Texas Blues

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Beware of Unintended Consequences

By Mark Klym

The last issue of Texas Blues included a note about Brown-headed Cowbirds and their impact on cavity nesting birds. After reading that article it was apparent a little deeper look into the question of managing these brood parasites might be in order.

The article included a note that "A former TPWD employee gave word to Texas Bluebird Society years ago that Texans could remove cowbird eggs and nestlings from bluebird nestboxes." Having worked with TPWD in an education and outreach role with the Wildlife Diversity Program, I was somewhat surprised by this statement which went against everything I know about the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, so I decided to start there first. I contacted Clifford Shackelford, the Non-game Ornithologist with the Wildlife Diversity Program. Cliff pointed out that the Brown-headed Cowbird is included in a very small group of native bird species that can be controlled *only* when found committing or about to commit depredations on a variety of things.This presents the question of what constitutes "about to commit depredations?" Cliff quickly pointed out that "You'll want to check with the feds concerning cowbird control as they continue to change." An email inquiry to Corrie Borgman at the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Albuquerque NM brought the reply

> " removal of cowbird eggs is not actually legal in this scenario. I'll attach a copy of the regulations for your reading pleasure. There is a depredation order for blackbird control (including cowbirds), but cowbirds can be controlled only for the following purposes: serious damage to agricultural crops, human health hazard or property damage, to protect a federally endangered, threatened or candidate species, or to protect a State endangered, threatened, candidate or species or special concern. Bluebirds are not listed federally, and to the best of my knowledge, they receive no special status by the state of Texas either, therefore they don't fit the criteria for this action."

So, while the Brown-headed Cowbird is a brood predator in our nest boxes, removal of their eggs (or young) is a violation, though I doubt seriously anyone would enforce the prohibition.

The more important issue raised by this article though is, does removing the eggs of this brood parasite serve a beneficial purpose? No one likes to look into their bluebird nestbox and see this huge "baby" that is almost as large as its "momma" bullying the other birds, but a recent article by Amy Lewis for the National Audubon Society raises questions about the parent bird's response to control efforts. Asking "is it a good idea to allow people's desire to nurture (to) interfere with nature?" her short answer was "no." She based that answer on the reaction of brood parasites to removal of their eggs.

Steve Rothstein, Emeritus Professor of Zoology at the University of California Santa Barbara shares this opinion. "It's a natural process and we shouldn't attach human values about killing or being sneaky to the natural world." he states in the article by Lewis. Many of Rothstein's reasons for not interfering with the eggs have to do with what he calls "unintended consequences."

Most North American birds lack the ability to recognize eggs as their own. This protects brood parasites, like the Brown-headed Cowbird, who lay their eggs in other birds' nests. Often when the cowbird does so, it first destroys or removes one of the true parent eggs. This is because most North American birds do keep track of the total mass of eggs in the nest – and this is where our interference can cause

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Beware of Unintended Consequences

unintended consequences. When momma returns and finds missing eggs she may, not always but the possibility exists, abandon the other eggs on the precept that the nest has been raided. Instead of protecting the young cavity nester, we have contributed to its demise. continued on page 2…

Another possible "unintended consequence" of interfering in the nesting success of bird species was brought to light in a 2007 study by Jeffery Hoover of the Illinois Natural History Survey. Naming his findings "mafia behavior" Hoover described 56 percent of cases in which cowbird mothers returned and ransacked the nests of "foster mothers" after researchers removed the cowbird eggs. Comparatively, only 6 percent of nests were destroyed when humans did not interfere. While this behavior has not been further studied, Matt Louder, who studies cowbird parasitism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign points to it as indication of why cowbird eggs should only be removed to protect endangered species.

The TXBlues article cited Michigan as sharing the opinion that Brown-headed Cowbirds do get into bluebird boxes. While this is true, it is also true that Michigan has a unique situation in that Cowbirds also destroy Kirtland Warbler nests and so they can be controlled by bluebird managers in the Kirtland Warbler range. Outside that very limited range in Michigan, control of Brown-headed Cowbirds is as illegal as it is in Texas. Texas has two similar endangered species – the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo – in limited habitats and removing cowbird eggs to protect these birds would be allowed under the depredation order. Removing them to protect bluebirds or other cavity nesters is not. Cowbirds are not the cause of these, or any other bird's decline, and they will not push these birds over the brink, but their management can be a tool in these bird's recovery. In the case of cavity nesters, we may be creating more grief than benefit.

One of the first members of TBS, Mark Klym served in various volunteer positions as he helped establish our new organization. However Mark's first love is hummingbirds! Mark, was coordinator of the Texas Hummingbird Roundup and Texas Wildscapes program at Texas Parks and Wildlife. He grew up in Canada, received his BS degree in Biological Science and Fisheries and Wildlife Management from Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste Marie, MI, then followed the hummingbirds to Texas when in 1999 he began work with Texas Parks and Wildlife. He is a coauthor of "Hummingbirds of Texas", Texas A&M Press, editor of the Eye on Nature and Texas Hummer Newsletters and author or editor of several booklets and publications from TPWD. Mark is currently employed as an environmental quality specialist with Jefferson Parish, Louisiana.

NestWatch Blog Explores A New Twist On Old Fairy Tales

How did the bizarre folklore of the "changeling" child first enter European literature? Perhaps an avian reproductive strategy called "brood parasitism" served as inspiration. Brood parasitism is how some birds avoid the work of raising young by laying eggs in the nests of other birds.

In our latest blog post, we explore the origins of the fairy changeling lore by examining some real-life changelings (i.e., cowbirds and cuckoos). Read on for a fanciful new take on folk stories as they relate to nesting biology.
Reprinted from NestWatch eNewsletter

Eastern Red Cedar/*Juniperus virginiana*

By Linda Crum
Master Gardener/Master Naturalist

Juniperus virginiana is a dense slow-growing coniferous aromatic evergreen tree. Ordinarily it is from 15-65 feet tall (can reach 90 feet) but may never become more than a shrub when growing in poor soil. It is a long-lived species – the oldest tree is in West Virginia is over 900 years old. Its range in eastern North America is from Maine, west to South Dakota, south to northernmost Florida and southwest into east-central Texas, native in 37 states. It is commonly found in prairies, old pastures, often along highways. It is not welcome near apple orchards since it is an alternate host for cedar-apple rust, a significant fungal disease of apples.

Eastern Red Cedar is sometimes considered an invasive species, even though native. Prescribed burning to preserve grasslands can control it. However, it does have wildlife value. Cedar waxwings love the berries of this juniper. Seeds pass through the bird's gut in about 12 minutes and have a higher germination rate roughly three times higher than seeds that have not passed through a bird's gut. Bluebirds, turkeys and many mammals consume the seeds also. The species is dioecious, meaning that that male and female reproductive parts occur on separate plants. The female plants produce the pale blue fruits that are so loved by wildlife. It is also the larval host for the Olive butterfly. The tree was prolific on my dad's farm in central Alabama and he used to cut one and haul it home every year as our Christmas tree.

Eastern Red Cedar has great commercial value. The brownish-red heartwood is fragrant and very durable. Because of its rot resistance, the wood is used as fence posts. It is also used in closets and cedar chests to ward off moths. The best portions of the heartwood was used for making pencils until supply ran short and incense cedar, a Pacific Northwest native tree was substituted.

Food and medicinal uses include the making of juniper tea by placing about a dozen berryless twigs in a quart of cold water, bringing the water to a boil and allow to simmer for about 10 minutes. The tea can be used for colds and cough. Berries can be chewed for canker sores in mouth.

The pollen of the Eastern Red Cedar is a known allergen, although not as potent as that of the related Ashe juniper. By the way, the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler nests in central Texas where Ashe juniper abound. Contact with the plant can produce a skin rash in some individuals.

Propagation is by seeds. Sow the seeds outdoors in fall or stratify and sow in spring. Stratify at 41 degrees for 30-120 days. Seed germination is poor, so sow a large number of seed.

Bluebirds And Fall Foliage Have Something In Common

Photos © Raisa Kochmaruk
By Raisa Kochmaruk, Cornell Class of '21
and Robyn Bailey, NestWatch project leader

From mountain peaks to foothills all across North America, this fall has brought a particularly vibrant symphony of color—both in birds and the leaves of deciduous trees. While remnants of the autumn migration pass overhead, songbirds are busy in the fiery foliage that rolls down hillsides into meadows and backyards below.

Change isn't only for the leaves, however. One songbird in particular draws the eye with its flashes of blue, starkly contrasting the golden hues of the fields in which it lives. Similar to the fall color phenomenon, the plumage of the Eastern Bluebird appears more vibrant during some autumns than others. In fact, this year brought out a wave of 'mega-watt' bluebirds which look quite out of place alighting on their usual posts. Despite the months of cold and shortening days to come, bluebirds put on fresh attire for the last, glorious days of fall, and they won't molt again until next fall.

How Are Bluebirds Like Fall Foliage?

The answer lies in their responses to weather: bluebird plumage patterns are correlated with the vibrancy of leaf pigments in autumn, and they share the same biological causes. Under optimal conditions, the loss of chlorophyll from leaves gives way to reveal orange-tinted carotenoids and red-hued anthocyanin pigments which account for the drastic change in color. And in the same way that an abundance of sun, rainfall, and frostless nights bring on the most vibrant autumns, these favorable conditions also lead to a plethora of insects and natural forest foods. Birds feast during harvest season to build the stores of energy that will carry them through the winter—and also to enrich their bodies with nutrients for building strong and healthy feathers. So while leaves are not directly related to this late-season molt, they coincidentally are a great indicator of the amount of food available to birds from year to year. Because bluebirds rely on insects as a main source of nourishment, years that have favorable conditions mean lots of available, nutrient-rich food. In short, more bugs can equal more colorful birds (Siefferman and Hill, 2005), and better ornamentation is linked to better reproductive success in both males and females (Siefferman and Hill, 2003, 2005).

All bluebirds are sexually dimorphic, meaning that there is an obvious difference in color between the male and female of the species. While both sexes have melanin-based chestnut coloration and molt in the fall (Gowaty and Plissner, 2015), male Eastern Bluebirds develop a much greater proportion of ultraviolet blue plumage on their heads, backs, and wings. Ultraviolet plumage actually results from microstructures on the keratin shaft which reflect the shortest wavelengths on the visible light spectrum: blue, green, and iridescent purple (Siefferman and Hill, 2003). Even though this structural plumage coloration does not involve pigment, feather composition nevertheless depends on the quality of nutrients obtained during the fall (Siefferman and Hill, 2005).

Since each harvest season brings different levels of precipitation and warmth, the abundance and nutritional quality of food fluctuates from year to year. Particularly fertile autumns, such as we are experiencing,

Bluebirds In Autum

Raisa Kochmaruk illustrated this article in colored pencil, graphite, and watercolor (though not necessarily in that order). Feel free to click the image and download a large version, so you can enjoy the ephemeral beauty of fall for a little while longer.

Why Molt In The Fall?

These two historic (ca. 1930s) specimens from the Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates perfectly illustrate the contrast between fresh and worn plumage. The duller bird on the left has newer plumage (collected in October) than the brighter bird on the right (collected in March). The buff color will break off to reveal more blue feathers as the breeding season approaches (click to enlarge).

You might think that the birds would wait until spring to adorn themselves with shiny new feathers, but in this case, structural plumage coloration involves a bit of delayed grandeur. Freshly-molted bluebird plumage is tipped with buffy-orange (that's the melanin) giving them a duller appearance, and this part of the feather actually wears away by the time breeding season comes around.

As the orange tips wear down, blue feathers underneath are revealed such that the bird has an overall brighter appearance just in time for the breeding season. In much the same way, autumn leaves don't really add color but rather lose some pigments thereby revealing others that were always there. As we transition into winter's subdued color palette, enjoy these final days of blazing leaves and know that when spring returns, the bluebirds will become as the leaves—even more brilliant versions of what they already were.

Fresh Versus Worn Plumage

These two historic (ca. 1930s) specimens from the Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates perfectly illustrate the contrast between fresh and worn plumage. The duller bird on the left has newer plumage (collected in October) than the brighter bird on the right (collected in March). The buff color will break off to reveal more blue feathers as the breeding season approaches .

Photo © Kevin J. McGowan

Reprint from Cornell Labs

It Has Been A Busy Summer In Texas!

Really! All I have to do is bend over and pick up a mealworm in my beak then swallow? Gee, Mom did it for me last time! Photo bv David Kinneer

A beautiful first summer and now my first molt. Photo by Becky Boyd

(left) Did you know Bluebirds may eat shrews, snakes, salamanders, tree frogs and lizards? Photo by Mike Jones of Indiana

(right) Tag, you're it! Photo by David Kinneer

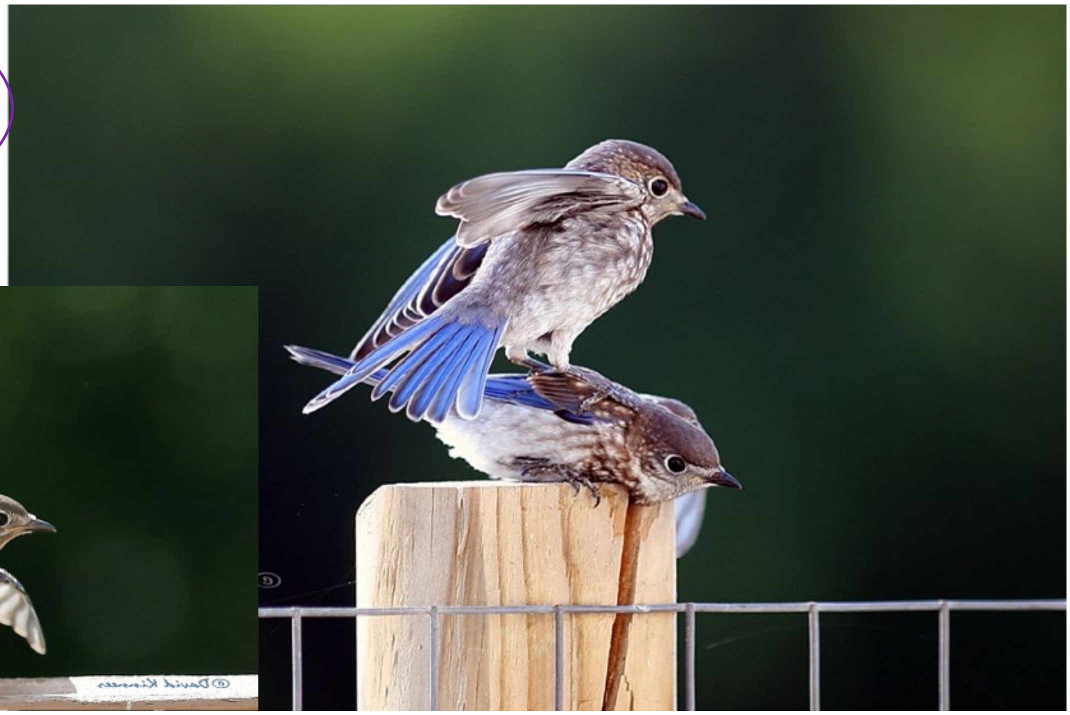
I sure wish they would have bought a cage big enough for all of us and the mealworms. Photo bv David Kinneer!

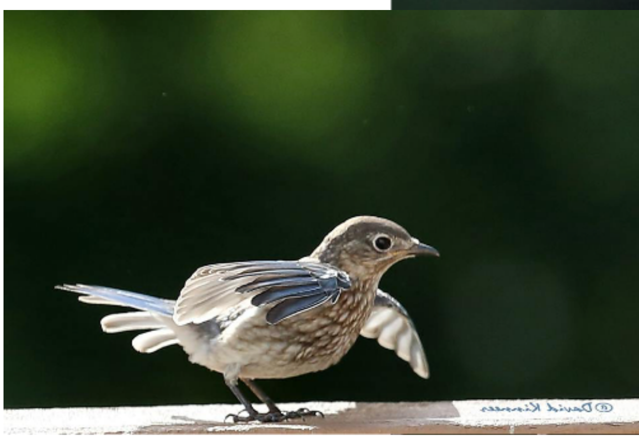
Another great nesting season sweetheart! Photo by David Kinneer

Our Members Share Some Of Their Great Memories

Thanks to all of the photographers willing to share their special moments with us! For more awesome photos visit the TBS facebook page. Also, visit the Bluebird-L Facebook page to view beautiful bluebird photos from all across the Eastern States.

Anybody can takeoff—it is the landing that is tricky!
Photos by David Kinneer





Catching up on all the gossip ah I mean news with family after another day of rain. Photo by Gary Suidika

Still master of my domain. Photo by Mike Brown

Thomas Irwin Reports On Nesting Activity At His Ranch

Thomas and his ranch was featured in the March 2018 issue of TX Blues. Following is his report of this year's nesting activity and his thoughts on future changes. Photos by Thomas Irwin.

If you will recall I own 195 acres located in Central Texas about 12 miles northeast of Goldthwaite, in Mills County. I really enjoy providing several nest boxes for the birds that nest on my ranch. If you will remember I became a member of the Bluebird society in 2015. I would like to add that I am honored and humbled that the Bluebird Society has asked me to contribute to the newsletter. I have thoroughly enjoyed being a member of the Bluebird Society, learning about how to attract and have Bluebirds nest on my place. I have 15 nest boxes deployed on my ranch. My 2018 season saw the same species as before nesting, namely Tufted Titmouse, Bewick's wren and Eastern Bluebirds.

My report back is not what I had hoped for. Even though I had success with my nest boxes, there were early nesting's of three bluebird families in late January early February. The birds found about a week and a half of warm weather before a strong cold front came in dropping temperatures to the low teens. My weather station at the ranch reported all night on the temperature and that it may have even snowed. If you would like you may [visit my weather station]() as it is part of the weather underground family.

All three families had already laid five eggs each. I was really worried. The Moms stayed on the eggs but to no avail. All three clutches were lost. By the time I realized the eggs were not going to hatch, eight weeks had past. The bluebirds had abandoned the nests and eggs. It was close to April when I finally removed the nests. It did not take long for two of the same nest boxes were populated with bluebirds and eggs. Both successfully fledged in early June. After that no Bluebirds repeated the cycle. The year before in 2017, I had nesting in several nest boxes all the way into August, but not 2018. The severe drought obviously did not help and could be the reason the season was so short. Moving the nest boxes around did not yield the results I desired. However undeterred I will relocate them again in January 2019 and move them closer to trees for the little ones first landings.

I look forward to the 2019 season and I just hope the same weather event does not happen again.

Stay Or Go?
Predators Near The Nest

NestWatch reveals the results of the latest research on the impact on bluebirds when predators are discovered near a potential nest. [Visit the NestWatch blog]() to read all about the study and the final analysis.

State Birds - Little Facts Of History

By Kate Moran

As I'm starting the packing process for yet another move—this time a move that takes us out of the country—I sit here reminiscing about the fun road trips I got to take my son on this summer before school started. Our country has such a beautiful rich history and incredible wildlife, full of wonderful species that the rest of the world would love to see (and pay to travel to see). One of our road trips took us to Branson, Missouri, where I noticed the bluebird displayed on their license plate. It made me want to look up our nation's history on symbols and why certain states got certain birds.

Granted I didn't go to my local library to check out books (I would assume the non-google way of doing research would yield better results). I did, however, comb the internet to find information on the origins and meaning of the reason behind state birds. Surprisingly, information is hard to find on the specifics of state birds. REALLY HARD. The state bird explanation is usually lumped into the broader explanation of why our country/individual states have symbols at all. Some of the information I found ranged from comedy to little tidbits of facts that I'm happy to share with all of you now.

If I could make a quiz out of the information, I would pose a few questions for you all. See if you'd be able to answer:

1. How many states have the bluebird as their state bird?
2. How many states have a cavity nesting bird as their state bird?
3. When did state birds become "a thing"?
4. What is Texas' official state bird?

I gave away the first answer! Other than Missouri, there are 3 states that claim the bluebird for their own: Idaho and Nevada have the Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*) specifically and New York has the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*). In addition to these 4 states, 5 others claim cavity nesting birds that include chickadees, wrens, and the Wood Duck (which is Mississippi's state water fowl).

And now, a little history! I can hear the professors during my master's program echoing in my head right now telling me to write as much of my thesis via my own original thoughts and just provide small quoted supporting material to emphasize those points without paragraph quoting. They weren't fans of paragraph quoting. But, since I like the way it was originally presented…sorry! Good ol' Webster mentions that the first known use of the state bird was in 1910 and is defined as "a bird selected (as by legislature) as an emblem of a state of the U.S." According to BirdNote.org's article on State Birds, "All 50 states and the District of Columbia have official birds. To become a state bird, it helped to be familiar, colorful, and have a punchy song. The Northern Cardinal perches as state bird in seven eastern states, the Western Meadowlark in six western states. Bluebirds and goldfinches are mascots of another seven. The country's most insistent songster, the Northern Mockingbird, holds down five states. And Washington, DC's official bird? The shy Wood Thrush!" Interesting! Benjamin F. Shearer, who co-authored "State Names, Seals, Flags and Symbols" with his wife Barbara S. Shearer, said:

> "the practice of designating official state symbols really took off in the 1920s and 1930s.Garden clubs wanted to have state flowers, and they would suggest state flowers and a lot of these minor symbols used for citizenship purposes. For example, they'd let school children vote on whether they wanted the robin or the bluejay to be the state bird. More recently, however, the motivation for adopting state symbols has shifted. Lots of states were adopting the symbols as ads for the state."

While all of this information is fascinating, I really wanted more meat. Who was the first person to propose this? What was the United States like during that time where symbols became a thing of fascination? I could provide that information in this article, but then I would be working on another thesis. Some of the information I found was downright hilarious! I wish I could have written this myself, but since I did not, I will share what Nicholas Lund wrote for Slate: “Texas. Official state bird: Northern Mockingbird. Sometimes—after a nice full day, perhaps spent in the company of loved ones—one can forget that the world is a cold, uncaring place full of death and sadness. Thanks, Texas, the birdiest state in the entire country, for reminding me that this civilization we’ve built and work our fingers to the bone trying to perfect is as meaningless as a sand castle in the tide. What should it be: any other bird in the state other than northern mockingbird. Roseate spoonbill? Golden-cheeked warbler? Swainson’s hawk? Aplomado falcon? Anything.” I couldn’t agree with this sentiment more! COME ON TEXAS!

Luckily, it looks like there is a process to change “unwanted” or “unoriginal” birds who have already been designated by the state. For example, according to Library.ca.gov’s page on State Symbols, “California’s state symbols are set by state law. If you would like to propose a new state symbol, contact your local State Senate or Assembly member.” Maybe Texas should get on this? My apologies to all the Mockingbird lovers reading this! For those of you who have been entertained by my past articles, you know how much I mock the Mockingbird! [Side note: Did you know Thomas Jefferson had a pet mockingbird named Dick and that birds were his favorite animal?] Clearly, I had too much fun looking up all this information. I will say that the one bird species who has visited my backyard the most for the past 2.5 years I’ve lived in Texas was the Northern Mockingbird. Touché!

My family and I are moving to Lisbon, Portugal at the beginning of next year. I know that as much as a yearn for my bluebirds every year and make fun of my other visitors, I will miss both of them dearly! As a matter of fact, the last of my Ruby-throated Hummingbirds has migrated on to Latin America just this past week (the ones I get at my house are seasonal and not year-round). I cried like a parent sending a child off to college. I know I’ll see them again someday, but we’ll be away for 3 years (with the potential of 6) and those little “flying fairies” (as I call them) are only “New World” birds.

I will also miss TBS! While I haven’t gotten to hang out with a lot of you because I always have something going on during Conferences, I appreciate everything our board has done to sustain this organization as well as appreciate all the individual work members have done in helping to strengthen the cavity nesting population. I will stalk the website and facebook pages over the next couple of years getting in my bluebird fix and seeing all the nesting pictures you all like to post.

I’m so glad we decided to do several road trips this summer to show my son the beauty of what the United States has to offer. He’s excited to take his “Bald Eagle” figurine to Portugal and show all his new friends what cool birds and symbols the United States has! This is my “swan song” of an article, but if any of you end up traveling to Portugal and would like to go on a local birding trip in the middle of your vacation, let me know and I’ll be there! Thank you, TBS!

Kate joined TBS in April 2016 and became a regular contributor to TX Blues in the July issue that year. We have enjoyed Kate’s column and admire her dedication to birding and her continued efforts to educate and promote bird conservation. We wish her well in her new adventures in Portugal! Although it is true there are no bluebirds in Portugal,Kate will have so many new birds to enjoy. Thank you for your many contributions to Texas Bluebird Society.

Next Issue: **Meet Our New Nestbox Certification Manager Dee Meyers and New Recruit Tim Manning**
New Bluebird Research "To Clean or Not To Clean"
Details - Summer Symposium Aug 3rd in Midlothian

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512-268-5678 (Pauline Tom

EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS AT TBS IS BECAUSE OF YOU!

As a total volunteer organization, it is absolutely true that our members make it possible to continue our conservation and educational mission.

It has been another great year, THANKS!

Volunteers Are Appreciated!

Phyl Baloga
Caryn Brewer
Linda Crum.
Beverly Davis
Harold Latham
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Judy Ray
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Brian Sinclair
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Tim Manning
Dee Meyers
Don Mitchell
Jerald Mowery
Tom Ohm
Shannon Ramsey

Dee Meyers is busy building nestboxes for TBS.

Volunteers Are Always Needed! Call 512-268-5678

Thanks For Your Financial $upport!

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- James R Yates

**New members who give us permission to print their name.*

AA - Houston, CF - Allen, TG - Leander RM - Bullar, WM - The Woodlands,
JP - New Braunfels, KS - Aubrey

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

Moved?
Send email/address changes to records@txblues.org

Photo by Kelly Sandefur courtesy of NestWatch - Cornell Labs

Election And Annual Survey Time!

In September the Board appointed **Beverly Davis**, **Brian Sinclair**, and **Dee Meyers** to serve a three month term pending the November elections. Remaining board members have agreed to serve a one year term. Current board member Ken Ray will serve on the Advisory Board next year. Any other nominations will be presented on the November ballot.

- Watch email for link to ballot and annual survey on or about November 1st.
- There is no "competition." Each nominee on the ballot, if elected, will serve.
- We email a ballot to each address in our records. Simply click on the link provided to access the ballot.
- If you want to provide/change (or confirm we have your correct address), provide your email address to records@txblues.org on or before October 20th.
- If you do not receive your election email by November 4th , please notify tbs@txblues.org
- If you do not have email, mail your ballot choice (Yes or No) to: TBS, PO Box 40868 Austin, TX 78704.
- The ballot allows for write-in candidates. Secure his/her permission before submitting name.