



# Bluebird Monitor

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

Fall 2015



## STORIES FROM THE JUNE CHALLENGE

The Ohio Bluebird Society challenged its members to “Visit a Nest box with a Child” in June. A collage of stories and photos follow of children who were able to see and learn about bluebirds because of this effort. This generation will be our future bluebird conservationists!

Cammie Loy and her daughters Anna and Audrey saw their first tree swallow young on June 5th near Vermilion, Ohio.



From Janice Petko



Jack is 10, Mara is 5, Max and Colton are 8. Colton is Max's best friend. They helped me check 12 bluebird nesting boxes in Louisville, Ohio. Four of the boxes were on their grandparents' property. The other eight were on adjoining lots. Their mother said, “The kids were really hyped by the experience.” It was a fun experience for all of us.

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From Jay Brindo, OBS President. The photo above is of his grandchildren, TJ and Shea. "They've been helping me on the trail since they could walk."

### From Penny Brandau



My husband and I had the pleasure on June 6th of walking with Mark and Cheryl who monitor a 22 box bluebird trail in Lorain County, Ohio. Mark and Cheryl have been monitors of this trail for many years and they often take their three young granddaughters with them on their weekly

nest box checks. As Mark and Cheryl inspected the young swallows and bluebirds for blowflies or other problems they also showed the chicks to their granddaughters. Their oldest granddaughter even helped keep trail notes for Cheryl as they walked along! Cheryl said, "They are usually pretty good for us, but on the trail, they are always good. Always wondering what is ahead. We stop to look at bugs, rocks, birds, snakes, flowers and whatever draws our attention." She also said "I also love to hear the girls talk about our encounters on the trail to their mom and dad and friends." These young girls are quickly becoming experienced bluebirders in little bodies!

## Take a Child on Your Trail

from Don Plant, OBS Trustee



It was June 27, 2015, the date of the Greater Mohican Audubon Society's annual Bobolink/ Butterfly Festival. The event is held at Byers Woods in Ashland County. Byers Woods is very unique, in that it is a recovered Ashland County Landfill. The habitat consists of grasslands and woods. At our festival, we also like to promote Bluebirds, since we do have a managed Bluebird Trail, consisting of approximately 20 nest boxes. I thought this would be a good time to promote our Bluebirds and Tree Swallows by "taking a child on a Bluebird Trail". I introduced Kacie Hunter, a young church friend of ours, and her mother, to the trail, during the festival. The photo illustrates one of the nest boxes. This box was occupied by a nesting pair of Tree Swallows. As we are aware, the female likes to sit in the entrance of the box, to keep an eye on its surroundings. Kacie got very excited, as we approached the box. The mother Tree Swallow finally flew off, and we were able to open the side entrance of the box. There laid in a cup-shaped nest five beautiful little white eggs, surrounded by the typical white feathers. I explained to Kacie that we don't want to disturb the nest, but Mother Tree Swallow will return without hesitation, once we leave the site. We then continued down the trail to one of the several ponds, where OBS member, Chuck Jakubchak was leading a class in "dip-netting" along the shore line. Kacie and her mother joined in and had a terrific experience. In spite of the rainy day, it was inspiring to share with and encourage a child with a few of these wonderful gifts of nature.



During the week of May 11, 2015, Brukner Nature Center's Preschool Environmental Education Program (PEEP) students learned about eastern bluebirds. During circle time the preschoolers learned some fun facts about the natural history and behavior of the eastern bluebird. They were able to see a study skin up close and could tell you if it was male or female by looking at the color. Craft time was exciting, creating their own blue bird nests on a paper template, gluing dried grasses and adding between two to seven pale blue eggs. The highlight of class time was hiking out to the bluebird boxes to observe an actual bluebird nest with five eggs! They were all so excited to see the eggs up close, peeking inside quickly before mom returned. The PEEPers loved comparing how many eggs were in the nest box to the amount of eggs in their created nests!

## End of the Season

By Dean Sheldon, OBS Advisor

In our part of the Eastern Bluebird world active nesting tends to wind down around mid- August. It is then that the trail manager should begin to think about tidying up nest boxes by giving them a final cleaning and making structural repairs (a new roof, say) on the boxes in preparation for the spring nesting cycle.

Some hardy souls take the extra step of removing/storing all of their nest boxes for the winter season. That is easily accomplished where only two or three backyard boxes are monitored. It is a more arduous task when talking about the removal and remounting of many more boxes than that. As a matter of fact, bluebirds are better off if the boxes are left in place. Those boxes often provide life protecting shelter for groups of birds which cluster up together for warmth during bitter cold winter nights. Several observations follow:

- Nest boxes should continue to be monitored until it is certain that nesting has ceased. That would be evident when there is no longer any nesting material being brought into the box.
- The nesting records for each box ought to be carefully checked and noted in the record book which has been kept throughout the season. Record-keeping is important for lots of reasons. However, it is especially important when determining the productivity of a particular nest box site at the end of the season. A less than optimum series of fledglings from a given box may indicate that the box location should be changed to a more productive area.

### The CLEAN UP:

- Remove and dispose of all nesting material left in the box.
- Thoroughly scrape/brush all interior surfaces. Remove caked- on fecal matter and other detritus left from the nesting season. It is not necessary to wash, scrub or disinfect those surfaces after cleaning.
- Remove mouse nests, insects nesting structures, spider webs and dead insects
- Check roof for cracks and deteriorated caulking. Re-nail or re-fasten loose box parts. Replace or recover roof as required. Make sure that drainage holes are cleaned and that the floor is tight.
- Check entrance door for fit and closure. Make sure that the door is hung properly for ease of opening. Secure the device used to "lock" door into position.
- Check mounting post for stability and make sure that mounting wire or hardware is tight and in place. Re-drive post if required. Install a new box at that location if required.

Double check your trail records. Make notes on other changes for the upcoming season. Store records where they will be handy in mid-April as you look ahead to your new bluebird year.

# Salvaged Birds in 2014

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

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I collect dead birds, not for myself, but for museums and other institutions that will preserve remains so they can be used for education or scientific study. Each year, during the holiday season, I prepare legally required reports for the Ohio Division of Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service so I

can continue to possess salvage permits that allow me to stop along the highway and legally retrieve an unlucky bird that failed to escape the path of a speeding automobile. Most of the birds I collect are found as I manage and co-manage nearly 400 nestboxes, nestjars, nest burrows, and platforms for birds.

During 2014, I salvaged 41 birds representing 13 species. My days in the field began on March 1 when I started returning 62 nestboxes and baffles to their mounts within two nestbox grids and one marsh on the Delaware Wildlife Area.

## Salvaged Eastern Bluebirds

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I found nothing to salvage until March 11 when I began to clean out nestboxes that had provided winter shelter for Eastern Bluebirds. Within a week, I salvaged a dozen bluebirds that had starved during cold winter weather. Polar vortexes made extreme cold and snow the norm last winter, and bluebirds paid the price.

Some local bluebirds choose to roost in my nestboxes for the entire winter, while other winter residents might be birds from more northern latitudes that migrated to Delaware County. Also, local bluebirds that migrated south for the winter begin returning to Central Ohio in mid-February to reclaim territories for the next nesting season. This may account for the fact that for every female bluebird found dead, three males were found. Males return before females in order to claim nestboxes and territories.

Wintering bluebirds feed on poison ivy berries, wild grapes, moonseed, and rose hips if the morsels are not covered with ice and snow. Considering how severe the winter had been, I was relieved to salvage only a dozen deceased bluebirds. A House Sparrow killed the thirteenth-salvaged bluebird on or before May 2 when I collected it.

Did finding twelve winterkilled bluebirds forecast a sparse nesting season to follow? Well, maybe. My annual mid-May bluebird nest count is a measure of the nesting

season and I counted 26 nests in 2014. That is 48.8% fewer nests than 48 counted the year before. Bluebirds in 2014 raised 187 fledglings representing 81% of eggs laid, a very good success rate. For comparison, in 2013, 74.8% of eggs developed to fledge 314 bluebirds.

## Salvaged Tree Swallows

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Between April 26 and September 17, I salvaged ten adult Tree Swallows; all but one had been killed by House Sparrows. Murderous, alien House Sparrows inflict bloody head wounds and other gross injuries to their victims. The swallow not killed by a sparrow showed no evidence to explain its death.

Between June 12-22, I salvaged five nestling swallows that failed to fledge. I found other nestlings that failed to fledge, but during the heat of summer, decomposition begins immediately at the time of death and fly eggs and maggots tell me to recycle the remains back into the natural environment rather than my freezer. When I monitor my nestboxes, I carry zippered plastic sandwich bags and index cards so salvaged birds can be bagged with appropriate records of dates, locations and other required information.

Five swallow nestlings that failed to fledge are tiny samples of a larger story. My nestboxes fledged 885 Tree Swallows in 2014 which sounds very good, but it is anything but good since swallows laid 1585 eggs and only 1116 hatched, which is 70.4% of their initial potential. Most disturbing, once hatched, only eight of every ten nestlings (79.3%) grew to fledge. In other words, 231 hatchlings died as nestlings. The success rate of 55.8% from egg to fledging was the lowest rate since 1990.

Once a family completes its reproductive cycle, I excavate and tear apart their used nest in order to count unhatched eggs and mummified remains of hatchlings and nestlings. In nests that lost two or more nestlings, remains showed that they died in stages, a sign of a limited food supply that came up short. During food shortages, competition takes place among siblings and they start dying days apart.

Small flying insects make up most of a Tree Swallow's diet and a swallow's ability to successfully reproduce is determined by its food supply. Other conservationists and I observe, count, and analyze our nest data to a point, but entomologists could provide the best answers to our questions. Bees, butterflies, dragonflies, and other insects have their champions that make their own observations,

and questions always arise about how extreme weather fluctuations and climate change are affecting their subjects.

As I monitor my nestboxes, I record European wasp nests and paper wasp nests that I must evict to keep cavities available for nesting birds. I even record the number of chambers in each wasp nest. In 2014, I removed wasp nests from 16 (4.1%) nest chambers among 389 nestboxes. In 2013, as I monitored 384 boxes, I removed wasp nests from 52 (13.5%) nest chambers. For 2014, the wasp population was down to 30.4% of what it was the year before. My wasp nest data is an indicator of what might be happening among other insect populations with similar life cycles, insects that supply food-energy for nesting Tree Swallows.

## Window Collisions and Traffic Claimed Other Species

Three birds were victims of window collisions, not at my home because I don't wash my windows. Clean windows reflect images of landscapes that can fool a bird, especially if it is trying to outmaneuver a hawk. Glass windows claimed an American Robin, a Prothonotary Warbler and a Mourning Dove. Traffic along highways and byways claimed the following species: Red-winged Blackbird, American Coot, Gray Catbird, an immature Common Grackle, Prothonotary Warbler, a female Northern Cardinal, Carolina Chickadee, a first-year Cooper's Hawk, and a mature Red-tailed Hawk.

I delivered all but one of my salvaged birds to the Ohio Wesleyan Zoology Museum. The lone exception was a road-killed Carolina Chickadee salvaged as I was on my way to a Columbus Natural History Society meeting at the Ohio State University Museum of Biodiversity on Kinnear Road. After I arrived, the small bird was bagged and laid to rest in a freezer.

Student curators at both museums will determine if the skins of salvaged birds can be preserved, and their bodies replaced with cotton, and if wooden dowel rods are needed for added support. After everything is stitched back together, a preserved specimen can be used as an educational prop or an object of scientific study for hundreds of years. As they prepare study skins, student curators enhance their skills as their aptitudes are brought into focus. Preparing study skins can lead to future careers as professional curators, taxidermists, educators, scientists, veterinarians, surgeons, etc.

*Read the following article to learn about preserving salvaged birds: Winker, Kevin. Spring 2000. Obtaining, preserving, and preparing bird specimens. Journal of Field Ornithology. 71(2):250-297.*

# An Unusually Sweet Story

By Janice Petko



I thought you would be interested in seeing this picture and hearing this story. I monitor 45 nesting boxes at the Algonquin Mill Farm in Carroll County, OH. The Mill Farm is owned by the Carroll County Historical Society (CCHS). The attached picture shows what I found in one of my boxes at the Algonquin Mill May 29...a swarm of honeybees. One of the CCHS members, who is a bee keeper, came to get the swarm.

This is what she said in an e-mail to me, "I got the swarm. I brought the whole box home and when I opened it up I discovered that they must have been there for several days as they had two pieces of honeycomb already built and were storing pollen in some cells. There were too many bees to actually fit in the box at one time so there were bees inside and hanging on the outside. They are now in a regular size (8 frame) super with room for all and are actively working. I am planning on keeping them here to make sure they build up and survive. Could transfer them to another beekeeper later if necessary."

I've never seen anything like this in my 22 years of monitoring the boxes at the Mill. I wonder if anyone else has.



# Out of the Box

## Late October Hummingbird in Grafton, Ohio

By Cathy Priebe

Even though it has been said that we should take down our hummingbird feeders at the end of summer, many hummer experts are now encouraging people to leave them up through fall just in case a late migrant may be passing through to fuel up so they can continue their long journey south. Recent records indicate these tardy visitors have been more frequent, but sadly, many of us still take our feeders down before Labor Day and suffer through hummer deprivation until next spring.

Photos by Judy Semroc.



Twelve years ago, October 18, 2003, I left a feeder out and was rewarded with a visit from a female rufous hummingbird. She stayed until December 1st that year. What an experience having a hummer through Thanksgiving!



On Friday, October 28, 2011 at 3 pm, eight years and 10 days later, a plump female ruby throated hummingbird landed on my feeder and stayed until November 8. What a surprise to see such a late traveler in my Grafton backyard! I immediately changed the fluid and called

some of my expert birding friends to come over and document her presence.

Larry Rosche and Judy Semroc stopped by the following day to take photos and observe her behavior. After reviewing some of the shots, we determined why this hummer may have been so tardy. She appeared to have only one good eye!

Blinkie, my nickname for her, generally landed on the feeder in such a way that you could only see her

good side. You would never have guessed she was incapacitated in any way. She seemed able to fly and feed from the late blooming Mexican and pineapple sages just fine and she maneuvered effortlessly in the air while snagging bugs. What a tough little critter!

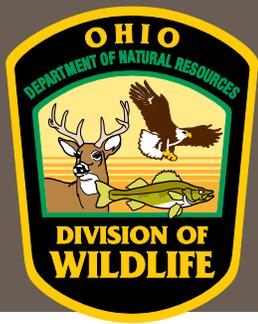
However, everyone who saw her was worried that she may not be able to continue her migration with only one eye. Plans were put into place if she was unable or chose not to leave, but luckily for us, she had her own itinerary.

After feeding heavily all day on special hummer food and flowers, she left early the next morning with the winds behind her and good weather in the forecast. I still miss her but I am glad she chose to continue her journey and I hope she found food along the way.

It may take years for you to observe a late hummer at your feeder. But who knows how many unseen hummers may stop by for a quick sip of food and fly off? I urge all of you hummingbird lovers to leave at least one feeder out this fall to help those migrants that may have gotten a late start. Who knows, maybe you will be lucky enough to have a late hummer stop by for a visit!

Blinkie. Photo by David Priebe.





# Wildlife Preservation

## Bluebirds in Winter

By Jim McCormac



While the weather may still be balmy, it won't be long until the first frosts nip the landscape and we enter another frozen winter. Many songbirds will flee south, but our beloved eastern bluebird has become much more of a winter fixture than it once was. The sight of a male bluebird on a fencepost surrounded by the meadows of summer is a classic image. Its husky warbles contribute greatly to the rich warm season soundscape, and the bluebirds pounce upon grasshoppers, cutworms, and other tasty insects. But many bluebirds dare to spend the winter with us. There's something a bit jarring about seeing one of the gorgeous azure-coated birds against a snowy backdrop. The bluebirds almost seem out of place in winter. It's as if such a stunning animal should be in some tropical haunt, not riding out a tough Ohio winter. But wintertime bluebirds have become far more common than they once were. The National Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) bears this out. Each count covers a 15 mile diameter circle, and must be conducted between a specific set of dates, roughly mid-December to early January. Participating birders attempt to tally every bird seen or heard. At present, about 62 counts are conducted throughout Ohio, offering a fairly robust look at our wintertime bird life.

Wintering bluebirds have indisputably skyrocketed. Attempting to tough out an Ohio winter carries risks for semi-hardy species, and exceptionally brutal winters have ravaged bluebird populations in the past. Many bluebirds will flee south if conditions become too inhospitable, but those who stay can suffer. The great blizzard of 1977-78 brought mountains of snow, thick sheets of ice, and extended Arctic temperatures. It was death on bluebirds, and their numbers plummeted. The annual average found on Ohio CBC's in the decade from 1975-1984 was only 1,204 bluebirds. There was a significant rebound in the following decade, with the annual CBC average spiking to 2,456 bluebirds – a 104% increase. From 1995 – 2004, CBC averages shot up to 3,588 birds, another 46% increase, and over the past decade the annual Ohio CBC average has been 4,706 bluebirds, a 31% increase from the previous decade.

There are at least three major factors that have conspired to increase winter bluebirds. First is all of the hard work



of readers of this newsletter, and other avid bluebirders. The exponential increase in nest boxes since the mid-1970's has allowed the overall bluebird population to soar. Secondly, the general trend towards milder winters is allowing half-hardy species to winter further north, in greater numbers. Finally, massive fruit crops of nonnative plants gone feral, chiefly various bush honeysuckles, have provided a new source of winter food. The latter is not a good thing. Honeysuckle fruit is high in sugar and low in fat and carbohydrates. Sugary fruit, to a bird, is the equivalent of eating M & M's, when they really need steak (fat and carbohydrate-laden berries). Native fruit, although produced in much lower numbers than prolifically fruiting nonnative shrubs such as honeysuckle, provide much greater sustenance to fruit-eating birds such as bluebirds. These fruits can be an important winter food for bluebirds.

For bluebirders with the room to do so, planting native shrubs and trees that produce fruit that last into winter is an excellent way to help bluebirds. The following species are indigenous to Ohio, are aesthetically pleasing, and their fruit is coveted by bluebirds:

Blackgum, *Nyssa sylvatica*  
Blackhaw Viburnum, *Viburnum prunifolium*  
Flowering Dogwood, *Cornus florida*  
Nannyberry, *Viburnum lentago*  
Red Cedar, *Juniperus virginiana*  
Red Chokeberry, *Aronia arbutifolia*  
Silky Dogwood, *Cornus amomum*  
Smooth Sumac, *Rhus glabra*  
Staghorn Sumac, *Rhus typhina*  
Virginia Creeper, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*  
Wild Grapes, *Vitis sp.* (any of the five native species)

# Extraordinary Eastern Bluebird Nest Location

by Haans Petruschke, OBS Volunteer



Since 2008, I have conducted annual breeding bird surveys as a volunteer at The Holden Arboretum. The survey protocol follows the Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas 2 protocol and uses an upgrade system in discrete areas of the Holden Property. All species found and any evidence of breeding

are recorded in defined areas but not along set transects or routes. The method provides the freedom to investigate activity and gather detailed breeding evidence. I am often helped in this endeavor by Frank Buck. He carries a camera with a long telephoto lens and is able to shoot documentary photos without a monopod or tripod. This can be extremely difficult under the full forest canopy.

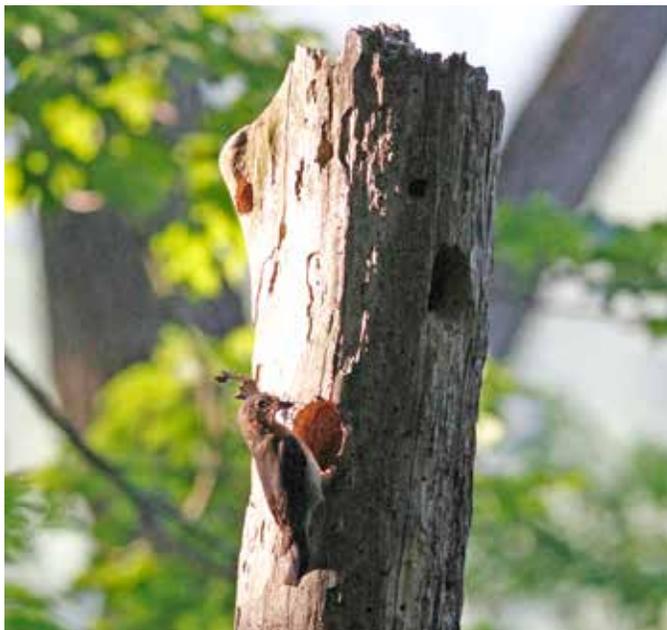
On June 7, 2015 Frank and I were surveying the Lower Baldwin property of Holden. This property is mostly unbroken, complete canopy, mixed mesophytic forest, with trees between 60 and 90 years old. The property is on the higher elevations of the front of the Allegheny plateau, and runs along the north side of the valley of the East Branch of the Chagrin River. We were about 40 minutes into our survey when I heard a familiar bird song but it was so out of context I could not place it. (In the leafed out forest sound is our primary method for identifying and



locating birds) Then I realized it was an Eastern Bluebird, very odd given how far we were from the nearest open area. A moment later I spotted a bird moving through the understory and then into the leaf litter to apparently catch an insect. Following the bird I saw it go to a snag and into a hole in the trunk. An active nest is good evidence and so I got Frank on the location so he could take photos. As I had been observing naked eye I still did not know the identity of the bird that had gone into the cavity. Once Frank started taking photos we realized it was a female Eastern Bluebird, and she was soon joined by a male. The bird I had likely heard sing moments earlier.

What an extraordinary location. The Kirtland, Ohio area, where Holden is located, has a very high population density of Bluebirds, but as is the common experience, they are usually found in open or semi open areas. If there is a nest in an area with complete canopy it is generally close to an edge. This location is approximately 0.4 miles from the nearest open area. It is on the edge of steep bluffs that rise 180 to 200 feet above the flood plain of the East branch of the Chagrin (If it were not for the trees this part of the valley could easily be considered a canyon). The river itself is approximately 0.2 miles from the nest location.

Needless to say we were astonished. I marked the coordinates, using the GPS application we use for Holden natural areas work, and Frank took numerous photos including the one which accompanies this piece. I am unaware of any precedent for such a deep forest nest, and present this documentation of the extraordinary location.



# Feeding Our Bluebirds

## Experiences, Observations and Opinions

by Mel Bolt, OBS Advisor and Past OBS Blue Feather Award Recipient



Human intervention into the feeding habits of bluebirds is very controversial. Some people maintain that we should not feed them at all since there is ample food available for them even during the winter months. Others claim feeding should occur only when the need arises, namely, late in the winter when the wild berries are depleted or in

the early spring when the weather is cold and damp. Some other people opt to feed them all year long which give them the pleasure of observing the birds feeding on a daily basis.

I support feeding them only when the need arises, however I am of the opinion some methods actually alter the behavior of the bird's eating and hunting habits. This is based on my past experiences and a host of articles I have read of other people feeding the birds. Therefore, my comments on feeding birds are not supported by scientific studies and **are based on my personal experiences, observations and opinions.**

Based on written articles I have read, studies show the bluebird's natural diet is about 85% insects and 15% wild berries in the summer months and changes to about 60% wild berries and 40% insects in the winter months for those birds that do not migrate. (These percentages may change due to weather conditions and the availability of food). I have personally observed bluebirds eating in the winter months wild berries such as wild cherry, Fire Bush berries, and small Dogwood berries, Holly, Wild Honeysuckle and Multi Flora Rose. The seeds from some of these berries I have seen regurgitated around my feeder.

In the summer during the nesting season bluebirds need protein for energy and muscle strength to support the laborious job of feeding and raising their young. However, during the winter their primary need is for foods that will sustain them and generate body heat to stay warm during the cold days and nights, especially if they winter in the cold northern climate.

After the nesting season is complete they need protein to support their annual molting of the worn feathers and acquire muscle strength for those birds that migrate for the winter to the southern tier of states. Insects are the

primary source of protein. I have observed them gathering in flocks in a highly infested insect area where they were foraging so that they obtain a large amount of the protein required for molting and the distant travel. I refer to this gathering as "A Bluebird Social". Therefore, humans should be concerned with these needs when we are offering supplemental foods.

The most common food offered by humans is mealworms, which is the larvae of the Darkling Beetle (*Tenebrio Molitor*). This is not a natural food for winter or summer. How often do you observe bluebirds in the wild carrying them to the nest to feed their young? Where are they in the winter when bluebirds in the wild are desperately searching for food? **Therefore since they are not a natural food bluebirds must be taught to recognize them as food.**

From my readings from other mealworm feeders their birds develop a pattern of coming to the feeder at certain times, especially if one uses bells, whistles, or other means of signaling the birds that mealworms are being presented. Also, once this pattern is established I have read that if the feeder is not filled the birds will appear to be begging for them to be placed in the feeder. If this is true then a definite behavior change in the eating habit and the type of food being consumed has occurred.

This behavior is then passed on to the next generation as the parents bring the young to these feeders. Also, in my opinion, this interferes with the parents teaching the just fledged chicks how to hunt and what to hunt for. Thus, one must ask the question. Just how dependent on humans do we want our bluebirds to become? They are already mostly dependent on manmade nest boxes and now we are teaching them to be dependent on humans for their source of food. I believe we should not give assistance on a continuing basis and I also believe the food presented should be natural.

*Editor's note: In the next issue of the Monitor we will continue with Mel's description of how he has experimented by using wild berries as supplemental food during the cold winter months and early spring when chicks are in the nest and insects are in short supply. He will report on other foods he has used in feeders and his conclusions about the bird's behavior changes related to these feedings.*

# OBS Spotlight

## George Newberger: “Extraordinary Man”

By Chuck Jakubchak, OBS Board of Trustees



The Ohio Bluebird Society is comprised of many amazing individuals and most have hobbies that extend beyond birds. OBS members care about the environment and their passion for nature exceeds that of most people. Every time I encounter a new member, I am impressed with their interests, accomplishments and positive attitude. This edition of the “Spotlight” reinforces that claim.

In 2014 Jay Brindo asked that I write an article about a long standing OBS member who resides near Ravenna, Mr. George Newberger. Earlier this year, in mid-summer, I gave George a call to discuss bluebirding and the first part of the phone conversation was pretty routine.

We spoke about his 40 plus years of bluebirding experience and the countless number of bluebirds and tree swallows that have fledged under his leadership. George expressed exceptional pride in his efforts to control the house sparrow population, as one might expect from someone so committed to helping bluebirds. He also explained that he had been an OBS member for as long as he could remember and that he had served as an OBS trustee many years ago. Clearly, George was an OBS member that has dutifully followed the mission statement of the organization.

Eventually the conversation shifted away from birds to George’s personal life and he told me that he had retired in 1982. While explaining how he had worked for the Soil Conservation Service (an agency of the US Dept. of Agriculture) for more than 30 years, it occurred to me that George had been retired for 33 years, an amazing feat unto itself. Before I could guess his age, George mentioned that he was 92 years old and that is when the conversation really got interesting.

I was impressed that a 92 year old could successfully maintain a bluebird trail of 30 boxes but quickly discovered that bluebirds were only a part of his passion. George is also an active gardener and maintains 50 dahlia plants that he carefully nurtures each summer. He shares the beautiful blooms with friends, churches and medical offices to help brighten their days. George explained that dahlias and bluebirds are complementary hobbies because he enjoys listening to the birds serenade him as he tends his delicate flowers. Having been a member of the Ohio Dahlia Society for 25 years, George used to enter his prized flowers in competitive shows, but stopped doing so a few years back.



*“OBS Spotlight” continued on page 12*



# Ask Madame WingNut

## Backyard Bluebirding Best Practice

by Paula Ziebarth

I live in the City of Powell, a suburban community in central Ohio. While monitoring trails throughout the park system and on my street, neighbors and acquaintances often approach me and ask how they can attract Eastern Bluebirds to nest with them. I like to tell them about the three most important keys to success or what I like to call “**The 3 H’s: Habitat, Housing, and House Sparrows**”.

### I. Habitat

Proper habitat is key for attracting Eastern Bluebirds. Most suburban yards have very good habitat with mowed lawns and a few trees. Eastern Bluebirds need short grass to hunt the ground dwelling insects that comprise the bulk of their diet.

A solitary tree or other tall perch near the nest box is advised as a sentry perch for the male to guard his nest box, for the parents to hunt from, and for the young to fledge to. This tree or perch should be at least 7 feet from the nest box to prevent climbing predators from using it as jump-off point and any overhanging branches should be at least 9 feet from top of box to keep predators from dropping onto box from above.

The nest box should be sited as far from human structures, evergreen trees and shrubby/brushy areas as possible. Such areas are highly attractive to House Sparrows, non-native competitors that kill Eastern Bluebird eggs, young and adults. Shrubby/brushy areas are attractive to House Wrens, native competitors that often remove nests, eggs and young birds.

Because Eastern Bluebirds will only nest within 100 to 150 yards of each other, most suburban yards can only house one pair of birds at a time. Plan on installing only one nest box for them in your yard.

### II. Housing

After carefully looking at the habitat in their yard, the homeowner has a site in mind. The nest box should be installed on a free standing pole with predator baffle. Height of box should be set so monitor can comfortably view inside box, generally having box floor about 5 feet from ground. For people interested in building their own nest box, some great plans are found at: <http://nestboxbuilder.com/>.

Important nest box design components include:

- 1 ½” or 1 - 9/16” diameter entry hole
- No front perches
- Kerfs or hardware cloth on inside front face
- Watertight
- Side vents
- Floor area – minimum 4” x 4”
- Access – easy opening for monitoring and cleanout
- Color – natural wood is fine or light color if painted

Do not cluster nest boxes. The more nest boxes you have within a given area, the more attractive that area is to House Sparrows and House Wrens. More nest boxes is NOT better. By setting up multiple sites in a suburban yard, the Eastern Bluebirds will have their defenses spread thin, expending needless energy chasing competitors from multiple nest sites and perhaps leaving their young undefended at a critical moment.

### III. House Sparrows

Be proactive if you have House Sparrows in your area. House Sparrows are a non-native, invasive species that outcompetes our native cavity nesting birds by entering nest boxes (or natural cavities) and killing eggs, young or adults. The seed cracking beak of this bird is an excellent head cracking beak. Our native insect eaters with their less substantial bills do not stand a chance against a House Sparrow when trapped inside a nest box.

If housing native birds in a nest box, discontinue any bird feeding that attracts House Sparrows. You can set out thistle seed for American Goldfinch, nectar for Hummingbirds, and a few mealworms for your Eastern Bluebirds if you are so inclined, but discontinue seeds or seed mixes that House Sparrows eat.

Install a dedicated trap box installed near a human structure (house or shed), pine tree, dense shrub or tree where they are known to congregate. This trap box should have a 1 ¼” entry hole which will allow House Sparrow entry, but will exclude Eastern Bluebirds, keeping them safe. You can convert a standard nest box to a trap box by installing a 1 ¼” metal hole reducer (available at bird supply stores) or making your own by drilling a 1 ¼” hole into a small block of wood and installing on box front.

*“Ask Madame Wingnut” continued on page 12*

My next question to George was, “If you like gardening and bluebirds, what do you do during Ohio’s cold winters?” His response left me speechless because he spoke of his love of cross country skiing and how he enjoyed skiing on the 38 acres of property that he calls home. His long snow covered drive way is a perfect cross county trail and allows him to get exercise when checking his mailbox. I never expected that response!

My intrigue with George’s lifestyle continued when he casually mentioned that he hiked a wooded trail through the Cuyahoga Valley National Park this past summer. He reminded me that it was only a small hike, but the concept of a 92 year old hiking any rugged trail in a national park seemed incredible.

As I started to wrap up the phone conversation, confident that I had enough material for the “Spotlight” article, I had to ask one more question: “George, have you done anything else that people might find amazing?” His modest reply involved his wonderful experience in West Virginia’s New River Gorge during the summer of 2012 when he went zip lining for the first time. How many people go zip lining when they are 89?

People like George Newberger are the reason I enjoy writing articles for the OBS Monitor. George’s story is a reminder of how bluebirding can help make your life better by adding a valuable dimension. OBS members are humble individuals with a zest and passion for life that is inspirational and indicative of a life well spent and George’s story reflects that notion.

The only thing better than meeting George and writing about his accomplishments is sharing his story with other OBS members that have deep-seated passions which contribute to the quality of their lives. George and all OBS members should be proud of their passions because they make our world a better place!

*If you know a deserving individual for a future Spotlight article, please send your nomination to [info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org](mailto:info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org) for consideration*

There is no need to have a predator baffle under a trap box. House Sparrows will gravitate towards trap boxes set out for them in prime House Sparrow habitat and you will be able to intercept and remove them when they do.

Best practice involves inbox trapping of House Sparrows as soon as one is observed on or in a nest box or trap box. Quick trapping and humane removal of these non-native competitors is important. If a male House Sparrow is allowed to remain in an area, his song will attract a mate and more House Sparrows of both sexes.

Purchase a Van Ert Universal Sparrow inbox trap. These can be purchased online at: <http://www.vanerttraps.com/> All nest boxes and trap boxes should have two trap mount screws installed on inside front face of box. This will facilitate quick trap installation when needed.

Although trapping House Sparrows is definitely best practice, those unwilling to trap them can remove their eggs and hope for the best. Leaving part of the nest and employing egg removal or rendering eggs nonviable will hopefully keep the House Sparrows with the box you have set out for them (dedicated trap box as described above). Never allow them to successfully breed. If operating this way, I would highly suggest the installation of a sparrow spooker or monofilament line on any active nest box being used by Eastern Bluebirds or other native cavity nesting birds.

This season, I helped set up my neighbor’s yard with a nest box for Eastern Bluebirds in the most open area of her backyard. I also installed a trap box near her house at the corner of her back patio. Her nest box successfully fledged seven (two broods) of Eastern Bluebirds and her trap box intercepted 6 House Sparrows. Across the street, my backyard Bluebirds also had two successful broods, fledging 10.



*An experienced monitor of over a dozen Bluebird Trails in central and northern Ohio, Madame WingNut enjoys all creatures that fly, regardless of their stage of development.*

*Send your questions to Madame WingNut at: [info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org](mailto:info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org) or by mail to PMB 111, 343 W. Milltown Road, Wooster, OH 44691.*

# Member News



## Amazon Smile

Please remember that you can help OBS whenever you purchase on Amazon. Simply sign up to purchase through Amazon Smile instead and designate the Ohio Bluebird Society as your charitable choice. A portion of your purchase will be given to OBS and won't cost you anything – what a deal! OBS has made over \$300 in the past year through members who have done this. It is simple and helps our budget!

## OBS Newsletter 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](mailto:info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org).

## Fledgling Counts

It is time to start sending in the fledgling counts for your nest boxes for 2015. There is a simple form which can be printed and filled out and mailed or the information can be emailed to [info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org](mailto:info@ohiobluebirdsociety.org). Check out the downloadable form on the OBS website <http://www.ohiobluebirdsociety.org/> and click on the tab on the left for Fledgling report. It is always interesting to see the counts of our native cavity nesting birds which fledged throughout the state. This will be reported as the counts are tabulated.

## OBS Grant Award

OBS recently awarded a small grant to Carrie Hill of the Bishop Flaget School in Chillicothe, Ohio to support their efforts to build and install new nestboxes around the school. They already have eight nestboxes that are used as part of their hands-on curriculum, teaching children about native cavity nesters, the importance of individual efforts towards a larger conservation goal, and important observation and record keeping skills.

## 2015 Conference

The 2016 OBS conference will be held on February 20th at the John C. Myers Convocation Center at Ashland University. Our conference theme is "Birds and People: Collaborating for a Better World". Topics will include the basics of bluebird conservation, project updates, the important values and services that native birds provide, and others. Watch for more details as conference planning continues.

## Welcome To Our New Members

John Barber  
Paula Eichman  
Bishop Flaget  
Donald Foy  
Harmon Gladding  
Carrie Hill  
Sarah Kujala

## Donations

**Harold and Nanette Waite - \$50.00**  
For *Nest of Bluebirds* books

## Upcoming Meeting

A members meeting for all Ohio Bluebird Society members will be held on October 24th, 2015 at the Wilderness Center in Wilmot. Please mark your calendars and look for more details on the OBS website and Facebook page.

## OBS Area Contacts (as of April 1, 2014)

Up-to-date list is available online at <http://www.ohiobluebirdsociety.org/about/311-2/>

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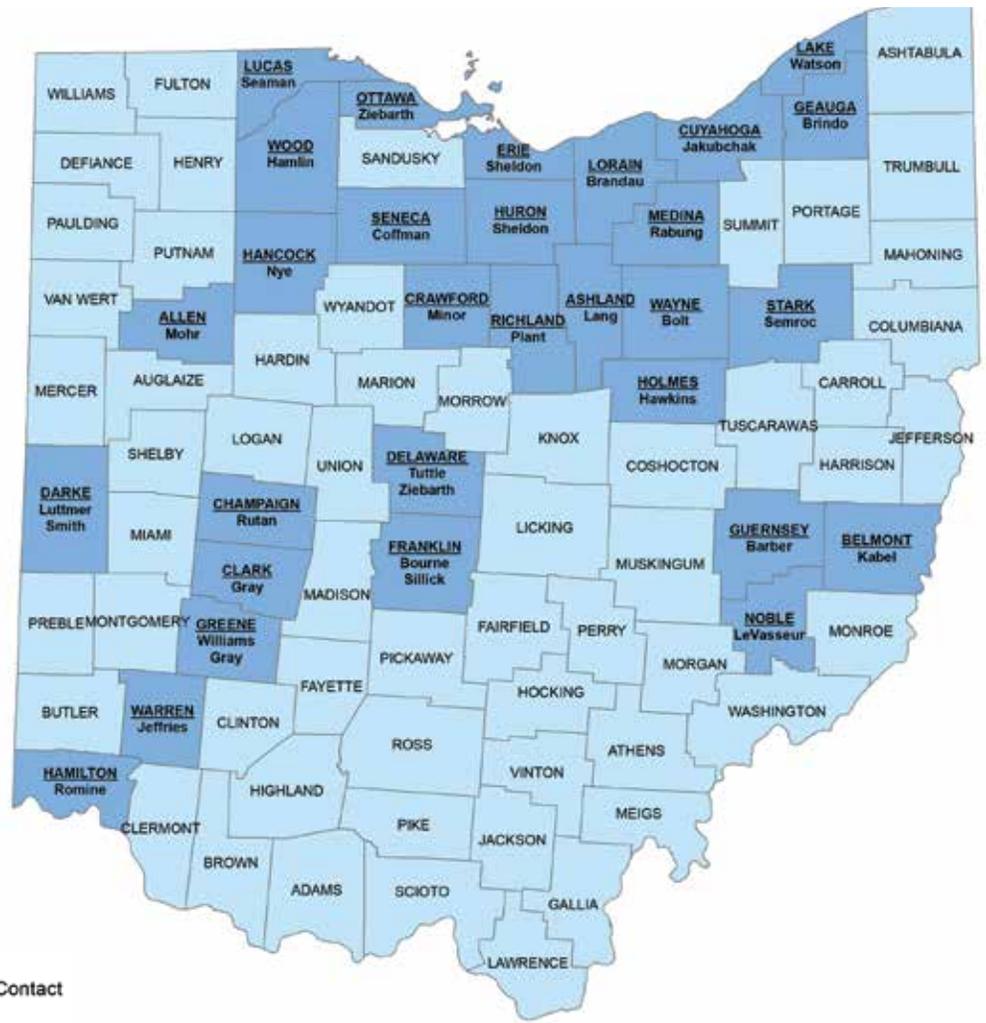
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Wooster, Ohio 44691-7241

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Like us on Facebook! Search for Ohio Bluebird Society to join our group.

# OBS Counties with Director, Advisor, or Area Contact



## Ohio Bluebird Society Membership Application

Membership Class	Annual	3-years
<input type="checkbox"/> Student (under 21)	\$10	\$25
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior/Sr. Family	\$12	\$30
<input type="checkbox"/> Regular/Family	\$15	\$40
<input type="checkbox"/> Organizational	\$40	\$100
<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		

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Street: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_  
 State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 County: \_\_\_\_\_  
 E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Make checks payable to:**  
Ohio Bluebird Society

**Mail to:**  
OBS  
PMB 111, 343 W. Milltown Rd.  
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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.



Affiliated with the North American Bluebird Society

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These photos were taken of children who were shown nestboxes on bluebird trails in Lorain County, Ohio, which are managed by The Black River Audubon Society. See the full article starting on the front page.



**Deadline for Submitting Articles:**

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