



Bluebird Monitor

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

Fall 2020



Purple Martin Journey

By Carice Jameson



December, 2017: We started our Purple Martin adventure when Santa left a bunch of marvelously huge boxes (bearing a return address of Troyer's Bird Paradise in PA) in front of our Christmas tree

in December of 2017. I, my husband Kurt, and son Parker, 9 at the time, unpacked the dizzying array of parts and pieces and dreamed of becoming Purple Martin landlords in the near future.

We spent February and March painting the wooden T14 rig white and reading *A Purple Martin Journey* by Andrew M. Troyer. We spent April studying the excellent instructions included with the rig and finally started to put it together. Following the advice in the book, we placed the rig 40' from our house, in an open area next to a pond, on our property in Coshocton County. We dug a hole, set the pole in concrete, and assembled the 4 wood sections that totaled 14 cavities and attached the pulley system.

We made a panicked call to the fabulous folks at Troyer's for advice on when to put the rig in the air. Since we were first year landlords, the helpful gentleman told us, we would be trying to attract Second Year Martins (SY), who had hatched the year previous and would be searching for their first nest site. These birds return in May, 4-6 weeks later than the older birds, so we put up our rig May 1, 2018, and waited. We discouraged a tree swallow from nesting in the rig by placing a bluebird house nearby. We waited. I played the Purple Martin Dawn Song every morning on my way to work. We waited. We discouraged multiple House Sparrows from nesting in the rig by...well, you know. We waited. Finally, a few SY Martins showed up!

The first year we attracted five Purple Martins, but only one pair nested. We checked the nest every 5-7 days. We kept a notebook of when the eggs arrived, hatched, and when the three young fledged. Success!

February, 2019: Parker and I attended our first Bluebird Conference, where we found out about Cornell's NestWatch

Carice Jameson,
We3 Farm



Parker Garver counts young in the K24 rig we installed in 2019 while the Purple Martin parents watch from the utility lines.



Parker holds a 10 day old nestling after inspecting for parasites.





Parker shows his Grams an active nest while his father Kurt Garver plugs an entrance hole with a rag tied on a 15' string.



(Above Left) Kurt runs the K24 gourd rig back up the pole with plugs in place to keep near fledging aged nestlings from leaving the nests prematurely. After 5 minutes the nestlings calm down and the plugs are pulled out from below.



program. We also picked up a copy of "Purple Martin- Best Practices" by Paula Ziebarth. Armed with our new information, we vowed to log our results with NestWatch this season and make a contribution to citizen science!

Since we were hoping the SY birds we had last year would return as ASYs (After Second Year) this season, we put the rig up March 21. We noticed our first Purple Martins on April 1st, right on time. We, ahem, discouraged a few house sparrows in April, and I indignantly watched a starling squeeze into the starling-proof entrance hole of one of the cavities. It must have been an uncomfortable experience, because they didn't attempt a nest. By May we had 16 Martins hanging around. Nest building started in mid-May, and the first eggs arrived by May 27. It was a flurry of activity, until finally all 14 cavities were occupied by June 16th. By June 28 we had 44 nestlings and 5 eggs left to hatch. By this point the oldest nestlings were 22 days old and we didn't know how to plug the starling excluder entrance holes to keep them from fledging prematurely so we ceased our monitoring and didn't have complete records for the season. However, since we filled up the T14 in our second year as landlords, we treated ourselves to a second rig. Another call to the helpful folks at Troyer's, who recommended we put the new rig up while nesting was still underway, so it didn't spook the birds when they returned next spring. We got a 24 gourd rig this time with a mixture of horizontal and vertical gourds so we could run an informal experiment of which housing they preferred- gourds vs wooden cavities? Horizontal vs vertical gourds? More wonderfully big boxes got dropped off on our doorstep and we erected the second rig twelve feet from the first. The Martins were curious and checked out the gourds and perched all over the new housing. We took the houses and gourds down in October and stored them inside for the winter.

March 2020: We put the two rigs up before the end of March. The Purple Martins started returning on schedule in April and we had high hopes of filling up both rigs this year- for a total of 38

nests. Just as we were looking forward to the start of nesting season the weather dipped below 50 degrees. The bugs the Purple Martins depend on for food disappeared. Parker and Kurt found dead Martins in the yard and on the road in front of our house. They gathered up the barely alive and tried to warm them up in a box in the garage. Kurt scrambled eggs and put the eggs and mealworms in a tray on top of a 15' ladder to try to feed the Martins that were left. By day three of the cold snap there were no Martins left in our yard. We feared they had all died. On May 23 we checked the rigs and found four dead Martins. Ugh. When the weather warmed up, some of the Martins returned. By May 31, the Martins were back to doing what Martins do and we had 22 active nests and 4 eggs. We did nest checks every 3 or 4 days. We didn't fill up our rigs, but we had 28 nests (74% occupancy!) by June 25, holding 52 nestlings and 67 eggs. Monitoring 28 nests was amazing, and we encountered all sorts of "interesting" things- Martin fleas, botfly larva, nest mites, a dead nestling. We studied up on nest changes and gave that a shot to help with the parasites- Parker gathered clean white pine needles from a tree in our yard. We also figured out how to plug the entrance holes of the cavities with older nestlings, with rags tied to long strings, so we can continue monitoring all season.

We've learned a lot of new things about Martins each year. Parker enjoys the one on one time with the nestlings while we change nest material and he inspects them for parasites and talks to them. It's thrilling as a parent to see your kid elbow deep in a Martin nest, calling out the number of eggs for the data sheet. This year we will have complete nesting data to submit to Cornell's NestWatch and the Purple Martin Conservancy's Project MartinWatch. Soon, when the nestlings have all fledged and wandered away to find a Purple Martin roost and gather for the fall migration, and the deafening roar of so many Martins has turned to silence, Parker and I will boil down our data and check the math and make our contribution to citizen science, and look forward to the Purple Martins returning next spring.

OBS Legacy Box For Distinguished OBS Member

By Monica Klarer, OBS Trustee

A Legacy Box was recently donated for the late Dean Sheldon, long time bluebird enthusiast, very active member of OBS, and monitor for many many bluebird boxes in Huron County. Since Dean lived in north central Ohio, Mel Bird and Monica Klarer were asked to find a suitable location for the box and immediately agreed on Sheldon Marsh State Nature Preserve, which is along Lake Erie, on the west side of Huron Ohio.

This area was purchased by Dean's father Dr. Dean E. Sheldon in 1954, to help "preserve a unique piece of northern Ohio biology". The family built a cottage there, and shared the highly diverse area with friends and local residents, including many school field trips. In 1979 it was sold to ODNR, which added other marsh areas and developed the preserve. The front area has a large meadow, where some old bluebird boxes were present, but had not been monitored in recent years. ODNR readily gave their consent for the placement.

Mel and his wife Mona prepared the box and pole, placing the Legacy Box plaque on the front of it, then went with Monica to install it on May 26, 2020. What should have been a very short procedure ended up with Mel's short initial placement



pole getting stuck in the ground. We did not take into account that the soil where Mel has all his boxes is quite sandy, and the Huron area is clay!! After many whacks with the mallet by Mel, and pulling by each of us, it was Mona who put a lot of muscle into it and was victorious in removing it! Mel and Mona are pictured as they made sure it was straight.

As visible in the photos, the box was placed in the meadow, fairly accessible for the public to view it. The other 3 boxes were replaced and Monica has agreed to monitor all of them.

Best of all, when Mel and Mona checked 5 days later, Dean's box had a bluebird nest in it already!!!

We think Dean would have appreciated this box, and the fact that its placement resulted in three more boxes being in use and monitored as a result. We thank Dean's wife Carol for her generous donation!

FYI : A Legacy Box can be donated to honor a special bluebirding person, with a donation of \$125 to the OBS program. Please see our OBS website.

Chickadees 911

By Tricia West Brown

It all started when bluebirds came down my stove pipe and ended up in my woodstove. They saw a cavity but that cavity was not ideal by any means! I would be sitting in my living room and suddenly hear the scritch and scratch of bird toenails in the stove pipe. Sure enough! When I opened the lid on my stove there would be a male and female Eastern Bluebird sitting in the cold ash left over from last winter. They were gentle birds. I could pick them up and carry them back outside without a fight or biting. My husband fabricated a screen to keep them out but that bugged me because I thought, "If they are that desperate for a place to nest then there has to be something I can do." Something more...

I decided I needed to erect some bluebird boxes. I consulted with my friend, bird rehabilitator, and bluebird box expert, Julie Zickafoose and soon started erecting boxes for my bluebirds. The first picture I sent her showed me standing proudly beside one of the boxes, with a neat row of boxes behind me. Her response was, "Oh that's great! If you want tree swallows though, they are too close to each other!" Oh! My husband and I carefully spaced them out along the borders of hayfields and cow pastures and even though it was July I got bluebirds! I got them immediately!! It was very rewarding.

Fast forward to this spring. I had all my boxes properly spaced



Young chickadee nestlings



apart, baffled and ready for birds. I started checking them in early April. On April 3rd I found a clutch of 6 Eastern bluebird eggs in box 7 and they were warm, being incubated! Oh dear! Please let the weather be mild!

Box 6 had a clutch of 4 Eastern bluebird eggs on April 9th and box 2 had a chickadee nest. It was a nest that made me want to climb in and sleep there. It was made of warm rabbit fur and a bit of deer hair over a base of beautiful springy green moss. On April 19th during the box check I found a chickadee hen, all steely eyed, daring me to shift her aside to see what she was sitting on. What a brave little mama!

It was on May 2nd that I noticed a pair of bluebirds who were interested in box 2. I saw the female actually entering the box. I went out and looked in the box and the little chickadee hen was sitting tight. I was relieved and thought everything was as it should be. Two days later my husband came in and told me that there was a dead chickadee laying on the ground beneath the box. I dropped what I was doing and ran out to the box. Sure enough, the little mama lay in the grass beneath the box-her head was pecked bald and her eyes were bloody. It was devastating! This occurred on May 4th.

As I tried to grasp what had happened my husband spotted a baby chickadee in the grass. Then another... and another...until we found six baby chickadees! Oh no! They were naked and incredibly small and ALIVE. I gathered them up and took the nest out of the box, deciding right then that the little hen had not died for nothing. I immediately messaged my friend Julie and told her what had happened. She said to feed them scrambled eggs and keep them warm so I did. The next morning one of the babies was dead but I still had five. I dug up an anthill and gathered ant larvae, the perfect sized food for these tiny, incredibly tiny, mouths that I was trying to feed.

A runt which was a third of the size of the others (who were at most thumbnail size) would not gape to eat. It died too. That left four lusty little birds that required feeding from the minute the sun rose until dark. I fed them ant larvae and a bug omelet



which consisted of powdered meal worms. I used the dried mealworms sold for chickens and added some eggshells that I baked in the oven and then powdered with a pestle and mortar. Next, I added a bit of betta fish food and scrambled it all with an egg! The four were thriving on this food.

At first I tried to make sure every single bird got a good helping of food by feeding it and then moving it to a different nest that I made, but after a day or two I could definitely recognize each bird as an individual and no longer needed to separate them as they were being fed. I had one who was a “drama llama” bird. It would propel itself up as tall as it could possibly get, yellow gape waving, then dramatically fall backwards and gobble down the food as soon as it was fed. Some would respond to squeaking, some to kissing noises. I had a medicine dropper of water and gave them drinks from that.

On May 6th a miracle happened. My friend, Julie Zickafoose, had corresponded with Darlene Sillick, who has her finger on the pulse of many bluebird box trails in Ohio. Darlene started beating a drum, sending out smoke signals, asking for help. She asked if anyone knew of a chickadee nest with babies less than a week old and she got a response from Jim Romine



of the Cincinnati Nature Center. He had a box with chickadee babies less than a week old on Longbranch Farm. Hallelujah! Even though I was completely immersed and invested in these tiny waifs, I was relieved to think that a mama bird, a chickadee, could do a much better job of giving them what they needed. Jim’s nest had five and I had four. It’s not at all unheard of for a chickadee to raise nine chicks.

The following day, Thursday May 7 was my lucky day because Jim and Anita Romine, along with Frank Glandorf and Dayle Deardorf were birding in Shawnee State Forest and would be going right past my house on their way back to Cincinnati. I sent the babies off with them along with a portion of bug omelet, a tweezer to administer food and an eye dropper of water to sustain the chicks in their travels. I also sent along a bag of live mealworms to supplement the chickadees’ diet during the brutally cold spring.

It felt strange when I woke up the next morning. I knew the birds were gone and yet I woke up at dawn, hearing birds chirping. I felt like there was something I needed to do! I realized that there is always something we need to do. Humans have a huge impact on the natural world and there is always something we can do to help out. It means a lot. The chickadees were helped by complete strangers and my friend Julie. They were willing to do something and they did it gladly. I am so thankful for every one of them!

Post note: Box two is currently under the ownership of a pair of Eastern bluebirds. They have a fine whorl of grass in the bottom, the beginnings of a new nest and hopefully a successful clutch of fine young birds will follow soon. In the meantime, I’ll keep watching. I hope you are watching too.

Tricia West Brown lives on a farm in Brown County, Ohio with her husband and a myriad of critters. She works for GE Aviation as a technician and also farms.



2020 Summer Events

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



It might sound strange but I enjoy revealing to people that I love to be hated. Such a statement quickly earns their attention. Once I have their attention, I continue to tell them that most parent birds that I work with express their hate by diving at me when they think I am a threat to their families.

As I monitor their nestboxes, I am only trying to count their eggs or young. My listeners then smile or laugh after realizing that I was not talking about my fellow human beings, but about protective parent birds.

Yes, I have often written about my favorite birds such as a protective male bluebird that I called “Macho Man,” and an unlucky female Carolina Chickadee that became “my little chickadee,” and a very prolific Tree Swallow that I had captured ten times when I used to band all of my nesting female swallows. The mother swallow knew me and she used to dive very close to my face. She also raised two families a season for four consecutive years.

So, on May 23, 2020, an escalation took place that really made me smile after everything ended without any detrimental outcomes; a female American Kestrel hit my head. Good news for both of us, she did not grab my head with her talons. I was wearing my Ohio State Parks and Watercraft volunteer’s cap, and instead of a solid fabric, two-thirds of the cap’s crown is a mesh fabric that allows maximum ventilation to one’s head. Had the falcon grabbed it while trying to make me bleed, the webbed fabric might have tangled with her talons to cause flight problems.

The thump on my head felt like a sock full of sand and she hit on the left side of the back of my skull. I believe she made contact with one side of her breast bone’s keel that contains muscles connected to her wing. Ironically, I believe I caused the collision since I had just reached the kestrel box to unfasten its hook. As I raised the hinged lid, I leaned to the left to allow the lid to pass my face and the hawk was too close to avoid hitting me.

Was she hurt? No, she flew fifty or more yards east to land on the utility wire to prepare for more passes. After I counted a family of five nestlings, I gently picked one up, and descended the ladder to join a laughing Dick Phillips. I handed the youngster to Dick, and then I went about writing band numbers and other information in my banding book. Dick held the bird’s body to present its leg to the jaws of my banding pliers. After I closed the leg band around the falcon’s tarsus,

Dick climbed the ladder to return the nestling to its nest, after which he selected the second bird to be banded.

As Dick approached the top of the ladder, the determined mother launched another attack, and as she was within ten yards of her target, I blasted her with a loud, forceful pish-h-h-h. Hearing the pish, she veered off course to pass Dick and circled for a second attempt. I pushed again to deter her. This went on for each trip up the ladder to return a nestlings and select another one to be banded. The good news is, her added attacks told us that she had not been injured when she delivered her first protest to my head.

As I write this report, 57 young falcons have fledged from 14 of the project’s 18 boxes. Unfortunately, two have died in traffic along the same country road. There is one box that contained a second clutch of kestrel eggs and everything looked good on July 5.

Much is being reported on the decline of the kestrel population during recent decades, but every kestrel nestbox project that I am aware of has successfully raised our continent’s smallest falcon. We need more conservation projects to answer the small falcon’s need.



A Carolina Wren nestling is revealed sitting in the nest tunnel’s entrance once the box’s front panel was opened.

Carolina Wrens

Carolina Wrens nested three times and were successful twice. The wrens nested in one of two Bob Orthwein Carolina Wren boxes on my back porch. They produced five eggs that developed to fledge. At Delaware State Park, two nest attempts with eggs in bluebird nestboxes ended with one nest successfully fledging five from five eggs. The other nest of five eggs was usurped by House Wrens.

A Carolina Wren nest is mostly moss with some leaves and grass. In a bluebird box, they weave a nest that has a horizontal tunnel that leads to the nest cup where the eggs are hatched and nestlings are fed. If you are a competing bird looking down into the box from the entrance hole, you just see a layer of moss below.

The Carolina Wren's nesting season is not over. During past decades, I recorded the latest first egg date as July 18. After an early spring nest with a first egg laid in late March or early April, they avoid my back porch for later second nests because of high summer temperatures that build up in our world.

Carolina Chickadees, a disappointing season

Carolinas attempted six nests, but only three produced fledglings. One nest behind my home in Delaware raised six from six eggs. Another Delaware nest at the student observatory on

the Ohio Wesleyan campus raised two from two eggs that were laid after four earlier eggs disappeared from the same nest.

Three chickadee nestlings at Austin Manor in Delaware died after a failed fostering of two orphan nestlings from the Ohio Wildlife Center. Sticks covered the remains of three nestlings from the combined family of five, pointing toward House Wrens as the possible cause.

In one chickadee nest inside the woodland at the John Young Park south of Delaware, four hatched from six eggs and all grew to fledge.

At the Olentangy Environmental Control center, a county sewage treatment facility across the Olentangy River from Highbanks Metro Park, seven chickadee eggs fell victim to House Wrens.

So, from total of 28 eggs, 15 (53.6%) hatched, and 12 (42.9%) fledged for a very poor season.

Well, much more needs to be reported and discussed once Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds complete their seasons. A shortage of insects is affecting clutch sizes, hatch rates, and survival rates. Even though there are still successes to celebrate, I still have not seen the summer's first grasshopper.

For now, try to stay healthy and conserve on!

Research Article on Food Supplementation Reviewed by Mike Watson

Food supplementation affects gut microbiota and immunological resistance to parasites in a wild bird species.

Sarah A. Knutie
Journal of Applied Ecology
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A recent study of nesting bluebirds in Minnesota found that food supplementation can provide significant benefits to nestling condition and success. The author, Sarah Knutie, was interested in the relationship between increased food availability and a bird's ability to tolerate and/or fight off parasites.

Knutie tracked nestling growth, health, gut microbiome and immune response across one breeding season in 2017. She treated some nests with permethrin to remove blowfly larvae. And some nests were offered daily feedings of mealworms.

She found that the presence of blowfly larvae reduced nestling body weight, feather growth and hemoglobin count (due to blood loss). Supplemental feeding offset all of these; nestlings receiving mealworms had higher body mass, faster feather growth, better immune response and a more diverse

gut microbiome. Overall, supplemental feeding reduced parasite load and increased nest success rates.

The benefits of supplemental feeding were particularly pronounced early in the breeding season, likely due to the lower availability of wild insect food. Furthermore, Knutie notes that because nestlings were in better physical condition at the time of fledgling, there may be longer-lasting benefits of supplemental feeding. She cites a study of ovenbirds that showed nestlings exposed to parasites had lower survival and reduced mobility.

For those of you who offer mealworms to your bluebirds (or are thinking of trying mealworms) and are interested to know how to make sure your bluebirds benefit from the mealworms, here are Knutie's methods. She installed a mealworm feeder dish 10 meters from the nest box. The feeder dish was a sterilized cat food can with drainage holes attached to a fence post. She offered 15 mealworms per day per nestling, starting a few days before the expected hatch date. Offering mealworms before the eggs hatched allowed time for the adults to learn to take the mealworms. This increased the likelihood that they would feed the mealworms to nestlings once the eggs hatched.



Ask Madame WingNut

The Eagle Has Landed

By Paula Ziebarth



Last year at this time, I promised you all a three-part series of articles covering the planning, implementation and monitoring of bluebird trails. “To Infinity and Beyond” outlined steps to find a good site for a trail and plan for the life of that trail. The second article, “Build it and They Will Come” discussed good nest box and baffle design criteria and where to find nest box plans or the boxes themselves. This

third article “The Eagle Has Landed” discusses the importance of good monitoring and data collection once a trail is established.

Nest season for many of our cavity nesting birds begins in March and is generally done by the end of August. Now that nestbox monitoring duties are winding down, it is an excellent time to compile and report data for the season. I hope everyone will submit their 2020 data reports to the Ohio Bluebird Society.

Monitoring nestboxes every 3 to 7 days during nest season is very important to make sure the birds are doing well and to intervene when necessary. Some important points when heading out into the field to check a trail include:

- Don't check nestboxes early in the morning if host bird could be laying eggs. Eggs are generally laid during morning hours.
- Don't check nestboxes during cold or rainy weather.
- Don't check nests when young are close to fledging.
- Don't check nests at or after dusk.
- Pack a small bag that carries all of your monitoring equipment. My monitoring bag includes:
 - o Van Ert Universal Sparrow Traps
 - o Large mesh laundry bag to retrieve trapped House Sparrows
 - o Fake eggs – trapping tools for House Sparrows
 - o Scraper – scrape out used nest material and wasp nest starts
 - o Screwdriver to open nestboxes
 - o Small plastic grocery bags to carry out any debris (used nests, dead birds, etc.)



Tap gently before opening nestbox. If female remains on nest, close box and get egg or young count following nest check.

- o Small field notebook to jot down data and extra pens
- o Hand sanitizer, tick repellent, sunscreen
- o Hole reducers to bring damaged holes back to original size or to reduce hole size to protect nesting chickadees from larger birds.
- o Hardware – extra screws, nuts and bolts
- Tap gently on the side of the box or make a quiet noise to alert the female that you are approaching. This gives the bird a chance to leave if she is in there. If you open a nestbox and see the female on the nest, quietly leave her be and get your egg/young count next time.
- Nest check should be quick, less than a minute.
- Non-native House Sparrows and European Starlings should be trapped and humanely euthanized when found attempting to use a nestbox.
- Once young have fledged, remove used nest and scrape box clean. Used nest should be disposed of properly far from nest site. Leaving the used nest at the base of a nestbox will attract predators to location.



Protect yourself from ticks and other dangers in the field.

I have been using Cornell's NestWatch database for the past 16 years. NestWatch is a computerized database. Users contribute to citizen science with the data they submit and that data is available to the user to evaluate the history and success of their trails throughout the years. I use data to generate year end reports for public entities that host the different trails I monitor throughout the state. I also use data sharing with monitors that share monitoring duties on a given trail. One monitor can check trail data online to see what another did the week before, etc. Having access to data from different trails I help manage allows me to find good foster matches when I receive a call from Ohio Wildlife Center to help out a nestling that needs a new home. Reviewing historical data allows me to evaluate the effects of succession and the need to remove nestboxes or resite them if House Wrens are showing up on a trail. It helps me evaluate the historical influence and populations of non-native House Sparrows.

I am a Nestwatch Chapter Coordinator for Delaware County and am happy to help anyone get started with data entry if you

have questions. NestWatch can be accessed online at www.nestwatch.org. I encourage everyone to check it out. Click on the "Learn" tab and you will find a plethora of information about many different bird species as well as tutorials on how to monitor birds and use the database. NestWatch describes itself as "a nationwide monitoring program designed to track status and trends in the reproductive biology of birds, including when nesting occurs, number of eggs laid, how many eggs hatch, and how many hatchlings survive. Our database is intended to be used to study the current condition of breeding bird populations and how they may be changing over time as a result of climate change, habitat degradation and loss, expansion of urban areas, and the introduction of non-native plants and animals."

When we establish nestbox trails and monitor them properly, it is "one small step for man, one giant leap for birdkind"!

If you have any questions, contact Paula Ziebarth at: paulazbird@gmail.com or 614-323-7566

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.

Nest checks should be quick, a minute or less.



How Was Your Spring 2020? By Darlene Sillick, OBS Trustee



About three weeks after an amazing Ohio Bluebird Society conference our world was turned upside down. Coronavirus (Covid-19) has given us new things to ponder, to be careful about and to be thankful for. Many people were told to work from home, students did virtual learning and, to our dismay, many nature centers and parks

would not let us monitor our nestboxes.

Old Mother Nature was one mixed up lady out there, wreaking havoc. It seemed like she couldn't make up her mind if she wanted more winter or if she just wanted to jump straight into summer. March, April and May became a big challenge for the returning birds we love to help. In my humble opinion, our insect eaters were having one of the worst springs Ohio could deliver. The Tree Swallows and Purple Martins received a terrible welcome to OH-IO.

In Central Ohio the Tree Swallows were about two weeks late to start nesting. Our Purple Martins at Safari Golf Course returned during the first two weeks of April. We had a day or two that was nice but at the end of April we had night time freezes and days of cold rain. I was one nervous monitor! I even called to talk to Purple Martin expert Andrew Troyer to see what was best to do since the flying insects weren't around. He had trained his martins to accept eggs and eat some frozen crickets but he was still watching some die due to starvation.



Safari Golf Course finally opened to the public and we were permitted to start monitoring. We have 35 bluebird/ tree swallow boxes and three 24 gourd martin rigs. We watched both swallow species trying to feed low over the water. We watched them brush the cat-tails and waters edge, trying to stir up flying insects. Due to the rain we missed a Sunday of monitoring and later that week I called my good friend Paula Ziebarth and said, "Can you please come with me to check the Martins?" There had been three or four nights in a row of freezing temperature and I had a bad feeling about the birds.

We checked two full rigs and found only one dead martin. Then it happened! One gourd was very, very heavy in the last rig. Paula brought it over to me and we knew this was not going to be good. There was a dead martin on the porch, half in and half out. Inside the gourd we found 24 more dead martins! I lined them up by the golf cart and took a picture that I decided not to post, it so broke my heart. We felt their keels which were sharp, indicating these martins had died of starvation after their flight from Brazil to Safari Golf Course in Central Ohio.

Somehow, I had to do something with these birds. I could NOT just throw them in the trash or bury them! I called the curator from Ohio Wesleyan University and told her what had happened and asked if she could use the martins to teach her students and for study skins. Within two hours I met Lisa M. Tabak from Ohio Wesleyan University and gave her the bag of 25 birds. Somehow it felt better to save them for science than to dispose of them...

Paula Ziebarth posted on a martin Facebook page about our losses. I went home and called Andrew Troyer again to give him the sad news. He was very kind and calmed me down as we talked about training martins to eat crickets or flying scrambled eggs. I also found a YouTube Video about a gentleman who fed mealworms to his early returning martins by placing a handful of chilled live mealworms on the porch of each martin housing unit when the rig was lowered. Check out the interesting video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj2l3KBzCjE>

We sent out emails to other martin landlords to let them know our sad news and found that others had lost birds too. This was a very hard spring for the birds we care so much about and it has been very hard on many of us and our families too. ***If you read this far, then I have a question for you. Will you email me if you had some challenges and losses this spring? We want to collect your replies and experiences and put that in the next OBS newsletter. I will title it "How Was your Spring 2020-Part TWO". Please send your 2020 spring news to me at dsillick118@gmail.com. I hope you will reply.*** I know that many of our bird counts will be down and that there are still some sites we can't get permission to check due to Covid restrictions.

This will be an interesting year for data collection. OBS President Mike Watson will surely write an amazing article this winter as he summarizes the state bird reports for OBS.

I hope to hear from you with your remarks about your spring news! Good or bad, climate change or not, it will be worthwhile to write the story. I wonder where all the insects are?! Their numbers seem knocked back from spring frosts and lots of rain. I can't wait to see what 2020 holds for us in the second half. That brings a BIG sigh!!

I need to end on a high note. My two granddaughters were with me during late June/ early July. I took them out to see the martins and age a few. It was hot and we didn't want to stress the birds so we only visited a couple of nests and aged a few martins. My granddaughters' faces say it all. They are 11 and 13 and were here for a visit from CO with my daughter who was a hero for driving that long trip! It was definitely a high note for all of us to get the chance to be together during these trying times!

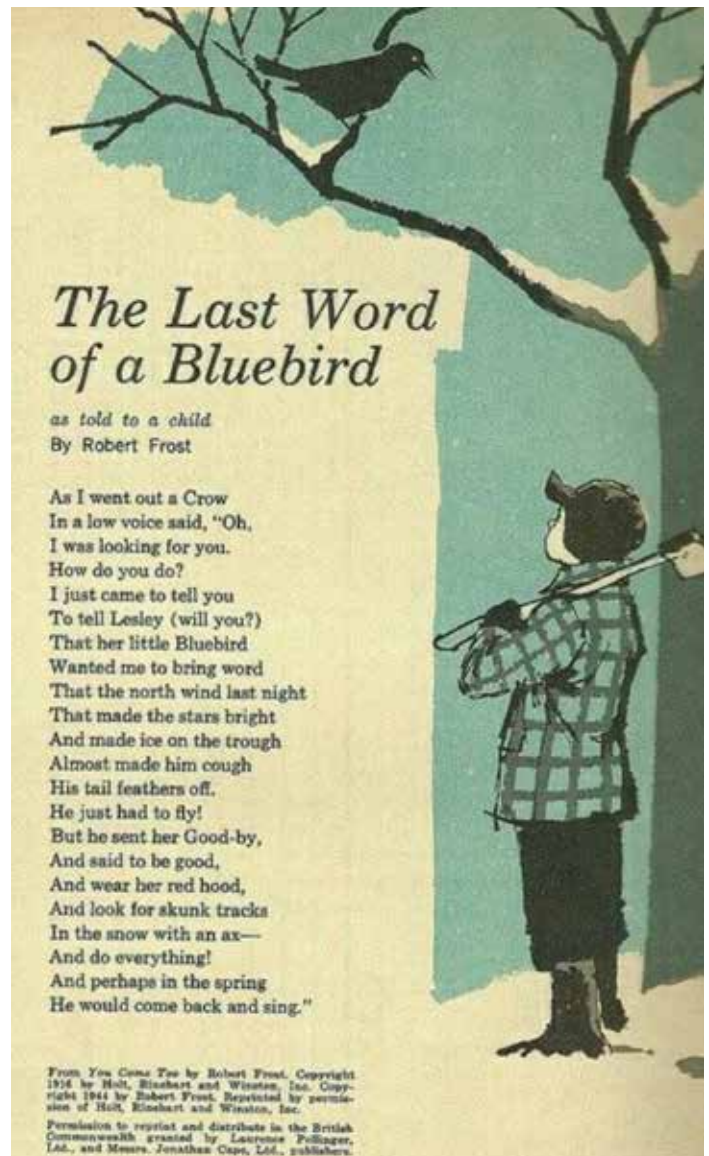
Bluebird Poem Analysis

by Molly Wilsbacher

With all of the unfortunate circumstances surrounding us today, I am reminded of one of my favorite poems by Robert Frost (1874 – 1963), *The Last Word of a Bluebird*. At first glance it appears to be about a bluebird sending word to his friend Lesley that he has to fly away for a little while, like many birds do for the winter. The bluebird wants Lesley to be good and healthy while he is gone, and the bluebird says he might be back in the spring.

However, if you look inside the poem, it is probably about someone who unfortunately died recently (represented by the bluebird), and that an angel (represented by the crow) has come to tell Lesley that the little bluebird sends her good tidings before he goes to heaven. The mention that the bluebird might come back in the spring to sing provides hope; not in the literal sense, but hope that other bluebirds would return in the spring to comfort Lesley and brighten your days. This interpretation makes sense to me because Robert Frost probably wrote this poem to his young daughter Lesley to help comfort her over the loss of her brother Elliot who died of cholera at the tender age of 4 or 5.

Finally, I think the poem resonates today. It is important to keep hope in our hearts when we suffer heartache and disappointments in life. After the mourning and grieving period passes, we could be rewarded with joy and contentment, especially if we remain positive and righteous. And, if we are really fortunate, we will be rewarded with the song of a bluebird.



Weather Affected Nesting at Holden Arboretum

By Mike Watson, OBS President



The bluebird trails at The Holden Arboretum in northeast Ohio were unusually quiet when the season kicked off this year. Not only were there no volunteers on the trails to help monitor nest boxes (due to Covid-19 restrictions), but bluebird nesting activity was nearly non-existent in April. We normally start

monitoring in early April and the average earliest egg date on our trails is April 9th. This year, though, 60% of our trails didn't have a bluebird egg until May. Overall, average first egg date in 2020 was 8 days behind average. Even when nesting started, activity was slower – fewer new nests start per week than normal.

Tree swallow nesting was similarly delayed, and for both species our sense was that the cool spring weather was the cause of the delay. And, seeming to back that up, by late May our accumulated Growing Degree Days was at a 30-year low (Figure 1). However, a closer inspection of how those GDDs accumulated showed that we seemed to have a fairly normal April and didn't fall well below normal until early May. This likely explained the delay in Tree Swallow nesting, since they normally don't start laying until early May and most clutches start during the second week of May. But it can't explain the bluebird delay – they begin nesting in early April, so the temperatures in May have no affect on the timing of the first nest.

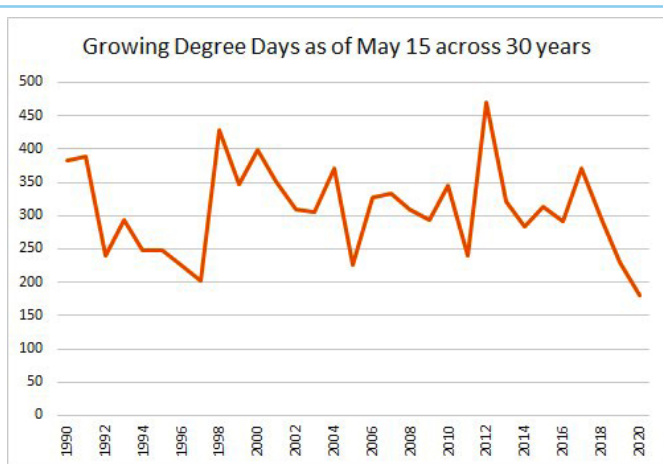


Figure 1. Total accumulated Growing Degree Days (GDD) as of May 15 for 30 years in Chardon, Ohio. GDD is a way of estimating potential growth and development of plants and animals by comparing daily temperatures to a base temperature. The base temperature represents the minimum temperature needed for growth and development.

We had previously seen a very slow start for bluebirds in 2018 and it appeared to be linked to cold and wet weather during March and April of that year. But the average temperatures and precipitation for 2020 was very nearly identical to average, suggesting that despite our sense that those months were cooler than normal, perhaps they weren't.

Normally, there's a steady increase in daytime temperatures from March 1 through April 30. However, NOAA data from a nearby weather station (Chardon, OH) showed that temperatures in April were not very different from the March temperatures (Figure 2). March was warmer than normal and April slightly cooler than normal. There was hardly any noticeable increase in temperatures across those two months, so temperatures in late April felt nearly the same as what we experienced in early March. Perhaps our bluebirds delayed nesting due to the lack of a noticeable warming trend; even though temperatures were close to average for the March-April period, there was no sense of spring advancing.

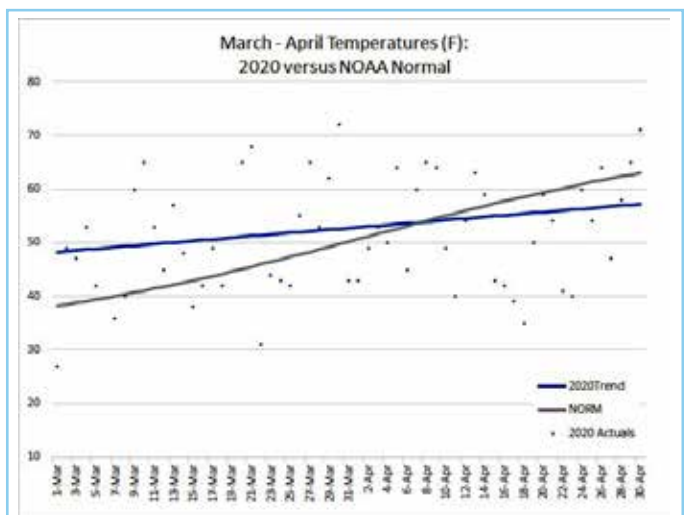


Figure 2. Daily temperatures and trendline for 1 March – 30 April, 2020 compared to daily normal temperatures. Data from NOAA weather station in Chardon, Ohio. Note that normal trendline shows ~20°F increase from early March to the end of April, but in 2020 there was very little warming during this period.

Holden was not the only place in Ohio that experienced delayed or disrupted nesting. In many areas nestling mortality was much higher than normal, likely linked to reduced insect abundance or activity due to cold temperatures. At Holden, most bluebirds waited until early May to start laying eggs. The time needed to finish laying and incubating would mean that eggs were hatching in mid to late-May. By that time our temperatures had warmed up considerably, likely sparing us the increased nestling mortality that other areas witnessed.



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President's Report – August 2020

By Mike Watson

Every year on a bluebird trail is unique. Some are closer to 'normal', but there's always something unusual to experience and deal with. This year, we had the combination of coronavirus and (in many areas) a very cool spring. Coronavirus has changed how all of us live and work and it appears that won't change anytime soon. It has affected when and how we monitor trails and who we share the experience with. And although the birds are not affected directly by COVID-19, it's probable that many nest boxes were not monitored as frequently as normal...which could have an impact on nest success.

Spring weather has a much more direct impact on birds and many areas saw delayed nesting and increased nestling mortality as a result of this spring's weather. My article on page 12 describes the weather where I work and how it affected nesting in April and May. Luckily, we did not see the kinds of nestling mortality that other areas have reported, and our birds seem to have done quite well despite a slow start.

As the season winds down, please remember to send in your fledgling reports – you can find a downloadable PDF on the OBS website.

Finally, I'll share a quick update on the OBS Board of Directors. Monica Klarer has stepped into the position of Secretary and will be instrumental to keeping OBS organized and on track. My term as President is ending in October and our VP – Darlene Sillick – will become OBS President at that time. Many of you know Darlene and I'm sure nearly all of you know of her. She's been an important part of OBS and many other conservation organizations in the state and has a record of great work on behalf of our native cavity nesting species.

As always, OBS will be electing new board members early next year. If you are interested in joining or have recommendations of potential candidates, please let us know.

Thanks!

Treasurer's Report by Molly Wilsbacher

- 1. SAVE THE DATES!** We continue to move forward with plans for the next two Bluebird Conferences on Saturday, March 6, 2021 and Saturday, March 5, 2022. Our theme for the 2021 Bluebird Conference is "Back to Basics." Ohio Bluebird Society's goal with every conference is to bring together and educate as many bird lovers as possible, and hopefully, you'll make a few friends and meaningful connections in the process.
- 2. Ohio Bluebird Society's bank accounts remained steady through the last quarter.** OBS bank accounts currently reflect that we enjoy \$35,212 as of June 30, 2020. Our anticipated expenditures in the current quarter include designing, publishing, and mailing this Newsletter, as well as expected expenses associated with maintaining insurance, website maintenance, and hopefully, awarding a few grants and sponsorships.
- 3. For those that do not know, the Ohio Bluebird Society receives a small percentage of all purchases made through Amazon Smile** and it doesn't cost you anything and doesn't increase your cost at all for items purchased. Please use the Amazon Smile website (<https://smile.amazon.com>) and designate the Ohio Bluebird Society as your charitable choice. *[PLEASE NOTE: Only purchases made at <https://smile.amazon.com> (not www.amazon.com or the mobile app) generate donations].*
- 4. It is not too early to thinking about donating to our silent auction for our upcoming Bluebird Conference.** If you're engaged in a little spring cleaning or even downsizing, please consider donating new or slightly used items for our auction next year. If you would like someone to pick up the donation, please email me OBSTreasurer@gmail.com or another Board Member. Thank you!

Unusual Bluebird Egg Photos

Shared by Paula Ziebarth



This female Eastern Bluebird began laying her clutch on May 30. You can see the partial clutch in the first photo. This is her second nest this year and she bled during egg laying last time also. This clutch should have hatched by June 17. When the eggs had not hatched today (June 25), we candled them and determined they were nonviable. The second photo shows the eggs covered with bird mites before we removed the clutch. I have never seen this before in over 20 years of monitoring nests. The Female was not on the nest when we checked this morning so she may have finally abandoned it. Could there have been some residual blood on the eggs that attracted these mites to them, even though she brooded and turned them throughout the incubation period? Have you ever seen anything like this before?

Other monitors and I have noticed a lot of bird mites in fledged Eastern Bluebird nests this year in general. I seldom see this except in Tree Swallow and Purple Martin nests.”

OBS Officers, Board of Trustees, and Advisors

We wish to thank the many people working with and for the Ohio Bluebird Society. Without their help, we could never accomplish our mission.

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

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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



A sign owned by the Delaware Volunteers Association at Delaware State park is maintained by volunteer Justine Strohm and uses lyrics from Miranda Lambert's hit country song, "Bluebird," to remind campers and visitors that bluebirds are a park resource for them to enjoy.