

BRAS Bluebird Newsletter March 2024

Spring has arrived although the snow showers and cold temperatures feel like winter still has the upper hand! Blooming daffodils and crocuses, the beginning of bluebird courtship signs and the first evidence of new nesting materials in bluebird boxes reassure us that spring is truly here. Our backyard bluebirds have paired up and can be seen moving pine needles around in their nestbox as the beginnings of a nest shape starts to emerge.

Last year the first bluebird egg laid in Lorain County was on March 19th and I cannot wait to hear news of this year's first reported eggs! Normally they occur in late March/early April. Please contact me with reports of your first bluebird eggs! I look forward to reporting on the first eggs in the next newsletter. Hint! Hint! According to Nestwatch records our first tree swallow egg in 2023 occurred on April 15, closely followed by the first Black capped chickadee egg on April 19. The House wren first reported egg for 2023 in Lorain County was on May15th. It will be fascinating to see if earliest egg dates are before or later than last year's dates!



Bluebirds usually travel in groups throughout the fall and winter but in spring they divide up into pairs. The female will choose the nesting site and build the actual nest from grasses or pine needles as the male guards her by staying near her in flight, protecting the nestbox entrance when she is inside, and bringing her food tidbits of insects. Lots of wing-waving can be seen as they communicate with each other during this early nesting and mating phase. The soft low-pitched warbling song of bluebirds usually consists of several phrases, each made up of 1-3 notes. Here is a link to a bluebird song recording.

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Bluebird/sounds

Bluebird eggs are pale blue or rarely white eggs and typically there will be 4-5 eggs laid in each clutch/ nesting attempt (one egg laid per day) although 3-6 total eggs are possible. The female will start incubating her eggs the day before laying her last egg and it will take around 14 days from the time incubation starts until the eggs hatch. Young hatchlings are naked except for sparse tufts of fine down and their eyes are closed. Mom bluebird will continue to brood them for the first several days after hatching to keep them warm while dad is busy providing food for the young family and his mate during this time. Bluebird chicks grow rapidly and within 16-20

days they will be fully feathered, as large as their parents and able to fly (fledge) from the bluebird box. Both mom and dad will be very busy, bringing insects to their young several times each hour and carrying away the fecal sacs from the nestbox. It is important to refrain from opening bluebird boxes after the bluebird chicks reach 12-13 days old because they might startle at the intrusion and fledge prematurely from the nest which increases their likelihood of being predated. A colorful and informative Factsheet which shows the rapid changes and development of bluebird nestlings can be found on the website of the North American Bluebird Society. It is fascinating!

<https://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/PDF/EABL%20Nesting%20Growth%20Chart.pdf>

For several weeks after fledging the dad bluebird will continue to feed the young fledglings and care for them until they have matured enough to be able to forage for food themselves. This can take 4 or more weeks of providing and protecting by dad bluebird. Often the mom bluebird will start building a second nest within a week or two after her chicks fledge and then she will begin laying eggs for her second clutch. In our area first clutches for bluebirds are usually in April or early May and second clutches are around June or early July. Occasionally a pair will have three clutches in northern Ohio and these late nestings might still be occupying nestboxes as late as August. It is a special treat to still have bluebirds nesting into August!



In early February Fritz Brandau started making new bluebird boxes for the Black River Audubon Society bluebird program. These will be used to replace worn old trail nestboxes or to start new trails. He is shown above with 40 new boxes he made this year.

By mid March all nestboxes should have a thorough spring inspection completed by the trail monitor or private homeowner. These inspections should include:

Roof and sides of box- any cracks should be sealed with clear silicon caulking. Replace box or roof if cracks are too large or numerous to be sealed. If the pole is leaning it should be reset in the ground using a pole driver. The Kingston predator guard should be secure and have a slight wobble when touched. Any tall grasses or bushes near the pole or box should be cut back or

removed to prevent climbing predators from accessing the box. Inspect and feel the entrance hole of the nest box. It should be smooth and measure 1 ½ inches. If the hole feels rough it is simple to smooth it with some medium grade sandpaper. If the hole has become enlarged (possibly from woodpecker activity) a 1 ½ inch hole guard should be placed over the enlarged opening to bring it back to the correct size. Inspect the interior of the nestbox also. There should be toe kerfs on the inside of the box below the entrance hole to help the young chicks climb out at fledge time. Van ert screws should be in place in case a house sparrow claims the box and must be removed with a Van ert trap. Any old nesting material or winter roosting material (feces, seeds, grasses) should be cleaned out. Scrape out any dried materials from walls and floor and make sure the floor drainage corners are not clogged with old nesting material. A quick inspection of the ceiling to remove any possible wasp nests should complete the spring inspection routine. Good Job! 😊



Photos above show trail work projects being done on some beautiful winter days in Jan. and Feb. Top photo shows Dalton Park (Wakeman) monitor Bob Bement helping Fritz place poles in new locations using the power pole driver. The lower photo on the left shows Carlisle Visitor Center monitor Charlie Weil and Fritz putting up new boxes on that trail. The lower right photo shows Sherod Park (Vermilion) monitor Brenda Kammer helping Fritz replace a couple of nestboxes which had been temporarily removed due to park improvement projects.

On March 2nd the Ohio Bluebird Society held it's annual all day conference at Ashland University and we were happy to have 4 members of the Black River Audubon Society Bluebird program attend. Mike Smith (North Equestrian Center monitor), coordinators Penny and Fritz Brandau and Dalton Park monitor Bob Bement enjoyed the great speakers and fun day with over 135 other bluebird lovers from across the state.



We would like to welcome several new trail monitors to our Black River Audubon Bluebird program group! Left to right: Gina Albano, Chris Stanton, Margie and Len Taylor, George Wright, Nina Love (already experienced) and Megan Griffiths. Their training class was held on Feb 25th.



The annual Spring meeting of all trail monitors was held at the Amherst Library on March 9th . It is always fun to get together again after a long winter and plan for the upcoming nesting season. We had a productive and great couple of hours together kicking off the start of monitoring for 2024. Happy trails to each of you! Wishing you lots of bluebirds!



Henry David Thoreau said that “the bluebird wears the sky on his back”. Our bluebird trail monitors will also be wearing that color on their backs as new tshirts will help identify them as trained monitors this year.

Whenever you see someone wearing one of these shirts as they check nestboxes please thank them for the awesome work they are doing to make our world more beautiful! 😊

