

BRAS Bluebird Newsletter September 2020

The beauty of the fall season and the quietness around nestboxes confirms the end of nesting for 2020. In some ways the start of nesting which occurred this past March seems like a lifetime ago! So many things have been different this year but the magic of monitoring a nesting bluebird or tree swallow never changes! Did you find yourself longing for the activity and excitement of nestbox checks in August when the boxes were at last empty? I have to admit to feeling an “empty nest” kind of nostalgia. It can be a common bluebirder malady in August!

Our backyard bluebird family disappeared in August after their last clutch fledged and we did not see them at all for several weeks. Although this is typical behavior it still seemed lonely in the yard with no flash of blue! And then suddenly they were back!! All five of them returned last week, peering in the nestbox, softly calling from the power lines, checking out the mealworm offerings in their bluebird feeder and taking leisurely baths and drinks in the birdbaths. The fall molt seems to be almost complete and their new feathers are bright and fresh looking. We are thrilled to see them again! 😊

Since bluebirds do not migrate south like many species do, we can look forward to having them as regular feeder and bird bath visitors this winter. They sometimes are known to roost in bluebird boxes at night if the weather is particularly cold or wintry but often, they will use natural cavities in trees as shelter during the bad weather. Customary winter food sources include seeds, berries and insects when available. Having dry mealworms in a special bluebird feeder and investing in a heated birdbath are ways to increase the likelihood of seeing bluebirds at your home this winter. Hint, hint!

In the month of September, we normally held a potluck meeting for the bluebird trail monitors but due to the concerns about Covid-19 this year we unfortunately were not able to get together as a large group. The 42 volunteer trail monitors have been faithfully turning in their notes from their weekly nestbox checks and their summary form however. This information is currently being entered into the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website, Nestwatch, and is an important collection of data for scientists who do research on many aspects of breeding success or failures. There are literally hundreds and hundreds of nesting attempts which are being individually entered into the computer from our 450 plus trail nestboxes. It is a labor-intensive job and I am so thankful to have help from Charlie Weil, Gina Swindell, Valerie Deptula, Stephanie Bevan, and Sandy Kantelas in this important data entering task! Thank you so very much! You guys are awesome!!

It is wonderful to receive reports from many of you who have private home nestboxes too. I am very happy to hear about your nestings and will include your information on a spreadsheet listing if you send it to me at pennybrandau@gmail.com. Tell me what species nested (bluebird, tree swallow, chickadee, house wren, etc) and if you can, please tell me how many eggs were laid, how many of those eggs hatched, and how many of those hatchlings

fledged. I will list it on our report and also submit the information to the Ohio Bluebird Society for their year-end fledgling count. I look forward to hearing from anyone in our area who had birds nesting in their nestboxes. Thank you!



Late summer photos above include a family of tree swallows with recent fledglings at Hale Road. Second photo shows monitors Jan Demarinis and Eugenia Bobo walking the nicely mowed trail at Hale Road (a big "THANK YOU" to the Metro Park employees at several parks who go the extra mile by mowing areas like these so our monitors can safely access nestboxes! It is incredibly helpful!)

The third photo shows a female bluebird on a branch and the last photo shows Fritz Brandau doing some weed eating around boxes at the new Burrell House trail this summer.



The picture on the left above shows dad bluebird and one of his fledglings on a power line. The second photo shows dad supervising two of his fledglings as they are learning to use our backyard mealworm bluebird feeder this summer.

Fall is a time to evaluate the success or failures of the nestings in our nestboxes and to take steps to try to improve the likelihood of nesting successes next year. Boxes should be inspected to make sure they are in good shape, not leaky or cracked. Old nests should have been discarded when the young fledged and the inside of boxes should be scraped clean of dry feces or nesting debris. Roofs should be water tight; entrance holes should be no larger than 1 ½ inches diameter and any tall weeds or brush that has grown up around the nestbox poles should be trimmed away. If the site has been attractive to house sparrows or house wrens then relocation of the box to a more open area should be considered.



Examples of fall nestbox maintenance activities are shown above. In the first photo Larry Wilson, monitor of Days Dam trail, evaluated his nesting data and realized that the habitat at his trail has changed so much in recent years that it is no longer conducive to successful nesting by bluebirds and tree swallows. The percentage and volume of house wren nestings on that trail corresponded to an increasingly brushy, overgrown habitat (preferred by house wrens) so a decision was made to remove the boxes at Days Dam and either use them in new sites or as replacement boxes elsewhere.

In the second photo a metal canning jar lid was screwed over the entrance hole of a nest box as a way to deter house sparrows from using this box to roost in over the winter and then establishing and dominating that site in the spring. This cap will be removed around April 1 when bluebirds and tree swallows are commonly starting to claim nests. Some people will remove boxes for the winter if they notice house sparrow activity at the boxes. Either method is helpful in reducing early spring nesting by house sparrows. The third and fourth photos show a badly cracked and worn nestbox is replaced with a new box at LCCC. The average "life" of one of our Black River nestboxes is around 10 years and then it usually gets "retired". These photos also show the presence of a stovepipe Kingston style predator guard on the pole. These guards

are highly effective in deterring predation of a nesting mother or her eggs/chicks by raccoons, snakes, chipmunks or other ground predators and are highly recommended on any nestbox. Plans for their construction can be found here:

<https://homepage2.texasbluebirdsociety.org/documents/kingstonpredatorbaffle.pdf>



Bluebirds check out the now empty purple martin house at Mill Hollow Bacon House in the photo on the left. In the photo on the right Monitor Mike Smith not only manages 50 nestboxes at Carlisle Equestrian Center, he also maintains and monitors 35 of his own nestboxes on his two properties in Lorain County. He is a very knowledgeable and very busy man! (And works full-time as well)



Being out in nature is healing in many ways. Body, soul and spirit benefit from time spent observing creation. Two locations that my husband and I visited in August and highly recommend are pictured above: A new prairie in Oberlin called the Oberlin Preserve is a peaceful interesting place to hike. Nimislia Reservoir in Summit Metro Parks was an awesome place to observe a purple martins roost at sunset in August. You don't have to go far to find something awe inspiring around you. Look for the beauty in life- it is still there!

Wishing you bluebirds, peace and good health in the months ahead!

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