

# TEXAS Blues



Texas Bluebird Society Newsletter • July 2017 • Volume 16. Issue 3

## The Red-Cockaded Woodpecker In East Texas



The endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) is a small black-and-white woodpecker, about the size of a cardinal. Only the male has any red marking, and this is just a short streak on both sides of the head above the cheek. The red streak of feathers is difficult to see in the field. This woodpecker has been federally listed as endangered since 1970, and is also listed as endangered by the State of Texas.

### Habitat

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker lives in open, mature pine forests across the southeastern United States. It is different from other woodpeckers in that it makes its cavities for roosting and nesting in live pine trees. Most other woodpeckers construct their cavities in dead trees. The older pines preferred by the RCW are often infected with a fungus called red heart. This fungus softens the wood in the center of the tree, making it easier for the RCW to excavate its cavity.

RCW cavity trees are characterized by a round cavity entrance about 2 inches in diameter and numerous “resin wells” that ooze sap. If a cavity tree is currently being used by an RCW, these resin wells will show red bark from recent pecking and the resin (sap) will look fresh and sticky. Resin flowing down

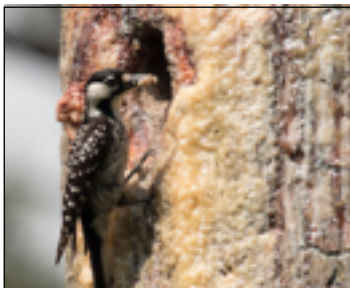
the face of an RCW cavity tree from the wells and entrance hole gives the appearance of a melting candle. This resin barrier helps to protect the nest from the RCW’s major predator, the rat snake. Abandoned RCW trees would have dry, gray resin. The cavity entrance may be enlarged by other woodpecker species.

Other cavity dwellers often compete for the RCW-built cavities. Other woodpeckers such as the Red-bellied and Pileated will enlarge the cavity entrances and cavities of RCWs and use them for themselves. Other birds that have been found to use RCW cavities include the Eastern Bluebird, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Tufted Titmouse, and Great Crested Flycatchers. Wood Ducks will use enlarged, abandoned RCW cavities as well. Flying squirrels often take over RCW cavities, and in the nesting season, can crush and eat the eggs and young. Besides birds and squirrels, insects, snakes, lizards, and frogs can be found using these cavities.

RCWs require adequate foraging (food gathering) habitat. Their diet consists mostly of insects, spiders, centipedes, etc. that are found on, under, and in the bark of trees. They are also known to eat small berries and seeds. Good foraging habitat consists of large stands with pine trees 10 inches in diameter and larger. RCWs will occasionally forage on hardwoods as well. A good herbaceous groundcover of grasses and forbs is important for insect production. The stand needs to have an open, park-like character.

### Family Life

Red-cockaded Woodpeckers do not migrate. They live in family groups, ideally consisting of a mated pair and one or more helpers. Helper birds are usually male offspring of previous breeding seasons. There is only one breeding pair per group. All members of the group help build cavities, defend the group’s territory, incubate eggs, and feed the young.



Nesting season is March through July with egg laying generally occurring in April and May. The female lays her eggs in the breeding male’s roost tree. The eggs hatch in 10 to 12 days. After hatching, the nestlings remain in the cavity for about 26 days. When the young birds leave the nest, they stay with the group for a few months. Later, the young juveniles may disperse to other areas, especially the females. A male may remain with the group to become a helper.

*(Continued on page 2)*



(Continued from page 1) Harvesting of timber is compatible with RCW management. As long as basic habitat requirements are met and maintained, timber can be harvested in areas with Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (except during nesting season).

### **Distribution**

Historically, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers occupied the open pine forests of the southeast from New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia to Florida, west to Texas, and north to portions of Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee and Kentucky. Currently, they only occur in 11 states: Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Most of the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in Texas occur on National Forest lands. They are also on State lands, investment company lands, and non-industrial private lands. All four of the National Forests in Texas have Red-cockaded Woodpeckers that can be viewed by the public. The W. G. Jones State Forest south of Conroe and the I. D. Fairchild State Forest between Rusk and Palestine also have RCWs.



### **RCW Management**

Forest biologists often band Red-cockaded Woodpeckers on the forests they manage. Banding RCWs serves a couple of purposes. First, it helps in identifying the birds throughout their lifetime. They are banded with an aluminum band that has a unique number. Plus, they are banded with colored bands that are applied in a unique pattern for each bird so they can be identified using binoculars or spotting scopes in the field without having to capture the bird just to know where and when it was hatched and/or banded.

Translocations (where birds are moved from one unrelated population to another) are an important tool in boosting population numbers and enhancing the gene pool. The Jones State Forest has received birds from another population in 2014, and could possibly participate in that action again in the future. With all the urbanization around this forest, that is a much-needed “ingredient” in keeping this population going.

Another important tool is the installation of artificial cavities in areas with RCW or to move RCWs into (by man or naturally). These artificial cavities resemble a blue bird box, but they are installed directly into the tree at a height around 25 to 35 feet. A rectangle is cut out of the live pine tree to fit the box into. It is then made to look as “natural” as possible to attract RCWs to it. Many of these have been installed on the Jones State Forest to give “ready-made” homes for these birds.

Actual habitat management is crucial to this birds. They need the open, park-like mature pine stands in which to live and raise their young. Different forestry practices contribute to the needed habitat of these birds. Thinning of over-crowded and/or immature pine stands opens up the stand of trees and allows the younger, smaller trees to grow to the size needed by the RCW. Mowing or mulching within RCW foraging areas helps to keep the stands open. The idea is to control the height of the midstory - the layer of vegetation in a forest that consists of smaller trees and larger brush. These mulched area tend to grow back fairly quickly, so follow-up treatments of prescribed fire and/or herbicide are necessary to keep these stands in good shape for the woodpecker. In stands that do not have a large midstory problem, prescribed fire or herbicide still need to be done every few years to keep the stand that way.

There are many benefits to opening up the pine forest in this way. For one, this helps protect the forest and neighboring properties from intense wildfires that could damage or even kill the mature trees and could spread farther where there is a large amount of “fuel” in the form of dense mid-story vegetation.

Other local wildlife also benefit from these actions. When the mid-story is reduced, more sunlight gets to the forest floor. This helps more flowering and fruiting plants mature and produce wildlife-friendly berries, flowers, and succulent new green vegetation. Our own resident endangered species - RCW - needs open, mature pine forests as well. These open conditions make it easier for these birds to fly through the forest, and helps prevent predators, such as rat snakes, from getting into the RCW's roosting and nesting trees. The RCW also benefit from the fruiting plants and the insects which are produced in a healthy herbaceous forest floor.

Overall, these management practices promote a healthy forest ecosystem, where the trees, small plants, wildlife, and even the forest “neighbors” benefit from the results!

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### **Article by Donna Works**

Donna has worked with the Texas A&M Forest Service since 1990. She currently works on a water quality project and with an endangered species, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Besides her regular job duties, Donna has also given many presentations to adults and children on topics such as water quality, water testing, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, threatened and endangered species, insects, and general forestry. She is a PLT Facilitator and PLT and Project Wild certified. In 2004, TFS awarded her with the D. A. “Andy” Anderson Award for Information and Education. Donna was honored to receive the 2012 Texas Forestry Association Forestry Educator of the Year award. She is the editor of TFS's *Forest Stewardship Briefings* newsletter and *The Texas Water Source* newsletter. Photos provided by the Texas Forest Service.

## Native Plants Attract Bluebirds: *Lantana urticoides*, Texas Lantana

Lantana is a member of the verbena family (Verbenaceae). Many cultivars of *Lantana camara*, a non-native species, are a popular landscape plant. Some have been determined invasive in the states of Georgia and Florida. I want to talk about *Lantana urticoides*, our native Lantana species. It is native to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and south into Mexico.



The original scientific name was *Lantana horrida* referring to the strong smell of the leaves that can affect sensitive noses. Thankfully, botanist August von Hayek re-named it *Lantana urticoides*. Urticoides means "like a nettle" which refers to the prickles on mature stems.

If you have trouble with deer eating your plants, use *Lantana urticoides* throughout the landscape. It is practically deer-proof or at the very least highly deer-resistant. Deer have their preferences and Lantana is definitely not preferable. Lantana will grow in poor soil with little water. Give it some supplemental water for about 6 weeks after you plant it to get it established.



Texas Lantana forms a spreading shrub, much branched from the ground. The leaves have a rough texture with toothed margins. Blooming from April to October, the tubular flowers are red, orange and yellow providing nectar for butterflies. The colors age from yellow to orange to red. Even in triple-digit heat, the shrub will be covered with

flowers. It is also a crucial food source for the larva of the Lantana Scrub-Hairsteak butterfly. Fruit is dark blue to black and relished by birds, including bluebirds; however, the fruit is poisonous to most mammals including cattle, sheep and humans.



Propagation is accomplished by division, cuttings or seed. Division is best done in winter when the shrub is dormant. Use a sharp shooter to cut out part of a mature shrub or dig up the whole shrub and cut into smaller pieces. Cuttings can be done in mid-summer or fall. Take greenwood without flowers 3-5 inches long. Plant mature black seed which can take up to 2 months to germinate.



Waiting for warm weather, the shrub may be slow to come back in spring. To keep Lantana in bounds, cut back in late winter or early spring when you see new growth. I cut mine to the ground so that it forms a compact shrub. When Lantana starts outgrowing its space in mid-summer just snip it a little to keep it from getting too big.

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Article by **Linda Crum**

Linda is a Master Gardener and Master Naturalist. In addition to her numerous bluebird presentations at local events and annual symposiums, Linda serves as TBS Treasurer and Membership Chairman. Photo credits: Ladybird Johnson Wildlife Center

## Keith Explains Weird Stuff

Keith,

Our daughter in Lockhart found these eggs in a nestbox that she hasn't checked in 2 years...out on their land near a little cabin. I wondered whether it looks like that upper left egg is hatching now or if it's something on the end of a piece of nesting material in front of the egg. It sort of looks to me like it's hatching. She found it late this afternoon...around 4:30pm or so. What do you think? Surely those aren't 1- or 2-year-old eggs abandoned in a previous year.

Every other nestbox she had at her house in town was inhabited by HOSPs, so we emptied them and took them home. Lockhart (in town) is basically a sanctuary for HOSPs and starlings. You really can't safely have bluebirds there. We are really excited that they are able to nest out from town. Maybe we should put up another nestbox on the other side of the cabin. They probably like the tank/pond near the cabin. (April 2017)

Thanks, Pat Nail



*Dear Pat,*

*These are fresh eggs. The white on the upper left egg is feces from when the egg was laid. The eggs are slightly glossy so I am guessing these eggs have been incubated for 5 to 8 days at least. They will hatch normally at 12 or 13 days after the last egg was laid this time of the year. The eggs will break in a line just about midpoint between the small end and the large end. If this were an old nest from last season there would be some spider webs within the top layer of the nest. The eggs as they get rotten will attract flies and there are normally small black spots on eggs from fly droppings. Some of the eggs will be broken normally that over winter in a nesting box. The white streaks on bluebird eggs normally wear off by about day 12 but not always.*

Pat reported, "not only did this brood fledge, but there has been a second successful brood as well!"

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## Unusual Occurrences When Monitoring Bluebird Nestboxes

By Linda Crum, Master Naturalist

I've been monitoring nestboxes for a number of years and once in a while I'll see something unusual. If I cannot understand what is going on, my go-to source is Keith Kridler. He has always come through with the answer. A couple of years ago a female was incubating eggs on my trail at WG Jones State Forest. A couple of days before they were to hatch, she added an inch of pine needles to the nest and began to lay a second clutch. Incubation proceeded for 13 days and again she added another inch of pine needles to the nest and began to lay a third clutch of eggs. She finally went the full incubation time and one egg hatched. *Keith told me that after the young one fledged, to take the nest and break open the eggs buried in the nest. He correctly predicted that the eggs were not fertilized. How did the female know? Keith says that near time for hatching, the female will begin to communicate to the young in the shell and they will communicate back.* She heard nothing and so began the process all over again – twice!

This year on her third clutch, the female nesting in my backyard missed laying an egg on day 3. On day 4 she resumed laying eggs. She laid 4 eggs in 5 days, missing day 3. I again wrote to Keith. *He said when a female misses a day laying an egg it's usually because she was frightened by a predator and prematurely dropped the egg that was destined for the nest.* That clutch successfully fledged a few days ago and she has already built a nest for her fourth clutch. I was able to determine her skipped day because I monitor the nestbox in my backyard every day in late afternoon during egg laying time. Eggs are laid between dawn and 11:00 a.m. Once incubation begins I monitor about two times per week during the time I feed mealworms in late afternoon. Thanks, Keith Kridler! You're the best!



*\* Keith Kridler is co-founder of TBS and our leading expert on bluebird behavior. Keith is co-author of "Bluebird Monitoring Guide" and a favorite speaker at TBS events.*

*Keith will be presenting at the 2018 Bluebird Season Kickoff at the Brazos Expo Center in Bryan, Texas on February 24<sup>th</sup>. Besides great presentations, networking, and demos - don't forget the Silent Auction FUNdraiser. Join us for another great TBS event!*

## Fun Times At Local Events For TBS Volunteers!



Botanical Research Institute of Texas hosts 7<sup>th</sup> annual Prairie Day event. Volunteer **Courtney Blood-Malecki** is a passionate birder. She talked Jim into putting in four new nestboxes at Mt. Olivet cemetery.

Two have bluebirds and have completed their first clutch of the year.



Volunteer **Maryann Coleridge** showing a mealworm farm to interested children. Educating our youth and developing future TBS members.

Local events provide many opportunities to share experiences and knowledge to raise awareness and conservation efforts for our bluebirds.



Three day Texas Land Conservation Conference. This is where Texas Bluebird Society met our webmaster, Clyde Camp, several years back. Good networking here, and always new members.

**Ron Tom** adds the final touches to the booth before the busy sessions begin. Many event provide new learning experiences for you also.

*Would you like to host a TBS booth at your favorite local event? Call 512-268-5678 to volunteer!*



**Pauline Tom** shared with **Cliff Shackelford**, TPWD Biologist and good friend of TBS, an interesting bluebird nest from the TBS display. The nest, from The Tom's yard in Mountain City (Hays County) is built with East Texas pine needles (from the wise men portion of the Tom's nativity scene display), fine grasses, and ashe juniper bark from logs Ron salvaged for projects. And, it's lined with hair from Pauline's mom's dog, Buddy, which they offer for birds in a cage intended for blocks of suet.

A favorite event for TBS volunteers is the annual Blueberry Festival held every June. This all day event attracts over 19,000 to downtown Nacogdoches. Volunteers stay busy all day long sharing their love of bluebirds, demonstrating the attributes of our Texas style nestbox, answering questions, and promoting bluebird conservation practices.

(Below) volunteer **Marsha Moon** mans the booth helping new members complete the membership form, giving the free Texas style nestbox, explaining our new member packet content, and sharing the variety of helpful information found on our website. There is always a record number of new members at this fun annual event.



## So Glad I Checked!

Unless all of us Texas Bluebird Society members live in close proximity of each other, there tends to be a void of knowledge among our neighbors and friends on birds in general. I'm sure many of you, like me, are the respective "bird experts" of your families, friends, and neighbors. If not experts, then you're probably the go-to person when something bad happens like a baby fell out of its nest or a bird hit your neighbor's window. This makes you a "subject matter expert." But just remember, even subject matter experts need to be briefed every now and then to keep knowledge fresh or learn of something new that could impact their current understanding of things.

This past month, I've been busy on my phone fielding questions from my neighbors and friends around the country. I've been pretty proud of myself that people know how much I like and study birds enough to call me in the first place. A lot of the questions deal with nestlings and fledglings, as you might expect at this time of year. Should I pick it up? (Depends on if it's naked or feathered.) Can I take down the nest as we don't want it there? (Depends on if it's a protected species on the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.) What happens if another bird builds a nest on top of the first mom's nest with eggs in it? (Well, that kind of sucks but you can't remove it if the second nest maker is a protect species.) And so on and so on. It's been fun actually. It reminds me of all the stress I used to go through when I first started birding and volunteering to monitor trails. So, I can sympathize with their stress levels on being the "chosen household" for these mama birds, even though (for most of them) they didn't ask for it. It makes me happy that so many people do, in fact, want to do the right thing by them. And, hopefully knowledge gets shared more and passed down. They can tell their community members and kids, and birds are in safer hands overall. But, sometimes something will come up that you either don't know or can't remember. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" at any point, and then look up material to reference.

This is something I learned while working as a nurse. The point when you think you know everything, think again. Something will always happen where you question everything you ever learned. Granted, the general consensus is that caring for patient lives is a bit more stressful than caring for bird lives, but not for me. It doesn't matter if you're a person or an animal—that life is very precious to me and I take personal responsibility if something goes afoul. This past week, one of my friends showed me her backyard nest box full of bluebird eggs. Except this nest had one egg that was different—a speckled brown egg that was bigger than the other light blue eggs. I immediately knew it was a cowbird egg, and I told her so (because she's new to bluebird nest monitoring). Of course her next question was "so what should I do now?" Without thinking it through, I told her to

remove that egg as the brood parasite would take more food to the detriment of the other babies. Not a few hours later I was still thinking about the answer I gave her. You can picture me driving down one of the many Houston freeways in rush hour with furrowed brow thinking "wait... was I right? That advice just doesn't sound right." Sure enough, I looked it up on my phone. Sure enough, I was wrong. GASP! That's such a scary word for many people. I like moments like that because it's a jolt to the system to keep me more alert.



Quick review on cowbirds (in case you needed it like I did): they ARE protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. So don't tamper with them. There were some cowbirds in Virginia (where I used to monitor trails), but not too much of a problem. Where my friend lives in Texas, they are everywhere. There were some interesting things I discovered about this species from NestWatch.org. I knew they were brood parasites, but I never got into details beyond that. Apparently they stalk an expectant mama bird to find a suitable nest to deposit their egg. When they do, they tend to damage or discard one or more eggs in the nest to make room for the addition. If you tamper with the egg or remove it, they can even retaliate and do damage to the host nest—YIKES! Unfortunately for the host species nestlings, the cowbird baby tends to hatch first thus dominating the food supply from parents. One interesting thing to note for us Texans is that we can obtain a permit to trap cowbirds to protect endangered species like the Kirkland's Warbler, Golden-cheeked Warbler, and Black-capped Vireo. But, you should always check with your state's wildlife management agency for local regulations. Luckily for my friend, I responded back to her before she had time to go out to the nest to carry out the original plan. Poor mama bluebird! But, such is life!

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By **Kate Moran**

Kate and her family moved from Virginia to Sugarland in 2016. She loves birds and immediately joined TBS. In addition to her many activities to promote bluebird conservation practices, she has become a regular contributor to *Texas Blues*.

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512-268-5678 (Pauline Tom)

**Moved?**  
Send email/address changes  
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## Volunteers Are Appreciated!

Sue Anderson  
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Pauline Tom  
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Bill Vick  
Sharon Vick



Volunteer Sue Anderson signing a new member at the 7<sup>th</sup> annual Prairie Day event.

Volunteers Are Always Needed!  
Call 512-268-5678

*Besides volunteering, Sue has spent the time to train her bluebirds to fly to her mealworm feeder when she whistles!*

## Thanks For Your Financial \$upport!

Richard & Sally Arnett  
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## Welcome New Members!

*\*New members who give us permission to print their names*

- Cathy Adwood
- Erica Anderson
- Kathy Ashley
- Rebecca Barker
- John & Joan Barrett
- Kevin L Bates
- Donna Beck
- Edith Bergquist
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- Michelle Boonzaier
- Ginger Boswell
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- David Bowles
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- Mike & Ruby Burleson
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- John & Tricia Hanisee
- Kerry & Tammy Harris
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- Kay Jenkins
- Monica Jenkins
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- Laura Klare
- Kristine Knodel
- Carolyn Landers
- Rachel Lange
- Richard Lankow
- Karen Lawrence
- Ron Lewis
- Rex & Clarissa Linck
- Patti Lozano
- Cindy Maier
- Carla Malone
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- Sarah Morris
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- Marilyn Nevels
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- Kelly Pennington
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- Vickie Raley
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- Kate Romer
- Stacey Rueda
- Jimmy Saxten
- Sharon Shaw
- Paul Shinsky
- Sonia Sides
- Barbara St Claire
- Pat Still
- Joy Stone
- James & Stacy Tabursky
- Jacob Taylor
- Randy & Ashley Thomas
- Gwen Thomas
- Mark Tietz
- Debbie Turner
- Valerie Turner Victor Pearson
- Diana Vincenti
- Katherine Vintges
- Steve Walker
- Keith Weatherford
- Mark Wheeler
- Steve Wilson
- Trish Wilson
- Mike Wise
- Jackie Young
- Scott Youngblood

+ an additional 38 new members

# 2018 Bluebird Season Kickoff

**Brazos County  
Expo Center  
Bryan, TX**  
on  
**Saturday  
February 24<sup>th</sup>**  
(9:00am - 3:00pm)



February 23<sup>rd</sup>  
**Friday Night Social Dinner**  
includes  
Last Chance Forever  
live raptor show



## Reserve Your Room Now!

Accommodations at The Stella Hotel  
Call 979-773-1001 or online [thestellahotel.com](http://thestellahotel.com)  
Use code TBSK0218 for special rate of \$109

Kickoff registration form and online registration available in  
October *TX Blues*

Visit <http://2018event.txblues.org> for details

## Great Events Only Happen With Great Volunteers - And We Need YOU!

Seeking volunteers to arrive early (some are staying overnight on Thursday, with dinner) in order to work all day Friday setting up, starting at 8:30am. Options: moderately strenuous or not strenuous.

Willing to work on Friday Team? Contact [Lonnie@txblues.org](mailto:Lonnie@txblues.org) or 936 594 1958.

## Bluebirds Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time



### Need Nestboxes?

Go to [www.txblues.org](http://www.txblues.org)  
Click **Nestbox Distributor**  
tab for nearest location.

### Federal law protects all cavity nesting birds!

- Do not disturb birds or nest.
- Monitor and report activity to NestWatch.



The Texas Bluebird Society newsletter, *TX Blues*, is published four times a year: March ■ May ■ July ■ October  
Debbie Bradshaw Park, Editor

Send stories/photos to  
[editor@txblues.org](mailto:editor@txblues.org)