



TEXAS BLUES

The Newsletter of the Texas Bluebird Society

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THE MONITORING QUESTION

As the pair of bluebirds flew back and forth to the nestbox my curiosity grew. What is going on in there? I wonder if there are eggs yet? Are they really building a nest, or am I just being too optimistic?

Several years ago I would have been left to do little but wonder, and some continue to do just that even today. The idea that the birds will abandon the nest if we disturb the nestbox has kept many from one of the most enjoyable, and beneficial activities one can experience through nestboxes.

At one time, the standard was “leave the box alone and let nature take care of everything.” This philosophy sprang from the same misconception that said if I handle a young bird the mother will abandon it. I like the wildlife rehabilitator’s response to that – a cartoon of a young bird with a stick and bundle over his shoulders and caption reading “would you kick your child out just because he smelled bad?” The parenting bond in wildlife is even stronger than it is in humans, and will not be disrupted just because we open a nestbox or handle a bird.

As science progressed, and as our numbers of cavity nesters continued to dwindle, the presence and persistence of some predators, most notably House Sparrows, was noted. It became apparent to some that opening the boxes and physically removing the predators might be necessary. The question then became “how often should I open the box?” or “how close to fledging can I open this box?” People, some might consider them risk takers while others would call them leaders, began to open their nestboxes more and more frequently, monitoring the success of their charges and removing unwanted guests. Most of this development was in the fields of bluebird nestboxes and Purple Martin colonies.

Today, most nestbox owners will advocate opening the nestbox at least once a week, some even advocate twice weekly, until the young birds are only a matter of two or three days from fledging. Our own Texas Bluebird Society president saved a fledgling this year as a direct result of monitoring late in the nesting cycle. Experience has shown us that the birds will not abandon their nests because of this, but the current question is will the disruption cause the young to fledge early. For many the jury remains out on late season monitoring.

Another philosophy one will encounter today is the idea of leaving the situation natural – allowing the birds to experience a natural setting without our interference. This philosophy may, or may not allow for removal of the old nests at the end of the season. My concern with this idea is that the “natural situation” no longer exists in North America – man disrupted that in the 1850s when we introduced non-native predators that our native birds are not equipped to compete with. Since we disrupted the situation, I take it as a personal responsibility to return the playing field as close to level as I can.

Today, there is no excuse for not monitoring your nestboxes. *By Mark Klym*

Did you know?

Many times nestlings are taken from a nestbox by a predator – often this is just before they fledge.

INDICATIONS NESTLINGS DID NOT FLEDGE

- a picture perfect nest with cupped indentation
- empty nest in less than 12 days
- no dandruff-like flakes in nestbox
- signs of predation such as nestling material in hole of nestbox or remains on ground near box



TBS member Athena Petty checks a nestbox during the spring event in Sulphur Springs, TX.

SNAKE PREDATION

One of the predators Texas cavity nesters must contend with is the snake. In some areas ice storms in the last couple of years have meant a huge accumulation of brush; brush and weeds bring rodents; the cycle builds and snakes and predator populations build up. After several years the rodent population will collapse and predators will be forced to feed on birds and other food sources!

In the east Texas area black rat snakes, speckled kingsnakes and eastern coachwhips have been found in nestboxes or caught in snake traps underneath nestboxes. Gopher snakes are a problem further west. Fortunately for monitors, none of the poisonous snakes in Texas seem to climb smooth metal pipe very well, but they could be a problem in nestboxes mounted on trees or very rough wooden poles. (Another good reason for mounting nestboxes on metal poles!)

These snakes generally feed at night. They will enter a nestbox and eat the eggs or young birds, and the mother bird as well if she happens to be incubating or brooding. After a big meal they may rest in the box and digest, or they may “eat and run” and you will never know they were there. Unlike birds and mammals that may leave fur or feathers around the entrance hole, mess the nest up while feeling inside the nestbox for the occupants, or leave eggs on the ground, snakes leave no trace. A monitor expecting to see the eggs or baby birds he noted last time will find an empty nest. In many cases another predator is blamed.

As intelligent predators, snakes can learn to recognize a new food source. In the early seventies, Keith Kridler’s trail in the Mount Pleasant and the surrounding counties consisted chiefly of nestboxes mounted on power poles. After several years other bluebirders in the area also had a lot of their nestboxes mounted this way, and the snakes had learned to recognize the large bulge (nestbox) on a power pole that meant lunch. From there they continued up the pole to bulge, which happened to be a transformer, with the result that that the number #1 cause of power outages was due to snakes crawling up power poles and getting on top of the transformers and blowing out the fuse!

So when we place our light-colored nestboxes out in the open on smooth metal poles, often conveniently lined up along a fence row, we may train snakes to this food source. It is especially helpful to the snakes if the fence row is not mowed often and provides them some good cover! So the first means to minimize predation by snakes is to keep the area around nestboxes mowed. This will also make it a little safer for you as you approach the nestbox to check it.

The easiest way to keep most snakes from ever reaching your nestbox is to install an 8” Kingston-type stovepipe predator guard beneath it. In rare cases very long snakes have succeeded in getting past some predator guards, so a Krueger-type snake trap may be installed between the predator guard and the nestbox.

While many people grease poles to prevent predators from climbing the pole, it does not stop snakes—it only provides evidence in the form of a greasy ring at the entrance hole. The addition of turpentine (not paint thinner) to thin the grease a little has seemed to deter some snakes, perhaps due to the smell, but a good predator guard is a far more reliable deterrent.

If you decide to use a snake trap it must be monitored. For one thing, the snake will die if it is hanging in the hot sun for several hours. It can be cut out of the trap and released, having perhaps learned that nestboxes are not the places to dine. (This must be done carefully since the snake is frightened and NOT happy!) It is also a recorded fact, found out through banding, that adult bluebirds WILL abandon eggs or extremely young birds IF a predator stays near the nestbox, even if it does NOT reach the box or harm the contents. On many occasions a snake trapped near the ground under a nestbox has caused the bluebirds to abandon the nestbox containing young birds, since the parents are not as bonded to young under 4 days of age as tightly as the following week. So you would certainly want to remove a trapped snake as soon as possible.

Since snakes may be around, we do need to be very careful going to and from boxes and while checking. But keep in mind this is no more dangerous than a normal walk across your field. We can mow the area around the nestboxes and exercise normal caution as we approach. It is also best to stand to one side when opening any nestbox, which may contain a snake, a wasp nest with angry wasps, or even a frightened bird that may want to exit in a hurry. And never reach into a nestbox you cannot see into, or use your fingers to block the entrance hole when capturing sparrows for example—use a glove or rag.

WATCH and LISTEN to your birds! Bluebirds, Jays, Mockingbirds and the titmice clan alert other birds to predators in your area. If the birds are all screaming or chattering or otherwise sounding strange there IS a predator nearby! Rat snakes will often be high in a tree top during the day supposedly their favorite daytime hide out is a hollow tree or one with a cavity...Nestboxes mounted to poles are natural hideouts for many creatures! – *By Kate Oswald*

We are now accepting 2003 speaking engagements

Contact Doug Rohde to secure a date
972 317-5500 or d.rohde@attbi.com

President's Corner

'We're already making plans to attend the October convention" were words I heard as Spring Event participants were leaving Sulphur Springs. WOW! Those words said our event was quite a success – time well spent for folks who made long treks across Texas.

The Texas Bluebird Society Spring Event is behind us; now the 1st Convention, "... one nestbox at a time" is before us. Mark your calendar and plan to join us at San Marcos Quality Inn on October 11th (evening) and October 12th.

Steve Garr's "Bluebirds ... Not Just for the Country" will be the keynote presentation after the Saturday evening meal. Garr has active bluebird nestboxes in downtown Nashville! His talk will provide hope for us in Texas as we work towards "Bluebirds Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time".

Perhaps you've read about Steve in "Bluebird Monitor's Guide". In the mid-80's he saw bluebirds in rural areas, on farmland and sometimes in subdivisions with large lots. (Sound familiar?) He convinced folks in new subdivisions to put up nestboxes – and bluebirds moved in.

Steve says, "The next thing you know people were getting bluebirds 5 to 10 miles from the place where they were originally found" and the birds were nesting in smaller and smaller yards.

Also look forward to hearing John Cys of Wichita Falls share about his trail at Lake Arrowhead State Park. Get a preview by finding his photos of nests on our website (www.texasbluebirdsociety.org)

During the day on Saturday we'll hear a report from David Shiels on a study he is conducting this summer with an experimental nestbox he developed.

There's more! Sharing. House Sparrow Help Desk. Silent Auction. Nature Walk. Nesting reports from across Texas.

The \$20 registration fee includes the Saturday evening dinner and costs associated with conducting the event. Register early to be eligible for special prizes!

Lodging reservations should be made directly through the San Marcos Quality Inn (512 353-7770) in order to receive the special room rate of \$59.95/night for up to four people. Breakfast is included.

P.S. Just five miles from the Quality Inn are more than 200 factory outlet stores. You might want to arrive early or stay over for Christmas shopping.

By Pauline Tom, tbs@austin.rr.com, 512-268-5678



Members discuss nestbox design and construction at the Spring Event in Sulphur Springs.

Ants in the Nestbox

It is not uncommon to find ants in a nestbox. There is a species of carpenter ant in the south that will carry their young into bird nests and will sometimes live peacefully with the nesting birds. Fire ants on the other hand are only coming to a food source—eggs, young birds or left over insects from old nests. Monitors have seen 5 bluebirds 12 days old reduced to skeletons in 48 hours by fire ants.

Old bird nests will actually attract fire ants, which is a good reason to remove nests after fledging. Carefully collect all nesting material in a bucket or plastic bag and leave nothing for the ants to feed on anywhere near the nest. Use either grease or Tanglefoot as a preventive to keep ants from crawling up the pole.

Boiling water is lethal to ants, so a teapot full of boiling water can be poured on a fire ant mound. It only has to be around 150°F to wipe out insects quickly and this will erase the scent trail. Some people have had success drenching the mounds with a detergent solution.

Go to <http://fireant.tamu.edu/materials/index.html> and click on on FACTS SHEETS for a comprehensive list of articles. Scroll down the list for "organic" (aka low-impact) methods of control and controlling ants around pets and butterfly and schoolchildren's gardens. There are also articles on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and biologic controls.

Wanted: Items for Prizes and Silent Auction for TBS Fall Convention
Doug Rohde (972 317-5500 or d.rohde@attbi.com)

Bluebirds in the Classroom

Realizing that our cavity-dwelling birds were quickly running out of habitat as housing developments are taking over, Carol Matthews, Liberty Hill Middle School seventh grade language arts teacher, decided to enlist the help of her students to come to their aid. Students researched various Texas birds and reported on them. It was not long before the students realized that the numbers of bluebirds, titmice, woodpeckers and other cavity dwelling birds were declining in numbers in direct conjunction with city development. They decided to do something about it.

Four dollars was collected from each student to cover supplies, and bluebird house plans were downloaded from the North American Bluebird Society website. Several teachers, parents and even the Superintendent of Schools, Dr Dean Andrews, joined together to help the seventy students build their birdhouses in early May. Students were very excited about building something themselves and proving that “one person can make a difference.” Since the bluebird houses project fell so close to Mother’s Day, Moms received them as presents!

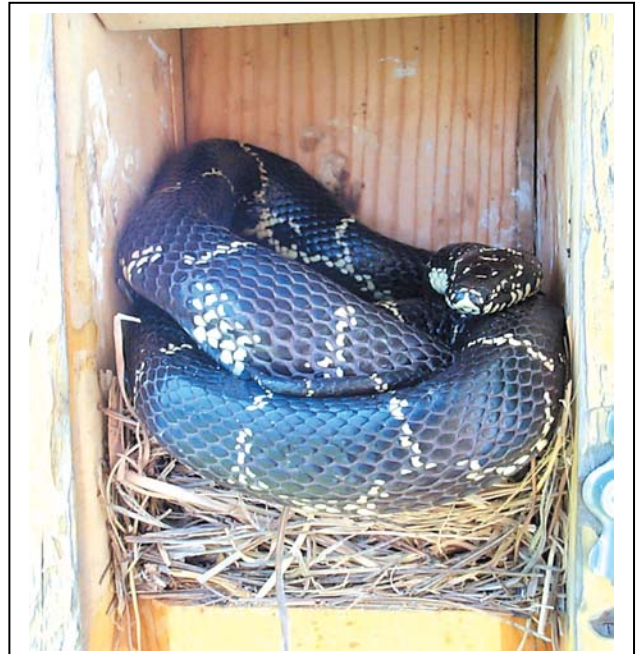


Dr. Dean Andrews, Superintendent of Liberty Hill Schools, assists a student in building her birdhouse.

One student reported that bluebirds started building a nest in his birdhouse within two hours of its installment! Within a week five students reported having eggs in their nests and one student reported having a Tufted Titmouse in his birdhouse!

Mrs. Mathews hopes to continue this project on an annual basis and is more optimistic about the future number of Bluebirds and other cavity dwelling birds in Liberty Hill. What can you do to “Make a difference” for our Texas cavity-dwelling birds? How about building a bluebird house for your yard too?

By Carol Matthews mikie@austin.quik.com



Snakes will take refuge inside nestboxes, often using the cavity nesters as a meal. *Photo courtesy of the Bluebird Monitors Guide.*

Membership in Texas Bluebird Society costs only \$10/yr. A form can be obtained from www.texasbluebirdsociety.org or by sending stamped self-addressed envelope to Texas Bluebird Society
P.O. Box 40868
Austin, TX 78704



Eastern Bluebird Fledgling--This is what it’s all about! *Photo courtesy of Wendell Long*

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