membership | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am interested in participating in OBS activities | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Email Newsletter OR <input type="checkbox"/> Print Newsletter | | |

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Ohio Bluebird Society is a 501(c)(3) Organization

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Up-to-date list is available online at www.ohiobluebirdsociety.org

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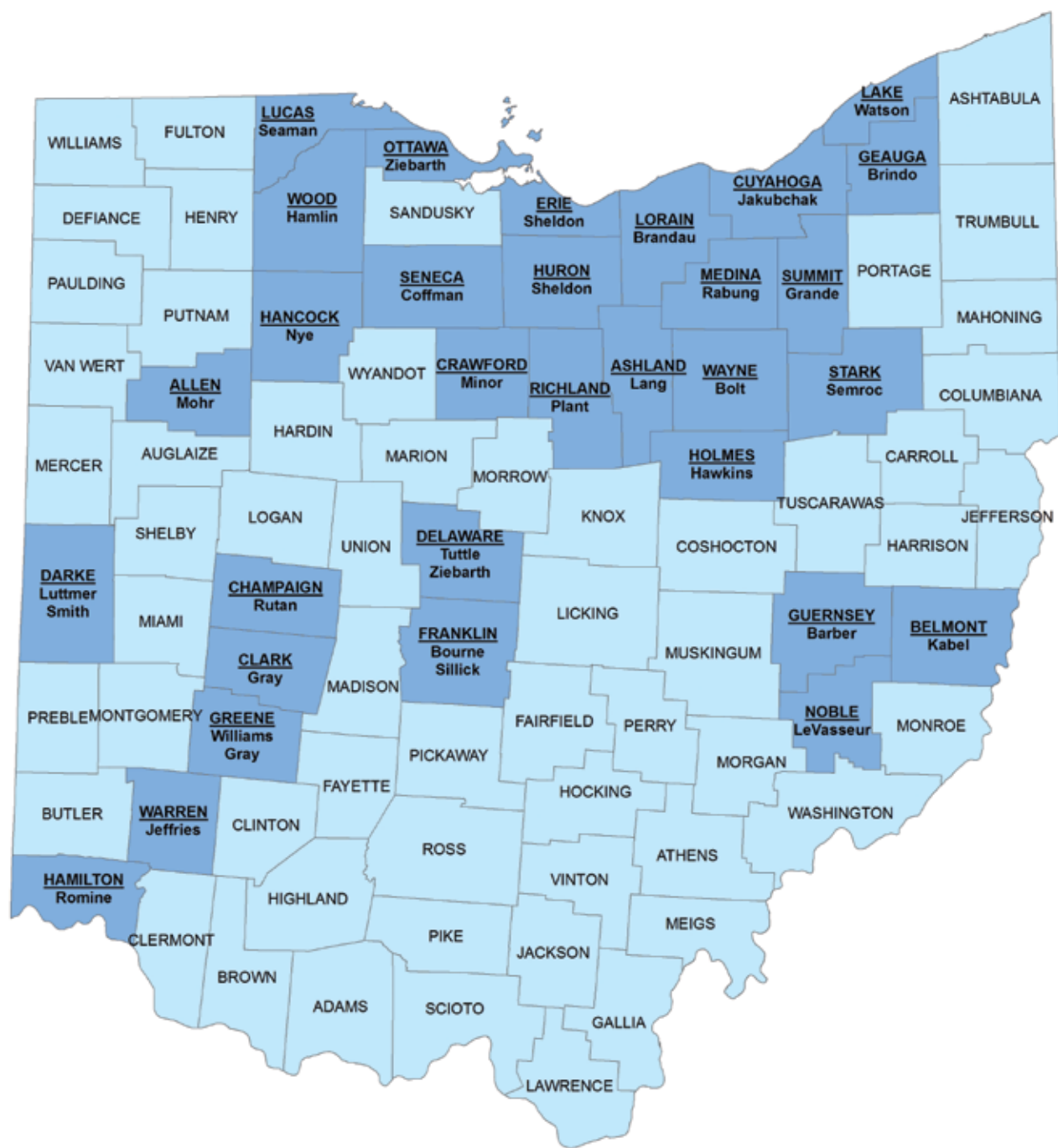
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created by Mike Watson; The Holden Arboretum



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Mission Statement

The Ohio Bluebird Society was formed in 1987 to support the return and the perpetuation of the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) and other native cavity nesting birds in Ohio. To this end, the Ohio Bluebird Society will strive for the best methods to use, conserve and create habitat for the protection of these species.

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Deadline for Submitting Articles:

Spring Issue - February 1
Summer Issue - May 1
Fall Issue - August 1
Winter Issue - November 1



Ohio Bluebird Society Annual Conference

February 20, 2016

registration 8:30, conference 9:00-3:15

John C. Myers Convocation Center ~ Ashland University ~ Ashland, Ohio

Birds and People: Collaborating For A Better World

Speakers and Topics Include:

From Refuge to Refuge: Byers Woods - Chuck Jakubchak

Keynote Address

Jamey Emmert, ODNR Division of Wildlife
Where Would We Be Without Birds?

Lunch Break-out Sessions

Getting Started with Bluebirds - Jay Brindo
Improving Your Bluebirding Skills - Don Plant and Dale Rabung
Grants and OBS Assistance - Mike Watson
Restoring the Mountain Bluebird (film) - Penny Brandlau

Bluebirds to Barn Owls: Thinking Outside the (Bluebird) Box - Kurt Gaertner

First the Birds, Now the Bees - Carrie Elvey

Birds for Eternity - Chuck Jakubchak and Sara Brink