

## BRAS Bluebird Newsletter January 2022

As I sit at our kitchen table looking at our backyard bird feeders, one thing I am very thankful for is the blessing of God's creation. The long gray days of January and the cold, wintry days of February are ahead and it sometimes seems like the continuing Covid pandemic and the isolation and grief it has brought to so many can be overwhelming. That is when I find that a walk outdoors in nature or even an hour or so spent watching and counting birds at our feeders can be uplifting.

The colors and feather patterns of the birds at our seed stations and heated birdbath can be vibrant like the Northern Cardinal and Eastern Bluebird pictured on the Shepherds hook or muted but striking like the Mourning Dove and Yellow- Shafted Flicker at the birdbath. I found it fascinating to learn that the yellow shafted flicker gets its name from the golden yellow wing linings which flash when they are flying overhead (and can be seen when feeding upright at a suet feeder) as pictured in the third photo below. The red bellied woodpecker also has hidden beauty. The reddish patch of feathers on the lower abdomen are seldom visible in the field but can sometimes be seen as it eats at feeders.



Feeding bluebirds and other birds in the winter is a favorite past time for many people. A late winter ice storm, heavy snowstorm or extreme cold can be deadly since natural food sources may be unavailable or depleted. Bird feeders can be links to survival especially at these times.

Many questions about bluebirds this time of year focus on how to help them survive the long and sometimes brutally cold Ohio winters. Their basic needs are food, water and shelter.

During winter a bluebird's diet changes from predominantly insects to mostly seeds, berries and small fruits. Planting native plants is an important way to help bluebirds in the winter. A list of bluebird preferred native plantings can be found on many websites, some garden centers and in bluebird resource books. This link to a popular bluebird resource website has wonderful native plant info: <http://sialis.org/plants.htm> Provide bluebird preferred foods at your feeders also. These include dried mealworms, peanut butter bluebird suet nuggets, sunflower hearts and even small currents or chopped raisins. Bluebirds prefer a platform feeder or will also use specially designed bluebird feeders. Many of these are made with a 1 1/2 inch hole in each end to give bluebirds access while excluding larger birds.



A regular source of water is important in both summer and winter. A heated bird bath in the winter will be attractive to bluebirds and many other species of birds when streams and natural water sources are frozen over.

Lastly, don't block off the entrance to your nesting box during the winter unless you notice house sparrows using it. Bluebirds often roost together in natural cavities like abandoned woodpecker holes or empty nest boxes during severe weather. Stories of six, eight or even more bluebirds roosting in a nest box at night are not uncommon! Native Downy woodpeckers also are well known for their occasional use of bluebird boxes for wintertime roosting although they sometimes peck the entrance hole to enlarge it. A new hole guard in the spring fixes that! We enjoy the video clips from our backyard RING webcam nestbox which shows a female downy woodpecker spending every night in our bluebird box again this winter. She will give it up in the spring when the bluebirds claim it for nesting!

Getting outside and enjoying some time with fellow birders is a great way to get exercise, learn new things and enjoy being with friends in a safe outdoors "socially distanced" way. 😊 There are lots of field trips planned by the Black River Audubon Society in the coming months. If you have never participated in one of these walks challenge yourself to try it soon! The dates and locations can be found on the website. <https://www.blackriveraudubon.org/field-trips>

Recent Covid spikes have caused a halt to in-person meetings sponsored by our bluebird program at this time. Normally this month's newsletter would give dates and locations for the "Bluebird Basics Class" which typically was held each year at a local library and was geared toward those interested in learning more about basic bluebird information. Unfortunately, the meeting for all bluebird trail monitors which was held each spring in early March is also on hold at this time due to the pandemic.

We are in need of a trail monitor for the smaller 12 box Indian Hollow bluebird trail in Grafton. Monitoring is done at least weekly from late March through August. Mentoring and information about how to monitor a bluebird trail will be provided. Please contact me at [pennybrandau@gmail.com](mailto:pennybrandau@gmail.com) if this interests you! We would love to welcome you to our group of over 40 bluebird trail monitors who manage the 33 trails in our program.

If you are looking for an interesting activity to do while waiting for nesting season to start, check out the Ohio Bluebird Society's website for information about the planned virtual conference on March 5<sup>th</sup>. There are many top-notch speakers and presentations planned. Last year's presentations can still be viewed on the website. I would encourage you to check it out! <https://ohiobluebirdsociety.org/conference/> The cost is free for this all-day event!

The Great Backyard Bird Count. Bird watchers of all ages can participate in The Great Backyard Bird Count which will be held Friday February 18 through Monday February 21, 2022 this year. Counts can be done from your own backyard or any other site you choose. This count was launched in 1998 by Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society. It is done each year in February and creates an annual snapshot of the distribution and abundance of birds. More than 160,000 people from all walks of life join this 4-day event. More info can be found at <https://www.birdcount.org/participate/>

In just a few weeks bluebirds will begin nesting! By mid-March each box you maintain should be examined to ensure that they are in good repair before that first nesting attempt starts. Roofs should be free of leaks, entrance holes smooth and only 1 ½ inches in diameter, floor drainage holes open. The poles should be upright, not leaning, and predator guards should be in place. Cracks in walls should be caulked or sealed with silicon to prevent possible wet nests and wet, hypothermic nestlings. Replace nest boxes which cannot be repaired. A few minutes of careful attention to these details can make a difference in the nesting success of the native birds which will use the nest boxes.

Spring will arrive on Sunday March 20<sup>th</sup> this year. In just a few short weeks that first blade of dry grass or pine needle will be spotted in a nest box by a vigilant bluebird monitor in Lorain County! Soon after, the first bluebird egg of 2022 will be seen and the pace of life will rapidly pick up for our bluebirders! It might seem that 61 days is a long time to wait for spring to arrive but good things come to those who wait (and prepare) for them! 😊

I hope you make time to connect with nature, learn something new and take time now to plan how you can help bluebird conservation. Perhaps you can attend a bluebird meeting or

program, volunteer with a local, state or national bluebird organization, or get involved in some other way. I hope the recommended programs and activities mentioned provide ideas and inspiration. Don't be left out in the cold like the squirrel peering in our window!



Quote from Neltze Blanchan, *Bird Neighbor*. "Snowstorms may yet whiten fields and gardens, high winds may howl about the trees and chimneys, but the little blue heralds persistently proclaim from the orchard and the garden that the spring procession has begun to move."



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Comments or corrections appreciated

