

## BRAS Bluebird Newsletter March 2021

Spring 2021. It seems like it has been a very long time since we last celebrated the first crocus of the season and the sight of bluebirds pairing up at a nest box. I have proof that it is happening again! 😊 “Yeah” seems too weak of a celebratory expression. The word “Hallelujah” seems more appropriate for this season! Hope is in the air again! Can you feel it?



For the past several years we have kept track of the dates of first eggs for several bird species that use our nest boxes. I can’t wait to hear who has the first bluebird egg of Lorain County this year! Please contact me with a photo of your first bluebird egg. I would also love to hear about the first tree swallow egg. We want to mention the date and location in our next newsletter and give recognition to the winner of this “egg hunt”.

Here are the past four years’ first egg dates for several native birds that we monitor in our boxes.

	2020	2019	2018	2017
EABL	3/28	3/28	3/21	3/31
TRES	4/18	4/22	5/3	4/25
BCCH	none	4/27	none	none
TUTI	5/1	none	none	none
HOWR	5/17	5/15	5/19	5/14

It is clear that the Eastern Bluebird is the earliest nester of the many native birds that might use our nest boxes. The only bird which nests earlier is the non-native House Sparrow. They try to out compete our native birds for nest sites by nest building in early to mid -March and will continue nesting attempts through July and even into August. Responsible bluebird monitors DO NOT allow house sparrows to successfully nest and raise young on their watch! There are many passive and active control measures which should be used to manage House sparrows on

bluebird trails. Call or email me with questions or check out these website links:

<http://www.sialis.org/hosp.htm>

<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/PDF/NABSFactsheetHouseSparrowControl.pdf>

The Ohio Bluebird Society website also has some great info about house sparrow control. Check out their website at <https://ohiobluebirdsociety.org/conference/> Since their yearly conference was virtual this year due to Covid the list of presentations by their varied and excellent speakers can be viewed at their website. I encourage you to watch all of the conference video talks. The one titled “Don’t pull that House Sparrow Nest” by Paula Ziebarth gives some great information about when to remove house sparrow nests. It’s a new way of sparrow control from the former method of just removing any HOSP nest over and over. Paula’s logic makes perfect sense and we are trying to encourage others to follow her experienced advice. It could save the lives of more native birds.

The photo on the right was taken by monitor Diane Lehman and shows a beginning bluebird nest made of pine needles at her home on 3/20/21. Her bluebirds might be looking for that coveted “first egg” award again this year!



Both bluebird trail monitors and private homeowners with bluebird boxes should inspect their boxes by early or mid-March. This inspection can reveal problems requiring repairs before nesting starts. It is important to actually walk around the nest box to inspect the entire box for cracks in walls or roof that might let in rain. Cracks should be covered with clear silicon caulking (or replace the box if it is badly deteriorated). Check to make sure the pole is still firmly in the ground and is not leaning. Sometimes the freezing and thawing which occurs during winter heaves the nest box poles partially out of the ground and they will need to be reset. Look at the predator guard to make sure it is intact. Also check the hole guard. Is it still 1 ½ inch or has it perhaps been enlarged by another bird or mammal and in need of replacement? Run a finger around the inside of the hole guard to check if there are rough splinters which could tear the feathers of the parent birds as they frequently enter and exit the box. A quick rub with sandpaper inside the opening of the hole guard can smooth away rough areas. The door of the box should be opened and the interior inspected too. Make sure the drainage ports in the floor

are not clogged, the box is securely fastened to the pole and that any old nests have been cleaned out.

There might be interesting evidence of winter time use of the nest box. The following four photos show some of the types of things you might find in nest boxes during your first inspection in early/ mid-March. How savvy are you at identifying the former occupants of each of these boxes? Answers are given below.



A



B



C



D

Photo A shows numerous seeds, larger, thicker feces and a couple of wispy blue-gray feathers. Bluebirds probably have roosted in this box during the winter. The seeds they ate during the winter were defecated and left on the box floor. 😊

Photo B shows lots of small wood chips on the floor of the box. A closer inspection shows that the entrance hole has been “whittled” and enlarged from the inside of the box and was the source of the wood chips on the floor. This is very common behavior when downy woodpeckers roost in a nest box. They like to do a little interior remodeling during those long winter nights. They will sometimes even create new entrance holes which could necessitate a completely new box being installed. Downys will always give up the roosting box when a bluebird claims it in the spring for nesting.

Photo C shows a heavy layer of House Sparrow feces and a few unkempt arching grasses with seed heads. This photo indicates regular use of this box by a HOSP, probably as a roost at night during the winter. Best action would be to trap the House sparrow with a Van Ert trap then clean out the feces and trash once he is removed permanently.

Photo D shows a mouse nest. These small white footed or deer mice will build a tall nest without a cup out of soft grass, fur, leaf, and other fluffy stuff. They urinate in the box, can carry disease, and will deter nesting birds since they will eat eggs and nestlings. Mice have been known to carry a potentially dangerous Hantavirus so before removing a mouse nest (and after evicting any mice) spray the nest thoroughly with a 10% Clorox solution, wait several minutes, then remove it with a spatula or gloved hand while standing upwind or wearing a mask. Predator guards on a nest box pole normally prevent most mouse nesting attempts although they can access boxes if tall grasses lean onto the box or pole.

Covid has kept us from holding our normal trail monitors spring meeting this year and also the meetings typically held for interested new bluebirders at area libraries. Fortunately, our need for a few new trail monitors was quickly filled by volunteers who saw our need advertised in area newspapers. We have changed the usual indoor in-person new trail monitor training this year to a self-paced training with a handbook and with mentored outdoor trail experiences.

Please welcome five new trail monitors to our Black River Audubon Society bluebird group. Courtney Brennan, Deb Ackerman and Anni Pilisy will be monitoring the South Equestrian Trail. Joe Gensert will be assisting and learning from Charlie Weil at the Carlisle Visitor Center trail and Cortland Hill will be assisting Sandy Kantelas at the New Russia Park trail. We are very happy to have these new volunteers and appreciate their additional help this season.

I will include photos of Joe, Cortland and Anni in future newsletters. We are still organizing trail walks together. Pictured below are Courtney and her sister, Katie, with Deb Ackerman doing nest box maintenance checks last week at Carlisle Equestrian Center South. Bluebirds were there to greet us! It reminds me to thank Mike Smith who has managed the trail at Carlisle Equestrian Center for many years and only gave up the southern trail this year because he has over 60 other

boxes he is continuing to monitor this year! The bluebirds we saw were undoubtedly ones Mike has monitored in prior years. Sweet legacy!



Last week boxes were put up for another species of cavity nesters at the Oberlin Preserve. The hope is that the Golden Swamp Warbler, also known as the Prothonotary Warbler, will find and nest in some of these new prothonotary boxes. Kate Pilacky, her husband Dave, and Diana Steele are pictured beside the first installed prothonotary box. There will be five more boxes installed.

Also picture below is a new educational sign which Black River Audubon Society purchased to be installed at the site of Mill Hollow Bacon House's purple martin colony. Cool to see other cavity nesters getting a helping hand and conservation publicity.



It has been exciting to learn that Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society is starting a new bluebird trail program. Board Member Kurt Miske had the vision to start a nest box program after walking a trail at the Lewis Road Riding Ring Equestrian Center in Cuyahoga County. He saw several sadly neglected and dilapidated old nest boxes which were obviously not cared for and decided to try to make a difference. The Cuyahoga Metro Park gave Kurt permission to install 5 new bluebird boxes in that area (they removed and discarded the old ones). A Memorial grant helped WCAS purchase the new bluebird boxes and predator guards from our Black River Audubon Society

Bluebird Program. My husband, Fritz, and I were happy to meet with them to help install the nest boxes a few weeks ago. Last week we joined Kurt and his 3 new bluebird trail monitors at the Riding Ring and did a first check of the nest boxes. It was a beautiful day to be outside and to see the excitement of these new monitors as bluebirds sang from nearby trees and flew overhead during our check. Wishing them successful bluebird nestings this season! 😊



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*"I wish you bluebirds in the spring  
To give your heart a song to sing"*

AA Beach and C. Trent