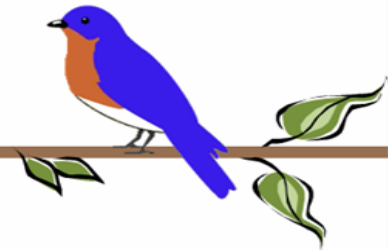


TEXAS Blues



Texas Bluebird Society Newsletter · Volume 9. Issue 1

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Texas Bluebird Society Mission Statement

To spread "Bluebirds (and other native cavity-nesting birds) Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time" - through education; and, the installation of "NestWatch'd" nestboxes in appropriate habitat; and, sustaining and increasing their natural food supply (insects and berries of native plants) - while enjoying the process and the bluebirds.

Revised January 2010

Status of Bluebirds in Texas: Are They In Decline?

by Dr. Keith A. Arnold

Dr. Arnold, noted ornithologist, was the Keynote Speaker at the Statewide Bluebird Season Kickoff Meeting held on January 31st in Bryan, Texas. Dr. Arnold is Professor Emeritus at Texas A&M University whose current research includes Bird-human interactions, especially crop depredation and urban bird roosts, endangered species and the ecology, systematics and distributions of Texas' birds. He is an elected member of the American Ornithologists' Union.

All three species of bluebirds occur in Texas, but only the Eastern Bluebird has an extensive breeding distribution; the Western Bluebird is confined to higher elevations in Trans-Pecos Mountains. As secondary hole-nesters, bluebirds originally relied upon the work of woodpeckers, since these birds cannot excavate cavities in wood.

A February 19, 2009 news release from the National Audubon Society indicated a 19 per cent decline in Texas populations of the Eastern Bluebird; very likely, the data for this assessment came from Breeding Bird Surveys. Many of these surveys have been changed dramatically through urbanization, thus eliminating habitat for woodpeckers and for bluebirds. In addition, a change in an agricultural practice, the use of metal fence posts, rather than wood, also affected woodpeckers. Finally, in post-WWII years, widespread pesticide use affected the insect prey of bluebirds and also interfered with reproduction. The banning of DDT and related compounds has greatly reduced effects on bluebirds.

Historically, we can look at the statements found in Oberholser's *The Bird Life of Texas*. The species account states that Texas populations had declined more moderately than in other parts of the species' range. Examination of regional works on Texas birds also suggests that habitat loss is a more important factor in lower bluebird populations.

So how do we assess the current status? The range map in Oberholser's work gives us county-by-county knowledge of breeding status. Unfortunately, the map does not distinguish the years of these nestings and includes many where the bird no longer nests or nested very rarely. A similar situation occurs in all of the regional works. The most recent assessment of nesting birds is the Texas Breeding Bird Atlas project, which took place from 1987 through 1992. While that gives up a more up-to-date picture, the field work is based on 7.5-degree USGS maps; hence, we have a very rough sketch of the distribution and generally no record of dates, numbers of breeding pairs, etc.

Based strictly on anecdotal information, my own personal experiences, and the fact that Eastern Bluebirds readily adapt to nestboxes, I am confident that populations are stable, if not expanding.



We are still here!

Photo by Wendell Long

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Visit our website
www.txblues.org

From the President's Desk...

Wow! Season Kickoff exceeded all expectations!! We set 100 chairs, and brought in more. Auction results—\$2,065!

"Thanks!" to the donors:

Aquarena Center, San Marcos
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Brazos Valley MNH
Brian & Judy Hetherington
Bryan Golf Course
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Dr. Keith Arnold
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Round Rock Express Baseball
Shirley Wilkerson
Stephen Pearce
Suzy-Q Stonewear Jewelry
T G Canoes, San Marcos
The Nature's Way
The Spa at Canyon Oaks,
Tractor Supply, College Station

"Thanks!" to the local team who "put on" the Kickoff under the direction of Local Event Coordinators, **Jim & Kitty Anding** and their assistant, **JoAnne Bates: Amanda Chau, Marianne Dent, Madge Luquette, Charlene Lusk, Daisy Porfirio, Theo Richardson, David Scott, Rachel Smith, Janet Stallone, & Jean Webster**

I apologize for the errors in the last issue, which went to press without final edits. Excuse: 'We wanted the "Kickoff" registration form to reach you on time.

For correction and clarification:

* **Meg Scamman** not Scramman

* **Keith & Sandy Kridler** received a Lifetime Membership in Appreciation for their **service as Technical Advisors**

* **Visit our website** to purchase nestboxes.

* **Poke**, a native plant also known as Pokeweed. Yaupon, beautyberry and pokeweed are often found in part shade in or on the edge of a woodland setting. They are not dependent on full sun for growth or berry production; however berry production will be reduced in dense shade.

* Personally, I will not toss feathers to Tree Swallows if/ when they nest in a Texas Blue-

bird Society nestbox – unless I receive assurances from experts that this interaction should not interfere with the new residents

* If your Texas nestbox houses a woven grass nest lined with white feathers, please contact us. We want photographs of the first Tree Swallow nests in our Texas Bluebird nestboxes

* A True Blue Friend plaque went to **Manuel Ruiz** in memory of James Garriott.

* **Ricky Walker** not Wilson

I hope you enjoy our new layout. We want to share your pictures (fotos@txblues.org), your bluebird experiences/stories (editor@txblues.org), or answer questions (tbs@txblues.org).

Reports are in, nesting is underway all across Texas! Be sure and check our *Spring Chore List* on the back page. We want to provide the best habitat we can for our feathered friends. Enjoy!



Pauline Tom, President

Donations

TBS extends their appreciation to the following members for their financial support:

Larry Ashley, Garry Harden, Robert & Seagrid Howe, Meg Scamman, Jane & Mark Tillman, Rhonda Wahne, and Louise Weizel .

Welcome New Members

David Barry Family ■ Kathy & Chris Brandt BB, Spring ■ VC, San Angelo ■ Rick Chafey ■ AC, Milano ■ Peter Cowger ■ Suzanne Crossley ■ Jamie Daily ■ SD, Magnolia ■ MD, Hearne ■ Suresh A. Desai ■ Carol Dowd ■ Shannon Edwards ■ Charles Epler ■ Paul & ■ Kerry Phillip ■ BF, Henderson ■ Diane Flynn ■ RF, Santa Fe ■ Beverly Frassinelli ■ Marilyn Frassinelli ■ Karen Gilley ■ Kathy Glaze ■ Anna M Goodman ■ BG, Uvalde ■ GG, Center ■ Mildred Greeley ■ Robert Greeley Family ■ DG, Utopia ■ KH, Lockhart ■ Laura Hanson ■ Garry Harden ■ GH, Magnolia ■ Lynn Hill ■ Chris Hinds ■ Scott Hinds ■ Joe & Jenny Hoelle ■ Robert & Seagrid Howe ■ MH, San Angelo ■ DJ, Langville ■ Don Johnson ■ LJ, Utopia ■ Kerrie Kerns ■ Keith & Pam Kingdon ■ EK, Austin ■ Judy Leunes ■ DL, Gause ■ DL, San Antonio ■ LL, San Antonio ■ CL, College Station ■ JL, Hearne ■ Patrick & Anita Lyons ■ TM, Bryan ■ Pam Moes ■ Peggy Moore ■ Irene Morales ■ Robert Morgan ■ George Munro ■ Harold & Jeannie Necessary ■ DT, Inez ■ JN, Victoria ■ Dorothy Norris ■ Tina & Bob Pereboom ■ Christine Powell ■ FR, College Station ■ Randy Reddemann ■ JR, Utopia ■ KS, Houston ■ Mickey & Melinda Sanders ■ Selena Schindler ■ Dottie Schoeneberg ■ Susan Solari ■ LS, San Angelo ■ LS, Amarillo ■ Drew Sykes ■ CT, Cameron ■ Larry & Judy Trick ■ RW, Elmendorf ■ Wanda Faye Weeks ■ Louise Weizel ■ Mike Whelan ■ Sandra Williams ■ Randy Williams ■ Nancy Wyatt

If you did not check "Publish Name" on the membership application, initials and city are used.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, March 27th

Lawn & Garden Show
9:00am—5:00pm
Waxahachie Civic Center
2000 Civic Center Lane
Waxahachie, TX 75165
Coordinator: Lysle Mockler

Saturday April 10th

Earth Day
10:00am—5:00pm
Woodlands High School
6101 Research Forest Drive
The Woodlands, TX
Coordinator: Betsy & Bill Jones

Thursday April 22nd

NatureQuest
1:30pm—5:00pm
Hill Country Nature Center
Near Garner State Park
Presenter: LeAnn Sharp
(www.friolodging.com)

Saturday, April 24th

Wills Point Bluebird Festival
8:00am—10:00pm
Downtown Area
Wills Point, TX 75169

Saturday June 12th

21st Annual Blueberry Festival
8:00am—5:00pm
Downtown Area
Nacogdoches, TX

Saturday June 12th

Milam County Nature Festival
Wilson Ledbetter Park
FM 1600
Cameron, TX 76520

Save This Date!

Saturday, August 14th

2010 Summer
Bluebird Symposium
New Henderson Civic Center
At Lake Forest Park
Henderson, TX 75652

Visit www.txblues.org
for the latest event updates

Meet Judy — Our Newest Board Member

My name is Judy Hetherington and my bluebird experience is very different from most Texas Bluebird Society members. My husband Brian and I had never seen a live bluebird, but we were interested in attracting them to our backyard. We attended a seminar at Hornsby Bend in 2001 and joined TBS. The ink on our membership form wasn't even dry when Pauline realized we had volunteered to make nestboxes. Pauline leaped at the chance and we were on our way to making thousands of nestboxes. The first batch we delivered was 50; now we make nestboxes 500 at a time. We made bluebird nestboxes for over 3 years before we saw our first bluebird. Anne Henderson invited us to visit her at her ranch near Camp Wood in the Texas Hill Country and we saw our first nesting bluebirds.

We installed nestboxes at our house in Taylor, but the nearest reported bluebirds were 10 miles away. We did have nesting wrens and chickadees though. A couple of years ago we moved to Bronte in West Central Texas and there are bluebirds "close" to us. In West Central Texas, "close" means within 50 miles. In the winter, we are visited by both Eastern and Western Bluebirds but have not succeeded in having any nesting Eastern Bluebirds yet.

We have been interested in birds for many years, starting primarily when I lived in Australia. The Australian birds are among the most colorful in the world and are easily attracted to your yard. However, we think the bluebirds rival the Australian birds for color and beauty.

I am a Texas Master Naturalist and use my love for bluebirds to earn the majority of my volunteer hours. I organized a "Bring Wildlife to You – Landscaping with Wildlife in Mind" seminar last year where over half of the seminar was spent on bluebirds and nestbox care. I have also been a member of the Native Plant Society of Texas since 2001 and recently gave a talk to the Concho Valley NPSOT group on using native plants to attract bluebirds. Both events earned new members for TBS and homes for the cavity nesters.

I look forward to serving on the board and promoting the use of native plants, trees and grasses for bluebird nesting, shelter and, most importantly, food.



Big Country Master Naturalist help at nestbox assembly day. Photo by Brian Hetherington.



"Bring Wildlife to You – Landscaping with Wildlife in Mind" seminar, organized and presented by Judy. Photo by Brian Hetherington.

M-M-M Good! It's Home Grown Mealworms For Dinner Tonight

by Susan Tartaglino

Well, we have had the gas-price crisis, the subprime mortgage crisis, the health care crisis - but did you ever hear about the mealworm crisis? It is true this crisis did not make the front-page news in the New York Times. But for those of us who buy mealworms for our bluebirds, the mealworm crisis was a disaster. It started in the spring of 2008, when all the major vendors of mealworms were having trouble supplying their customers. The problem, as I was told later by one vendor, was that the wheat bran they use for food and bedding all came from the same supplier, and that stock had become contaminated with pesticides, so the insects all died (remember, the mealworm is a larval beetle, not a worm).



Photo by Susan Tartaglino.

Lots of people use mealworms beside bluebird lovers. People with small mammals such as pet mice or sugar gliders feed mealworms, as do people with reptiles and amphibians. Zoos use lots of mealworms. Those that were available during the crisis went to the zoos first. I tried my local pet shop, but they used the same vendors, so they were out too. They did have freeze-dried mealworms, very expensive if you're feeding as many worms as I do. Canned mealworms come in a gross jelly that you have to wash off. The bluebirds ate the reconstituted freeze-dried worms after a fair amount of puzzlement, but wouldn't touch the canned ones.

This situation went on for months, until finally I resolved to try raising my own mealworms. There was another reason, too. In Texas, in mid-summer, temperatures can fry mealworms during delivery. Have you ever received a big box full of smelly, stinky, dead mealworms? Hopefully not, and trust me, you don't want to! I'd tried raising mealworms once before, without much success. The main thing I did wrong was trying to use one large container for all three stages. The second time around, which is ongoing, I know better.

Where to grow your mealworms? I started with my laundry room. You can't raise mealworms in your garage, unless it's temperature controlled. The mealworms need to be kept at 60 to 90 degrees, with about 80 being ideal; they also like some humidity. If you've been buying mealworms, you know they can be refrigerated (not frozen!) and will survive, but they won't grow much if at all. Now you want them to grow.

It's best to cover your containers, but they must also be ventilated. I use two four-drawer plastic containers made for letter-size paper that I got from Wal-Mart, along with two large plastic containers for bigger worms. You'll need to keep separate the beetles, the pupae, and the worms. Why? Two reasons: The beetles will eat the pupae and smaller worms; and you're going to have to clean out the insect poo occasionally. If you're only using one container, you'll be throwing out the eggs (which are almost invisible) along with the poo. The solution to this dilemma is to wait for the eggs to hatch and the worms to get large enough to separate them from the poo.



Deep fried with a little salt anyone? It is a fun snack in Thailand.. Photo by Susan Tartaglino.

Start with the four-drawer container or something similar. Fill four drawers about one-third full with fresh wheat bran. Now place 40-50 starter worms in the bran (see last issue about where to buy them). Use the large size as they will pupate sooner than medium. Avoid giants and supers as they won't pupate at all. Every day or two remove any pupae (they look like fat white commas) and put them into a separate drawer by themselves. They won't eat and hardly even move at this stage, but they're alive. As soon as they turn into beetles, remove the bee-

bles to one of the other two drawers. I use a little plastic spoon. This is a quick job but must be done almost daily.

Every four to six weeks, move your beetles (use a slotted spoon) to a new drawer of fresh bran. Watch for new tiny worms to hatch out in the original beetle drawers. When the new worms are about half grown, sift out the poo and move them to your big container. I use two of these, one for junior worms, one for senior worms. The senior worms are the ones I feed to the bluebirds, except in breeding season, when I offer medium worms as well for the newer chicks. If the senior worms start to pupate, move pupae to the pupa drawer, or, if you already have enough beetles, feed the pupae to the bluebirds.

The poo is a very fine dust with a slight odor. Some will get into the air and settle around the containers, but it's easy to clean up. To remove it, pour worms, beetles, bedding and all a little at a time into a hand-held mesh strainer and sift out the poo into a plastic washtub. Pour the cleaned bran/worms/beetles into another washtub or their home container. When done, dump the poo into your garden - it's great fertilizer. There will also be some cast-off worm skins from the molting worms. This turns to dust too and can be sifted out along with the poo.

If you're organized about it, you can keep a continuous supply of worms of the right size going all the time. Since I'm not especially organized, I usually end up with either a huge number of worms all at the same time, or run out of larger worms entirely. No problem: I just buy some more from my vendor to keep me going till my worms grow large enough to feed to the bluebirds. Of course, you can feed smaller worms to the bluebirds, but these are your growing stock.

Remember to add carrots sliced in quarters lengthwise to all drawers except the pupa, once or twice a week. You can try other vegetables to see what they like. I usually add rolled oats (Quaker Old-Fashioned) on top of the bran for the beetles only. They like to grab the edges of the oatmeal to help right themselves when they overturn. They also eat the oats.

Watch out for pests. Pantry moths like the bran. You can buy or make a trap with cardboard and two-sided sticky tape; fold it up on top of the trap. A sticky flycatcher tube hanging nearby will also catch the moths. This tends to be a summer-only problem. If you have mice around, set some traps or get a cat. Tight-fitting containers lids will also work, but need to be ventilated.

I once had a problem with ants, which found my senior mealworm container and started feasting. I threw the whole thing in the refrigerator for a few days, which killed the ants but left the worms alive, at least the ones that hadn't been eaten. To keep ants out permanently, I dust the countertops with 5% Sevin dust (available at any garden supply department) and put the worm containers on top. But remember that the Sevin will also kill your insects, so be careful.

What if you decide to get out of the mealworm business? Easy! Just dump out your containers in the backyard. Something will come along and eat the eggs, worms, beetles, bran and anything else - I guarantee it.

Note: Mealworms are low in phosphorus and high in fat and protein. Use them as a treat, not a food staple for your bluebirds.



Mealworm beetles in three starter drawers, with rolled oats and carrots on top of the wheat bran. Photo by Susan Tartaglino.

Musings From The Master...

How Many Nestboxes?



Keith Kridler, everyone's resident expert, our favorite speaker, and cofounder of TBS, participates in several List-Serve groups focusing on bluebirds and their behavior. Keith has given us permission to publish his contributions to these groups. Following is an edited excerpt from Bird-L.

Not In Texas!

Prescott Bluebird Recovery Program in Oregon recently published an article stating that based on their research they were recommending "fewer nestboxes is better."

This maybe true for Oregon where the bluebirds have stiff competition from Tree Swallows and Violet-Green Swallows for nesting habitat, Texas does NOT have this issue! If you hear a rumor about reducing the number of nestboxes in your area, ignore.

Texas Bluebird Society promotes nestboxes for bluebirds *and* other native cavity-nesting birds.

February 2009

I encourage people to put up 4-6 nestboxes in their yard even though it might be less than one acre. In early spring the male Eastern Bluebirds appear to be more territorial when they are trying to attract a mate. I watched a hormone pumped male yesterday trying to defend the twenty or so nestboxes I have in our 2 ½ acre front yard/ side yard and three nestboxes on my neighbors two acres. He was attacking the male bluebirds from three different pairs that were calling and checking out these nestboxes. He was busy zig zagging across 5 or 6 acres! He would have been better off concentrating on stealing a female from just ONE of these pairs!

We see a LOT more fighting over nestboxes BEFORE egg laying begins. Normally for me we see a LOT closer nesting of the bluebirds once the insect numbers climb in April for the second nestings. We often only have 1/3 of the bluebirds using our boxes in late Feb. early March. Then about 2/3 of our total number will be using boxes in early April. By the first week in May we will peak on numbers of nestboxes along the trail with bluebirds in them.

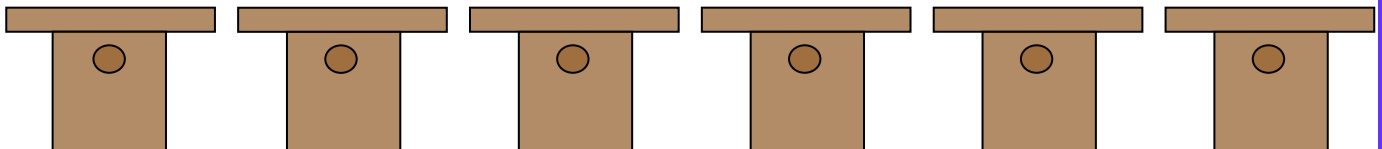
We see increases of new nests in our empty nestboxes after every big storm when nests get drowned out in natural cavities or poorly made nestboxes. I feel that as food supplies increase and the pairs of bluebirds are comfortable guarding their nestboxes for their second and third nesting attempts they do not worry as much about other pairs coming in and using empty nestboxes nearby.

When bluebirds nest in boxes right across a street from one another they have normally already fought to a stand still and have an agreement on who will feed where. Each will often feed in the opposite direction from the nearest pair. They will still defend their side of the road but again it depends somewhat on food, hormones and time of the year.

It is especially important to have extra boxes out early in spring IF you are trying to attract the other 5-8 species of birds that will use your "bluebird" nestboxes depending on what part of the state you live in or should I say what kind of habitat you live in and how you place your nestboxes. Chickadee and titmouse species normally only raise one family early in the season so they need nestboxes at the same time the bluebirds do. The wren species nest multiple times so there should be empty boxes for them all during the season.

House Sparrows may be a problem in your area. I try to have some empty nestboxes up at all times, hoping that the sparrows will choose an empty box where I can live trap them rather than seeing the House Sparrows kill or destroy a nestbox containing young or eggs of our native birds.

There are more than 80 species of birds that use cavities. Then you have all of the species of squirrels, chipmunks, mice, other rodents, even bats. Don't forget that bats will sometimes use cavities or gaps behind loose bark or behind the nestboxes. Several species of tree frogs use the nestboxes and several species of snakes use nestboxes or cavities. Bumble bees, again several species in the USA and Canada along with the various strains of the European Honey Bees will use cavities. Wasps, Hornets, mud dabbers, ants, earwigs, spiders the list goes on and on. The bigger the entrance holes you have the bigger the species of critters you will attract. Old rotten nestboxes and chewed out, worn out bird house gourds are placed into over grown fence rows or placed in brush piles where they can still be used as shelter for creatures large and small. If nothing else they will feed the termites, bacteria and or fungi releasing their last gasp of Carbon Dioxide back into the air.





Male Western Bluebird.
Photo by Jim Stevenson.

Photo Librarian Needed!

We need a volunteer to serve as Photo Librarian for the TBS Photo Gallery hosted on Flickr. Ability to handle large files as email attachments, familiarity with posting photos and good organizational skills needed to maintain accurate records and process release forms. Librarian will add/edit captions and photo data as needed.

We need your help so we can all share and enjoy the beautiful pictures of our members.

Please contact Pauline at 512.268.5678 or email to pauline@texasbluebirdsociety.org



Eastern Bluebird nest in Jones State Forest, Montgomery County. Photo by Linda Crum.

Statewide Bluebird Season Kickoff Held Jan 30th at Brazos Center Drew 100+ Attendance



A full day of speakers, 7 member panel, demonstrations, and special nestbox offers were on the agenda at the Statewide Bluebird Season Kickoff Meeting. Photo by Caryn Brewer.

Special Thanks to our hosts

Jim & Kitty Anding & Committee

whose diligence, dedication, and hard work made this event a huge success!



Many volunteers were needed.

Always a popular activity, the Silent Auction has proven to be great fun, and a great fundraiser! Photo above and below by Caryn Brewer.



Linda Crum demonstrates her method for disposing of house sparrows—a non-native species known for their vicious attacks on many cavity-nesting birds/eggs. It is legal to eliminate them. Photo by John Park.



NestWatch
Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Participate with thousands of other bird enthusiasts across the country to monitor and record critical nesting information into the Cornell Lab of Ornithology database. Not only are you providing valuable research data,

IT IS ALSO FUN TO DO!

- Logon and register your nestbox(es). www.RegisterYourNestbox.org.
- Observe and record nesting data
- Enter nesting activities online www.NestWatch.org.
- Record data for each brood.
- Finished? Summarize data to upload to Cornell Lab's database.



Mounting a nestbox at eye level takes on new meaning when Susan Lousberg is checking nestboxes by horseback! Photo by Keith Kridler.



Double the fun! Dr. Tom Wheeler combines his love of riding the road with his nestbox monitoring duties. Photo by Marcus Wheeler



"Texas Blues"

This newsletter of the Texas Bluebird Society is published four times a year.



Photo by LeAnn Sharp



Photo by David Shiels



Photo by Lysle Mockler

Bluebirds Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time

Insects have such a high water content that bluebirds can eat and drink at the same time.

However, clean water for drinking and bathing is always appreciated.

Texas Bluebird Society
PO Box 40868
Austin TX 78704



Non-Profit
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit #444
Buda, TX 78610

Send street or email address changes to Caryn Brewer at records@txblues.org, or to our P.O. Box.

Return Service Requested

Spring Chores

- ✓ Clean out old nesting materials after each brood fledges.
- ✓ Install a Kingston Predator Baffle on the pole to serve as a predator deterrent .
- ✓ Soap the inside roof and edges to discourage wasps from building a nest .
- ✓ Apply a one-half inch band of Tanglefoot to the pole to stop fire ants.
- ✓ Wrap nursery cloth mesh around the pole ("tutu'd" style) to trap snakes before they reach the nestbox. Be sure to check regularly and remove any snakes that get caught. The goal is not to kill the snake but to capture it and move it away from the area.
- ✓ Provide a source of clean water.
- ✓ Raise mealworms (pages 4&5), or purchase mealworms, if you plan to offer mealworms as a supplemental food. (Do not overfeed).
- ✓ Mow grass or control burn field to make insects readily available.
- ✓ Trim away any plant materials encroaching on the nestbox space.
- ✓ Install HeatShields on your nestbox or place in location with afternoon shade.
- ✓ Plant shrubs such as American holly, American beautyberry, parsley hawthorn, flame-leaf sumac, pokeweed, elderberry and two yaupon species: *Ilex vomitoria* and *Ilex decidua*.
- ✓ Register your nestbox at www.RegisterYourNestbox.org.
- ✓ "NestWatch" the nestbox about once a week (look in and write down what you see).
- ✓ Record your nestbox observations with NestWatch at www.NestWatch.org.
- ✓ Summarize nesting data in NestWatch to upload information to Cornell Labs database.