

BRAS Bluebird Newsletter May 2023

May is such a beautiful month! Flowers, migrating birds, trees budding and longer, warmer days! Nesting on our bluebird trails is in full swing with bluebirds, tree swallows, black capped chickadees, house wrens and of course the nefarious and undesirable house sparrow competing for boxes. It is a month of joy as new eggs and chicks and fledglings are being recorded on our nesting data sheets but it can also be a time of sadness when unexpected losses are found.

The reports of the first bluebird eggs on our trails started arriving the first week of April. Cheryl and Mark Pruitt, monitors of Findley Park, had their first bluebird egg on April 2. This was the earliest report of a trail bluebird egg this year. Congratulations Mark and Cheryl!! Indian Hollow monitors Sanjay and Indira Palekar reported finding 3 bluebird eggs in one of their boxes on April 7 so their first egg would have been on April 5. From April 6 to April 12, I received reports of bluebird eggs at Kendal of Oberlin, New Russia Township Cemetery, Carlisle Equestrian North, Bacon Woods, Bacon House, Olsen Nature Preserve, Carlisle Equestrian South trail, Forest Hills Golf Course trail, Westwood Cemetery and Royal Oaks trail. Several private bluebird landlords also reported their first bluebird eggs those first two weeks of April- Jen Bickers, Jon Traut, Cindy Byrda, Diane Lehman, Kit Fleming, Deb Ackerman and Adele Straub. I hope I did not miss mentioning anyone who reported early bluebird eggs- please contact me if I did.

Our backyard bluebirds laid their first egg dangerously early this year- on March 19th. She laid 5 eggs and 4 of those managed to hatch on 4/6/23. It was a real nail-biter for me though with several nights near or below freezing. Obviously, this female and her partner were experienced parents and the advantage of having dry and live mealworms and a heated bird bath in our backyard probably helped stack the odds more in their favor since they did not need to leave the eggs or chicks long to forage for food or water. It was fascinating to see on the nestbox Ring camera that the mom bluebird spent the nights with her chicks to help keep them warm even when the chicks were 13 days old! Very unusual! All four bluebird chicks fledged on April 23 and I took a deep sigh of relief! 😊 We cleaned out the nestbox on April 24th and took down the spooker. Amazingly the Ring camera showed mom bluebird starting to build a nest for her second clutch on April 26th and she laid the first egg of that clutch on April 30th. What a working pair! Dad bluebird continues to feed the fledglings while she sits on eggs again!



March 19th-first egg



April 6th- hatch date



April 23- fledge day, empty nest

Bluebird Fledglings and their father



Tree swallows started to return from their wintering grounds in southern USA, Mexico and Central America in late March and early April. They delayed nesting this year until early May and then seemed to be in a huge hurry to get started! Perhaps the consecutive days of cold weather with heavy rain the first few days of May caused them to delay nesting? With temperatures in the 30's and 40's it became a battle to just survive since flying insects are not readily available in those weather conditions. Another aerial insectivore, the Purple Martin, also suffered that week due to the rain and cold and many Martins were discovered dead of starvation in our northern Ohio region. Heartbreaking!



Tree swallow and Martin deaths found May 4 and May 6.

Raccoon predation can be a problem for nesting cavity birds. It has already caused the losses of two entire clutches of bluebirds at the homes of two private bluebird landlords. At one home the nest box was located near a tree with overhanging branches and the raccoon easily dropped from a tree branch onto the nest box roof and then was able to reach into the nest box entrance hole to remove and eat the bluebird eggs. At the other private home, a very large raccoon managed to climb up the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch metal pole and then scale the 6 inch diameter by 24 inch stovepipe predator guard. One bluebird chick was eaten, and three others were found dead on the ground with injuries from the raccoon bites. The female bluebird must have been in her

nest box, keeping her young chicks warm, and barely managed to escape this predator. Several of her feathers were found on the ground near the nest box. Muddy raccoon pawprints on the pole and predator guard and even the blacktop driveway attested to the determination and large size of this particular raccoon. We have changed that predator guard for the 8" diameter!

Lessons we all can learn from these two situations?

1. Make sure nest boxes are not located under trees or branches, near or on fences, or on tree trunks. Climbing predators like raccoons, snakes and even chipmunks can access nest boxes in those locations.

2. Having a 6-inch diameter predator guard will help deter many ground predators (it did for several years at the second home mentioned), but it is a safer choice to use an 8-inch diameter stovepipe Kingston predator guard to deter larger snakes and raccoons. We have installed only the 8-inch diameter guards on our Black River Audubon Society trails for the past 11 years. It is horrific to find partially eaten bluebirds or chicks and is something none of us want to see!



The competition for available nesting sites has been strong this year. Several trail and home monitors have noticed that tree swallows seem to be more intense than usual in attempts to take over nest boxes from bluebirds. Bluebirds usually have begun their first nestings in April (and the second one sometime in June or early July). Tree swallows typically have only one nesting per year- in May or early June, so many boxes were already occupied by bluebirds when tree swallows arrived back from their migration. The urge to nest is so strong however that they sometimes bully and interfere with bluebirds who are trying to incubate eggs or feed young chicks. This can cause nesting failure for bluebirds.

Monitor Diana Steele noticed and reported two clutches of bluebirds on her trail at CMA in Oberlin that appeared weaker and smaller than expected and was concerned that there was a flurry of Tree swallows circling these boxes when she was doing her monitoring checks. We made the decision to install an additional nest box within 20 feet of each of these single bluebird-occupied boxes and immediately the swallows left the bluebirds alone and focused on claiming these new sites for their own nesting! Literally within minutes!! We also provided live mealworm supplements for a few days to the bluebirds to help feed their undersized chicks. This situation ended up being a win-win! The swallows were provided with an empty nest box they were desperate for (and were no longer interested in the box occupied by bluebirds), and the bluebirds were able to feed and care for their young without competition from tree swallows. Both species are highly desirable and beneficial native birds! 😊



Ants can be attracted to a nest box which has damp decaying grasses from wet weather, broken eggs in a nest, or a dead chick. They are the “clean-up crew” but can also injure young chicks with bites or stings. Each weekly nest box check should include a gentle peek under the nesting material for ants. Sliding a 3 inch spatula under the nest, carefully raise the nest about an inch or less to look for ants, then carefully remove the spatula, allowing the nest to return to its original position on the floor. If ants are found and are swarming the nest it is advisable to change the nest and then apply a one inch ring of petroleum jelly around the pole to deter them from returning. Check out this site for more help with ants and for nest changing info.

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



May can be a time of challenges and even losses but it is also a time bursting with new life. Monitors who learn about possible predators, competitors and pests that are common problems for nesting birds can change a challenge into a satisfying success story! There is always something new to learn and share with others! Build on the basics and sing out your story!



June 1st is an important date! It's the date that I request 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. This is a very important count for our bluebird program. Thank you for sending me your reports!

"Do your little bit of good where you are: it is those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world" Desmond Tutu

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