



TEXAS Blues

The Newsletter of the Texas Bluebird Society

NABS 2006 - "Red, White & Bluebirds"

YEEHAW! About 16 months from now, bluebird enthusiasts from across North America, and maybe even a few from farther afield, will descend on the heart of Texas. NABS 2006 will be held in Kerrville, and as host, TBS seeks to offer our colleagues their enjoyment of true Texas hospitality and the wildlife of the Hill Country.

In January, a planning group of the board met in Kerrville and discussed accommodations, room rates, meeting facilities, food service, workshops, field trips, entertainment and budget options for the fifth weekend in April, 2006.

All agreed that the larger group of interested TBS members should have an opportunity to get involved now.

Take a look at the following list, see where you might help out, and contact TBS by telephone/e-mail.

Needs for NABS 2006 - volunteers@NABS2006.com

- People willing to plan the speakers and other major indoor events
- People to plan nature and historic tours, shopping and other events that can be enjoyed in the area
- People to do advertising, media management, outreach and basically keep the communication going
- People to handle convention fundraising – silent auction, live auction, product sales and raffles
- People to handle pre-event fundraising – soliciting donations from sponsors and corporations, writing grant proposals
- People to administer hospitality and banquet events.

Several board members are chairing key committees and they all need HELP. If each member of TBS brings their talents and expertise to a topic on the Needs for NABS list, our convention will be a resounding success.

NABS (North American Bluebird Society) 2006 is the opportunity you may have been looking for to get more involved in TBS.

Information: Pauline Tom, TBS president, 512.268.5678.

True Blue Friend plaques - New!

Mrs. Lora B. (Roger) Garrison of Utopia, Texas, is the recipient of True Blue Friend plaque #1.

The presentation honors her many years of dedication to her Bluebird Trail. The plaque was a Christmas gift from daughter and son-in-law LeAnn and Anthony Sharp, and their family.

The "gifting" of the first TBF plaque transpired over a full year, recalls TBS president Pauline Tom.

"Christmas 2003, LeAnn told her mom about the plaque and shared with her the verbiage. TBS thought at that time, 'We're almost ready to produce the plaques.' After hundreds of hours of work on the details of the Society's new logo and the details of the True Blue Friend program, LeAnn's mom received the first plaque. Thanks to all for a job well done!" said Pauline.

MANY thanks to Cheryl Anderson for coming up with the idea and making it happen. Cheryl is now administering the commemorative plaque program for interested members, civic and business groups, and the general public.

Information: Cheryl Anderson, 817.444.8581; www.texasbluebirdsociety.org/TBF.



Lora B. Garrison of Utopia, Texas, is the recipient of the Texas Bluebird Society's first True Blue Friend Plaque.

Plumage, molt crucial to “feathers”

by **JOHN C. ARVIN**, Bird Program Specialist
World Birding Center, Mission, Texas

Feathers are the most distinguishing characteristic of birds



No other animals have feathers or anything resembling them. While finding a commonality in birds is tough (for example, some birds do not fly, though flight is one of the first characteristics that generally comes to mind about birds), all birds do have feathers. Feathers are thought to be highly evolved scales similar to those of reptiles, with whom birds share certain other physical characteristics.

Feathers are one of the strongest natural materials for its weight that exist. Feathers are excellent insulation and allow birds to survive in some very cold environments. This is largely because they trap lots of air which is then heated by the internal body temperature and held close to the body under the feathers to prevent loss of body heat. They also allow flight to occur by increasing greatly the surface area of the wings and tail (the feathers most important in flight) without substantially increasing the body weight of the bird.

Feathers are divided into several groups by their function. Flight feathers are defined above. Body feathers or “contour feathers” provide an aerodynamically streamlined surface so the bird moves through the air with a minimum of resistance (friction). Down feathers are primarily insulation to conserve body heat.

Feathers wear out and must be replaced. Orderly replacement of feathers is called “molt,” and occurs once a year in all birds and twice a year in some others (one could quibble about this technically but this is the short version). Each suit of feathers a bird wears is a “plumage.” In most plumages all the feathers are the same age—they were produced by a single molt. Birds can replace feathers lost in mishaps as well, but this is done on an individual basis and is not the same as molt in which most or all the feathers are replaced in an orderly and predictable fashion.

I will limit my remarks to plumage replacement by songbirds, such as Eastern Bluebird, which is typical of most passerine birds, and because it saves having to digress on the inevitable exceptions in other groups. In a species such as the Eastern Bluebird the first plumage worn after hatching is “natal down.” This is an insulation plumage to protect the nestlings from stressful temperatures. Down is worn only in the nest (less than two weeks in Bluebirds) and by the time the birds fledge (leave the nest under their own power) they have molted into juvenal plumage. In some species juvenal plumage does not differ much from one of the adult plumages, but in bluebirds this is buffy brownish above with some bluish in the flight feathers and a dappled breast. Again, juvenal plumage is worn for a relatively brief time, a few weeks in most cases. Thereafter begins a second molt. Those of us who have been around for a while grew up calling the various plumages produced by molts “breeding plumage” or “winter plumage” or “immature plumage.” These designations are pretty imprecise, sometimes to the point of meaninglessness.

A formal analysis of molt to make communicating about the various plumages and strategies involved easier and more standardized was put forth about two decades ago. It is called the Humphrey-Parkes System after its two originators. It is much more accurate but requires us to learn a new lingo in which to describe molt.

The H-P system has two plumages for birds after the juvenal plumage mentioned above. The first plumage after the juvenal is acquired through the prebasic molt and is called “Basic Plumage” (or first basic, or sometimes Basic I to indicate that it is the first of an alternating series of two plumages that the bird will carry on the rest of its life. The prebasic molt in most passerines is completed before the fall departure (in the case of migrants) so the bluebirds hatched in the summer are in Basic I plumage by fall. In bluebirds this is similar to, but somewhat duller in color than plumage worn by the adults.

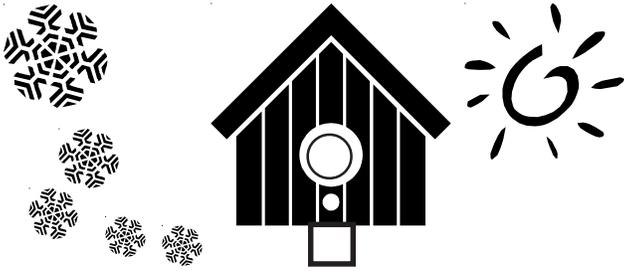
Some songbirds undergo a second, partial molt in spring that involves only the body feathers (usually retaining the flight feathers) to produce the colorful plumage that we grew up calling “breeding plumage.” Under the H-P System this is now called “Alternate Plumage,” and may also be identified by number (in our case here Alternate I to indicate that this is the first alternate plumage the bird has attained in its short life. This plumage is adult-like, or at worst, a somewhat less vivid version of the adult plumage.

After breeding for the first time (if they do breed in their first year; some do, others do not) they have another prebasic molt in late summer/early fall going into their second year, and generally the basic plumage attained by this molt is indistinguishable from that of adults. In this case we abandon numbering the molts and call the plumage produced “Definitive Basic” to indicate that no further changes in appearance will result from future molts, and that the birds from then on are indistinguishable by plumage from that of adults.

A bird is in its freshest plumage in the early fall, even though the colors of that plumage may be much less colorful than the alternate plumage worn in spring, which is produced by the prealternate molt for those species which have one. Bluebirds do not have a prealternate molt. Fall bluebirds are the brightest they will be all year.

Blue color is not due to a pigment in bird feathers. It is produced by the refraction of light from the structure of the feathers. Thus a bluebird’s blue feather dipped into water to destroy the angle of refraction results in a dull brown feather until it dries. The ruddy breast of males and the brownish feathers of females are due to the presence of pigments in the feather. Once formed, feathers can change color only through wear and bleaching.

By the time nesting season rolls around, the bluebirds may be getting quite a bit duller than they looked in early fall.



Winter bluebird nests?

by **KEITH KRIDLER**

Co-author, "Bluebird Monitor's Guide"
Former TBS Board Member

The state of Texas generally experienced a very warm, late fall in 2004. Amount of daylight, the amount of activity hours per day, diet and hormones affect egg laying and the desire and ability to lay eggs.

It really is not too unusual to see nests built in the middle of winter and eggs laid and abandoned during short warm spells. We are now up to 10 hours of sunshine and another hour of good pre-dawn and post-sunset light here in Texas. Even though we have had several hard freezes there are an abundance of insects for the birds to feed on.

Birds are triggered into laying eggs at about 12 or more hours of daylight or activity. If bluebirds or chickadees roost at night near a street light or lighted out building, they will receive enough hours of artificial "daylight" to trigger egg laying. Egg laying does not do any good unless the male is also producing testosterone as the males only produce viable sperm during part of the year when hours of daylight, diet, hormones, etc. are all correct.

There are a lot of articles in the news about the amount of estrogen showing up in the environment coming out of city waste water treatment plants and affecting the breeding or timing of egg laying in various wildlife who end up drinking this water or living in the water.

I normally don't check my nestboxes that much in winter.

I start getting calls from people with backyard nestboxes around Christmas every year. They are watching their birds carrying nesting material and often end up with eggs. Since I get these calls every year I believe it is fairly widespread. In most of these cases the birds are in someone's back yard where they watch or feed the birds.

Nearly everyone has security lights or street lights up now and the birds often roost in lighted areas. Thus they are exposed to extended artificial daylight. I have nestboxes up in industrial parks that are lit up well at night and in these areas it is common to find nests and eggs that were laid and abandoned after Sept. and before normal egg laying times in spring.

By the time bright yellow daffodils are blooming in your area the soil temperatures, air temperatures and hours of daylight will be correct for there to be viable chickadee and bluebird eggs in your nestboxes.

While doing routine maintenance in late December (following end of season cleaning in November), Bob Kersten in Milam County discovered a real surprise - two fresh nests with a single egg. One was a Carolina Chickadee and the other was an Eastern Bluebird. No additional eggs were laid and the eggs were not incubated.

February's "To Do" List for Bluebirds

What you should be doing RIGHT NOW to get ready for the birds!

Spruce up the houses, as bluebirds will start looking for nesting boxes before Spring. Make any needed repairs to nestboxes and get them ready for nesting. Have woodpeckers have been working on the nestbox holes? If so, install a block of wood with a 1 1/2-inch hole right over the old hole. February is a great time of year to install new nestboxes. If a nestbox was unproductive last season, consider moving it to another location. Nestboxes on fence posts? Take them down and reinstall them on poles with predator baffles. Replace any broken doors. Rub a bar of dry soap inside the nestboxes to keep wasps from building their nests. The wasps have just been trying to keep warm - but they're not hospitable roommates for bluebirds. To eradicate, one suggestion is to wait for a cold weather day when the wasps are sluggish and cannot fly. A putty knife works well to kill them and also is good for scraping the inside walls of the nestbox to remove spider webs, old mud dauber nests, and so forth. Attend local and regional programs on bluebirds for fellowship and information. The bluebird "wing wave" (courtship behavior) and the sight of the first blue eggs of the season will be special memories. Try to place a nestbox in a spot where you can watch and enjoy what's going on if the birds choose to nest there. Add a birdbath, if possible, to watch them splash-splash. For a smaller property, consider "pairing," or placing your nestboxes closer than normally recommended. In this way, nesting options exist for more than one species of cavity nester. Thanks for participating in the comeback of bluebirds to Texas!

TBS hosts NABS 2006 convention
April 27-30, 2006 - Kerrville
Get involved now in the plans!
volunteers@NABS2006.com



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Happy Blue Year!

Even before our "Start With Five: TBS Trail Launch Initiative" has rolled out, TBS is assisting with public bluebird trails in the bluebird friendly communities of Weatherford, Groesbeck, Waco, and Wellborn.

And, although we have not officially announced our offer to sell nestbox kits to non-profit youth organizations for \$5.00 each (in lots of five; picked up in Mountain City), several lots were sold in January.

TBS seeks quality items for the NABS 2006 auction/raffle. Please contact your civic-minded business friends.

- A volunteer quilter, and a donor to purchase the material, have stepped forward for NABS 2006.
- The quilter needs a "pattern."
- Will someone please help with locating or designing a "pattern" for a quilt that will appeal to the patrons attending our bluebird convention in Kerrville? If others can create additional quilts, bluebird education and research will benefit.

The more quality, desirable items we accumulate during the next fifteen months, the more we will achieve with the money from the auction.

Nature-related and Texas-themed items are particularly desirable for the NABS 2006 auction and raffle.

Please e-mail volunteers@NABS2006.com or phone 512.268.5678 if you can help.

Near-term, volunteers are needed for the popular TBS Booth at Earth Day in The Woodlands (Saturday, April 2) and the Wills Point Bluebird Festival (Saturday, April 23) near Lake Tawakoni.

Happy Valentine's Day!
Pauline Tom, president

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

Bluebird House Day is Saturday, Feb. 12

SATURDAY, FEB 12: Ninth Annual Bluebird House Day, 1:30-5 p.m., Sam Maxey Bell House in Paris (Lamar County, Northeast Texas). Hear Keith Kridler, 4 other experts; enjoy hands-on activities. Friends Friends of the Maxey House will have bluebird boxes and kits available.

Fee: \$3. Reservations required; call 903.785.5716. Open to public.

Historic Site Manager (and TBS director) Judy Brummett reminds that anyone joining TBS with \$15 membership will receive a free nestbox!

Texas Bluebird Society Board of Directors

Cheryl Anderson; Judy Brummett; John Cys; Dan Hanan; Lee Hutchins; Sharon Kersten; Mark Klym; Mary Leyendecker (editor, Texas Blues); Lysle Mockler; Charles Post; Mike Scarbrough; LeAnn Sharp; Pauline Tom

North American Bluebird Society Convention NABS 2005

Thursday-Sunday, May 19-22, 2005
Asheville, North Carolina

Register by
Tuesday, February 15, 2005
to be entered in a drawing
for a beautiful bluebird print by
NC artist Dempsey Essick

Full details on NABS website. Visit: <http://www.ncbluebird.com>

Mealworms can be ordered online! NABS gives a 15% discount on mealworm purchases through two distributors to their members, and a coupon for 1,000 free mealworms to new members! Details, NABS website.



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