

BRAS Bluebird Newsletter May 2020

Two months ago, all of us were just starting to feel the impact of the strict stay at home orders due to the Covid-19 virus. Life has changed in so many ways in the past two months for most of us. Now we are looking with caution at the re-opening of many businesses and hoping to stay healthy in the months ahead! Checking bluebird boxes has been a blessed way to connect with familiar rhythms of nesting observation and to feel a sense of excitement and purpose. The fresh air, exercise and connecting with nature is good for the body and soul, right?

June 1st is the date that I obtain information about the early season contents of nest boxes on all Black River Audubon Society bluebird trails plus information from those who have bluebird nest boxes at their homes. Please check all of your nest boxes as close to June 1st as possible and report what is actually in each box around that date. I am interested in knowing what species are using the nest boxes (bluebird, tree swallow, black capped chickadee, etc.) and how many eggs or chicks are actually present. Then please let me know if you have already had any fledglings- how many and what species. For example, your report might look like this: “Box 1 has 5 bluebird eggs and has already fledged 4 bluebirds this year, box 2 is empty, box 3 has 6 tree swallow chicks, box 4 has 4 bluebird young chicks.” If you found dead bluebird chicks or unhatched, abandoned eggs this year please mention that in your note to me as well as how many were lost. I will compile all this information in an “early season report” and send the information to all of you in the next newsletter. Thank you so much!! I really appreciate it! You can email the information to me at pennybrandau@gmail.com. Thank you!



The accolades for “First Bluebird Egg of Lorain County 2020” go to two people this year! On March 28, 2020 two residents of North Ridgeville, Chris Shermak and Ford Smith, each found that their bluebirds had laid first eggs! 😊 On March 30th Diane Lehman of Amherst discovered that her bluebirds had laid their first egg! All three of these first nestings successfully fledged all or part of their clutches! Ten fledglings out of 13 first-of-the-season eggs aren’t bad! This was the beginning of a long list of active bluebird nestings. All three of these early nesting landlords put sparrow spookers up after they found their first bluebird eggs and they also have

the recommended Kingston predator guards on their bluebird box poles to protect against ground predators like raccoons and snakes. Sparrow spookers should not be put up until after the first bluebird or tree swallow egg is laid and they should be removed as soon as the young fledge out of the box. Missing streamers should be replaced. See these links for more information about both sparrow spookers and stovepipe predator guards:

www.sialis.org/sparrowspooker.htm and <http://www.sialis.org/baffle.htm>



On March 22 Fritz and I put up 12 new nestboxes for Lorain County Metro Park at Burrell House in Sheffield. With the new social distancing guidelines in mind we decided to forgo the usual offers of help and were happy to install these new boxes ourselves. Marty and Glenda Carbaugh were excited to take over as monitors for this newest trail! Naturalist Rachel Kalizewski was instrumental in the establishment of this trail and we thank her for all of the work she did in getting grants for the expenses of the nestboxes, poles and predator guards, and approval for the trail itself. Her dream to put up a swift tower and to implement several other conservation ideas have also been accomplished! Kudos to Rachel!



April brought lots of bluebird nestings and the start of the tree swallow nestings. Spring flowers, warmer temperatures and budding trees were encouraging to see. Repairs to some nestboxes like the one pictured below were necessary. I guess the downy woodpecker who roosted this winter in this Sherod Park, Vermilion box decided to change the location of the hole! The box was replaced on March 25th. Time for bluebirds or tree swallows to move in! They remodel less!



The second week of May brought a lot of challenges to our bluebird program when the weather turned cold, snowy and windy then heavy rains came later in the week. I received the first report of dead bluebird chicks from monitor Mike Smith on May 10th, the day we had snow around our front yard tulips. He reported finding 26 dead bluebird chicks out of his 29. I sent out an email alert to the trail monitors.

In the next 7 days reports came in from the monitors of all of our 33 bluebird trails and even a few private homeowners. The total number of dead bluebird chicks reported due to the weather was 133. 😞 This is a loss of over 18 percent of the total that we fledged last year. 😞

The extreme cold leads to hypothermia in young nestlings and can cause starvation and death. They become too cold to open their mouths to be fed! The heavy rains make it very difficult for the parents to even find enough insects to feed their growing, hungry young. Both of these factors combined at the same time caused horrific losses of the young bluebird chicks. It was noted that some clutches lost all young, some lost partial clutches. Many nests of eggs were abandoned. Even the tree swallows (which were just starting to lay eggs) were noted to stop egg laying in many cases and then finally restarted laying a week later. Hatch and fledge dates won't correspond to first egg dates in many cases this year due to delayed incubation.



Flooding was common as shown by the photos on the following page- taken about 8 hours apart. We never see ducks in our back yard since we live in the small town of Amherst but we decided that these smart visitors were prophetically warning us of the deluge that would soon arrive!



Fortunately, it is early in the nesting season for bluebirds and we hope they can successfully re-nest once or even twice more before the end of summer. Fingers crossed for more favorable weather in the weeks ahead!

Weather is a factor we can't control but good nestbox management can help reduce losses due to many other possible problems which can occur during nesting. How familiar are you with the following common problems and how to help reduce their impacts on the nesting success?

Ant infested nests

Wet nests

Blowflies in a nestbox

House sparrows in or on a nestbox

Eggs that have suddenly disappeared from a nest

Wasps inside a nestbox

Dead chicks in a box or unhatched eggs

There are several wonderful resources which are available to help us follow recommended practices and definitely help improve the chances of successful nestings. Check out these three recommended sites. There is an answer to almost any question you could ask on these sites! Knowledge of how to help our beloved native birds is only a keyclick away! 😊 My husband and I are always happy to hear from you also- your successes and challenges or if you just want to talk about bluebirds!

www.sialis.org/index.html

www.nabluebirdsociety.org/

<https://ohiobluebirdsociety.org/>

Take care of yourself as you walk bluebird trails or check your nestboxes.

Wishing you bluebirds, joy, peace and the blessing of good health!

Newsletter and photos by Penny Brandau pennybrandau@gmail.com 440-670-3684