

TEXAS Blues



Texas Bluebird Society Newsletter · Volume 12. Issue 2

MAY 2013

Other Cavity-Nesters: *Tufted and Black-Crested—Both Species of Titmouse Favor Texas*



Black-Crested Titmouse (above photos) is only found in Texas and Mexico. Tufted Titmouse lives here year-round.

By Helen Munro,
New Texas Bluebird Society member.
Past President and Editor of the North Carolina Bluebird Society

The Eastern Bluebird is the “poster child” for the secondary cavity nesters. Secondary cavity nesters are the birds that cannot make their own cavities in trees and rely on the work of woodpeckers, rotten limbs falling out leaving knotholes, newspaper tubes, mailboxes, and, of course, nestboxes supplied by thousands of individuals, member and non-members of bluebird societies, throughout the North American continent. This activity has moved the bluebirds to a secure place in our environment.

The bluebird recovery has been so successful that people doing research on the Brown-headed Nuthatch, another secondary cavity nester, have asked bluebird enthusiasts in and near pine forests to reduce the hole size in the standard nestboxes from one and a half inch to one inch. By attaching a washer with a one inch opening, the Brown-headed Nuthatch uses the early nesting period, and removal of the washer invites the bluebirds to take the second nesting cycle.

However, the star of this article is the Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*). Its grey crest, placed like a jaunty hat on its head, makes it easy to pick out of a crowd. Its five and a half inch body is slightly larger than the four and half inch Carolina Chickadee and the three

and half inch Brown-headed Nuthatch. Their differences can be seen in Figure 1, taken from *A Guide to Field Identification Birds of North America*, 1966. The large head, thick neck, full body, pointed crest, and stout bill add to the ease of identification. The grey color on the top of its body with the white underbelly and peach streak just below the wing rounds out the description.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s information sheet on the Tufted Titmouse describes them as “acrobatic foragers.” Like the chickadees, they prefer sunflower seeds, but will eat suet, and other seeds at the feeder. They are slower than the chickadees with whom they often flock and are found in both deciduous and evergreen forests in the eastern United States. Their whistled song is two notes or one slurred note that is repeated two to four times. (Editors note: One often hears the high, whistled *peter-peter-peter* song well before you see the bird.)

Texas has a second species of titmouse, the Black-crested Titmouse (*Baeolophus atricristatus*) which is found in north-eastern Mexico and central to western Texas. In the areas where they overlap with the Tufted Titmouse,

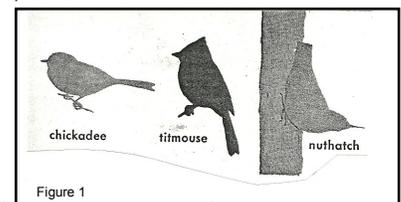


Figure 1

Continued on page 7...

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*Volunteering on a bright sunny day is fun. Volunteering on a day with high winds and a 42° temperature is **dedication!***



Linda braves the cold as she discusses bluebirds and warm summer days.

Check www.txblues.org to find a local event in your area.



New member, Beth Grijalva, (front) braved the cold to attend TBS event. She accepts her free nestbox from dedicated volunteers Caryn Brewer (left) and Meg Scammn (right).

Arbor Gate, located in Tomball, is always a favorite venue. Protected with hat, coat, and gloves, Linda gave a lively presentation as usual. In spite of the blustery day, 36 members joined TBS. More nestboxes across Texas.

TBS Thanks Donors For Their Financial Support

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We print names of all new members who give to us permission on Membership Form.

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Easy-Peasy! Register online <http://RSVPbook.com/2013Symposium> or use your smart phone

2013 Summer Symposium in Mount Pleasant (with Silent Auction FUNdraiser)



Presented by Texas Bluebird Society

Saturday, August 10, 2013
Mount Pleasant Civic Center, 1800 N. Jefferson Avenue, Mt Pleasant, TX 75455
9:00 AM – 3:00 PM

Doors open at 8:30 for Registration and Silent Auction



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Featured Speakers

Keith Kridler, author and naturalist
Bluebirds & More

Belinda McLaughlin, Past President, Native Plant Society of Texas
Gardening for Bluebirds

Other Presentations:
House Sparrow Control, NestWatching, and more

REGISTRATION COSTS and DEADLINES

Early Bird Advance Registration: \$15.00. Box Lunch and 10 Door prize tickets.
Deadline: July 10, 2013

Advance Registration: \$15.00. Box Lunch and 2 Door prize tickets. Deadline July 27, 2013

At-the-door Registration: \$6.00. No meal and no door prize ticket

Friday Evening Social: BBQ Dinner in the Meeting Room of La Quinta Inn: \$12.00
7 PM Buffet (6 PM Happy Hour BYOB, donations for Margaritas). Deadline, July 27, 2013

Lodging: La Quinta Inn \$74.99. Ask for the Texas Bluebird Society group rate. (903) 572-5514

On-line registration available at <http://RSVPbook.com/2013Symposium>

FREE Nestbox to members who pledge to "NestWatch" at least two nestboxes
(submit observations to Cornell Lab of Ornithology through www.NestWatch.org)

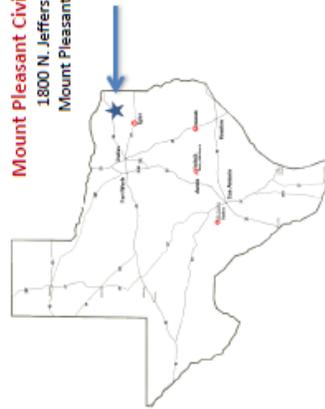
For More Information:

Keith Kridler
(903) 573-5866
kridler@suddenlink.net

To Donate a Silent Auction Item:*
Benni Konvicka
1315 North Dale Ave
Stephenville, TX 76401-1604
Auctions@texasbluebirdsociety.org
(254) 968-6663

Donations received after July 27 will miss the publication deadline.

*TBS is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)3 "charitable" organization. Donations are tax deductible, as allowed by law.



Mount Pleasant Civic Center
1800 N. Jefferson Avenue
Mount Pleasant, TX 75455



ADVANCE Registration (includes Box Lunch)

On-line registration available at <http://RSVPbook.com/2013Symposium>

Registrant #1

Name _____ Name for Name Tag _____
Street Address _____ City _____
State _____ Zip _____
Contact Phone _____ E-mail _____

Registrant #2 (same street address)

Name _____ Name for Name Tag _____
Contact Phone _____ E-mail _____

# Registrants (Please circle)	Description	Cost
1	2 Member	\$15.00
1	2 Non Member	\$15.00
1	2 Friday Night Dinner	\$12.00
		Total Due:

check Cash

New \$15 Membership at this event includes FREE nestbox!

Do you plan to join at the meeting? Y N

(This is not a firm commitment for membership. Please do not send membership dues now.)

For Planning Purposes Only

1. TBS Members and New Members: TBS will provide you a **FREE** nestbox at this event if you pledge to "NestWatch" at least 2 nestboxes (submit observations to Cornell Lab of Ornithology through www.nestwatch.org)

Do you plan to participate? Yes No N/A
2. \$15 Nestboxes available for purchase (based upon availability). How many do you plan to purchase? _____

Mail Registration Form with Payment made payable to "Texas Bluebird Society" to:
Janet Stockard
1055 CR 4640
Mount Pleasant, TX 75455



Register now with your SmartPhone.

TBS Newsletter

EARLY BIRD Registration—Deadline July 10, 2013

ADVANCE Registration—Deadline July 27 2013

AT-THE-DOOR Registration available (no lunch or door prize changes)



We want bugs now!

They're so yummy in our tummy... **WE LOVE BUGS!**

Bluebirds are skilled hunters. Good vision and speed assist the parents in providing a meal up to 5 times an hour for their family.



Feed us just one more time, please.

Did you know...

Bluebirds can spot a caterpillar camouflaged and immobile at 50 yards; even in rough pasture or tall grass.

When necessary bluebirds can fly up to 45 mph.



CATERPILLARS Photo by Beth Goetzman



CATERPILLARS Photo by Beth Goetzman



GRASSHOPPERS and SPIDERS



Photos by Beth Goetzman

Bluebirds can swoop from their perch to the ground after a bug at 17-18 mph.



BEES Photo by Beth Goetzman

Parents will provide food to their young two - three weeks after fledging.

Eastern Bluebirds will beg for mealworms. Some bluebirds will eat mealworms to the point of developing gout and other health problems.



Photo by Luke Hoag



Photo by Vanessa Voisinet

Mealworms are a bluebird's equivalent of fast food takeout. Tasty, but not full of good nutrition for a growing baby, or adult. Consider mealworms a snack.

Berries—The Other "B" Food

When bugs are scarce in the winter, or from other weather conditions, bluebirds enjoy, and depend on, berries from native plants.



Photo by Lindsey Smith



“While monitoring the new nestbox trail at MLCA in San Antonio, David spooked this Bewick’s Wren off her eggs. Less than two weeks later, the eggs had hatched.”

Photo by Paul Pruitt

Build, Install, Monitor— Younger Generation Does It All

David Pruitt, and his fellow scouts from Troop # 118 LaVernia, installed a 22 nestbox trail at Mitchell Lake Audubon Center in San Antonio. Installing a nestbox trail is fantastic! The real commitment begins when it is time to monitor the nestboxes. President Pauline Tom praises David, and his dad Paul, for their diligent dedication to providing vital data through NestWatch to help scientists.

Dear Paul & David,

We are so proud to have David as a member of Texas Bluebird Society! What a sterling example of a Scout project with follow through after the nestbox installation!

I'm so proud of this. I will point to David's project when Scouts make inquiries. It's relatively easy to construct and install nestboxes, compared to the ongoing commitment necessary to tend to the nestboxes and NestWatch.

Keep up the good work. And, enjoy! I look forward to seeing updates. (Pauline)

“We at MLAC could not agree more.” Susan Albert, MLAC Center Director

Nestbox Trail Updates

Buda & Hornsby Bend Nestbox Trail—Monitored by Barbara Vinson

I have had to relocate the Buda Fire Station Nestbox Trail due to construction on the adjoining property. The good news is that with the new locations there are five baby bluebirds in Box #5. There is also a Titmouse nest in Box #4. I'm excited to have succeeded in attracting bluebirds at the main station.

With the high winds on February 25, the compost/Dillo dirt caught fire at Hornsby Bend Nestbox Trail, and I have not been able to monitor the nestboxes along the ponds since that date because the area is closed except to staff. The fire is contained to the concrete pad and compost piles and hopefully, the fires will be extinguished by next week. Kevin Anderson is going to try and check the nestboxes in that area tomorrow, Saturday, and let me know how the bluebird and wrens are doing that had nests established before the fires started.

This afternoon I checked nestboxes at Platt Lane and CER. Platt Lane nestboxes are full of new and already established nests; five out of seven nestboxes are occupied. The nestbox by River Watch has five bluebird eggs. There are two, maybe three, titmouse nests and one possible wren nest. I moved the Platt Lane #1 nestbox from the north hay field and with Tree Folks permission put it on their property. It has never had any interest by birds at the hay field location. I also removed Platt Lane #2 nestbox from the south hay field over to CER. It is now labeled CER #5 and located under the pecan trees in the area south of the Chimney Swift tower. CER #3 has five bluebird eggs with the female sitting on them. My planned schedule for checking nestboxes this season will be on Monday and Friday of each week, generally mid-afternoon. (Reported March 15, 2013)

Beaumont Botanical Gardens Nestbox Trail—Monitored by John Park

Last spring I established, what I hoped would be, a bluebird Nestbox Trail at Beaumont Botanical Gardens in Tyrrell Park. Last year, the trail produced four Titmouse families. After trail maintenance and spring monitoring, it appears the Titmouse population is again nesting on the trail. Although the focus of TBS is definitely bluebirds, all secondary cavity-nesters are welcomed, and their nesting activity is enjoyed by all garden visitors. However, if the Titmouse continues to claim domination next year, I am seriously considering renaming the trail. (Reported March 28, 2013)

Musings From The Master...

“Dirty Egg” Mystery Solved

Jim’s Question: I have these observations from a nest box that is puzzling me.

1. On March 1, there were four eggs in the nest as seen in the attached photo.
 2. Yesterday, March 14, there were only three eggs in the nest and the eggs had a soiled, dirty appearance as you can see in the other photo.
 3. Yesterday, the female was on top of the box with some nest material in her beak.
- Don’t know what happened to one of the eggs and why the remaining three look the way they do. Whatever happened, is it possible the pair has given up on the first batch of eggs and is starting to build a new nest on top of the original one?



Photos by Jim Marshall

Keith’s Response: The dirty egg photo, if you look close you will see that the air sack or air bubble inside the egg has broken apart from where it is supposed to be attached under the big end of the egg, and it has floated to the top of that one egg. This means that the egg is infertile and is getting rotten, really it is already rotten. I suspect that all of these eggs, when you inspect them, will also be rotten. Either she did not incubate them correctly, the male was sterile early in the nesting season, or they did not mate correctly, ending up with infertile eggs.

Almost any time you break an egg while monitoring, if the female breaks one of her eggs in the nest, or a predator breaks one of the eggs in the nest, the female will abandon those eggs and start a new nest over the top of the old nest and eggs. Normally it is around 10 days between losing a clutch of eggs and the female being able to begin laying a new clutch of eggs.

I would expect by now that the female has built a whole new nest over those bad eggs. Normally if you have a side opening nesting box then I would slip out both the old and new nests, carefully remove the lower nest with the three bad eggs and replace the upper new nest back in the box. You can carefully break each of the three bad eggs and see if any baby birds were beginning to form. You can soak them in warm sudsy water for awhile and wash off the old rotten egg from the broken one and look for floating air in the other two eggs



As Keith predicted, the female began building a new nest over the top of the old, failed nest.

Jim inspected the eggs as Keith suggested and photographed his results.



Jim’s Response: I went to the box with the three soiled eggs this morning before I read your message suggesting to let nature take its course. I followed your previous idea of removing both nests and separating the first one and putting the start of the newer nest back in the box. Attached are photos of the returned, rebuilt nest and the three old eggs after opening them for examination. As you can see, two of the eggs appeared to be infertile, but the third had an embryo that had started developing. But, as you pointed out, the female had given up on this first batch of eggs and started building the new nest so I don’t think there was any hope for that embryo.



Visit Keith in his home town of Mount Pleasant, the location for the 2013 Bluebird Summer Symposium on August 10th.

Keith will once again be our featured speaker, sharing his photos, knowledge, and stories, about bluebirds and other cavity-nesters.

Find the Registration form and event details on page 3.

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. This is an edited excerpt from the Bluebird Monitors Yahoo Group.



Tufted Titmouse

Continued from page 1

Tufted and Black-Crested—Both Species of Titmouse Favor Texas

they may mate, but DNA analysis reveals that they became separate species 250,000 years ago. The black crest from which this species gets its name is a sharp contrast to the soft grey crest of the Tufted Titmouse.

The photo collage (front page) is a composite of Black-crested Titmouse pictures. The nest matches the description of one for the Tufted Titmouse. There are dead leaves, moss, animal hair and other soft fibers, and, in some, a snake skin. The four to eight eggs are white with reddish brown spots. There is a twelve to fourteen day incubation period followed by another twelve to fourteen days before fledging. Unlike the Eastern Bluebird, the titmouse has only one brood per year. This information is from a brochure, *Bluebirds Forever*, published by the North Carolina Bluebird Society.

What are the chances of finding a Tufted or Black-crested Titmouse in one of your nest boxes? For sixteen years, I was involved in a nestbox trail in Foxfire Village, NC. There were from seventy-two to eighty boxes. Bluebirds occupied 80 percent of the nestboxes, and there was only one nesting of a Tufted Titmouse! Chickadees and Brown-headed Nuthatches were recorded in a few boxes each year, but only one Tufted Titmouse. My chances of recording a nesting Tufted Titmouse was about one in twelve hundred. This data was for one nestbox trail located in the Sandhills of North Carolina on a golf course surrounded by pine trees.

NestWatch, a program run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, collects nesting data from all avian species all over the continent. "Citizen Scientists" observe and report nestings. In real time, the data for each species is reported for each state. In 2012, North Carolina reported 175 nesting attempts by Eastern Bluebirds and four for the Tufted Titmouse. This increases the odds of having a nesting Tufted Titmouse to one in forty-four.

Texas did even better than that. The Tufted Titmouse had twenty-four nesting attempts reported and the Black-crested Titmouse thirteen. This total, thirty-seven compared to 348 Eastern Bluebird nests, rounds off to one in ten nests were either created by a Tufted or a Black-Crested Titmouse when compared to the Eastern Bluebird. It is data like this that illustrates the importance of collecting information from many nestbox trails and backyards, not just one. My data would indicate that the Tufted Titmouse is very rare; whereas the NestWatch data for both North Carolina and Texas gives a much more accurate picture. NestWatch information can be found at www.nestwatch.org. It is time to register my four new Texas nestboxes and start reporting!

Featured Native Plant : *Agarita – Mahonia trifloiolata* (Member of Berberidaceae family)



Photo by Judy Hetherington

By Judy Hetherington, Master Naturalist

Agarita is also called Algerita, Will Currant, and Laredo Mahonia. It's an evergreen shrub with gray-green leaves that is under-utilized in landscapes. Of course, the prickly leaves mean that it needs to be toward the back of a garden bed. In fact, it makes an excellent shrub in front of windows to deter burglars. My husband Brian tells the story of a woman who was tired of her sons taking a short cut off the front porch. She planted agaritas, problem solved.

Agarita is an important plant for wildlife, too. It blooms very early (February–April), proving nectar for bees. The flowers also attract other insects and birds. It provides cover for quail and small mammals. In the fall, agarita produces abundant fruits that are eaten by many birds and animals including bluebirds. It is one of those plants that keep over-wintering birds alive. The berries are plump and pea-sized. If you're willing to dodge the leaves, you can make jelly or wine. The root can be used to produce a yellow dye. Agarita grows in dry, stony soils over most of Texas except the east and southeast portions. It is normally three to four feet tall, with stiff, spiny, holly-like leaves (which are alternate,) two to four inches long and divided into three leaflets which have three to seven lobes ending in sharp spines.

Deer avoid this plant due to the prickly leaves. Jelly Recipe: (<http://texasjellymaking.wordpress.com/2011/04/26/agarita-jelly-recipe/>)



Photo by Judy Hetherington



Photo by Joseph A. Marcus



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

Send street or email address changes to Caryn Brewer at: records@texasbluebirdsociety.org or send to our P.O. Box.

Need Nestboxes?

Check for a nestbox distributor near you.

Go to www.txblues.org and click

Nestbox Distributors

from the main menu.



Photo by Luke Hoag

ALL NATIVE CAVITY-NESTERS are protected by federal law.

Do not remove an active nest or eggs except for House Sparrows

Monitor the nest and report to NestWatch.

Bluebirds Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time

2013 Summer Symposium

August 10th

Mount Pleasant Civic Center

Find Registration form and event details on page 3

Helen Munro, former President of the North Carolina Bluebird Society, has retired to Texas and is now an active member of TBS. Read Helen's article on page one The Black-crested and Tufted Titmouse Favor Texas

Helen, and her NCBS members, created the "Bluebirds Inside A Nestbox" video; a regular feature we enjoy watching at our annual events.



I am starving! And my babies keep calling for more!!

Congratulations to Lowell Anderson, winner of the photo caption contest, and recipient of a 2014 TBS membership! Thanks to all who entered.

Mealworm Feeder Foils Mockingbird



Photo by Mike and Jean Drummond

By Linda Crum, Master Naturalist

Mockingbirds always bring drama to the scene. I had modified an old nestbox to make a mealworm feeder by taking off part of the front of the nestbox. It worked like a charm – that is until the mockingbirds discovered it. Those mockingbirds guarded it with a vengeance. Poor little bluebirds were left looking on from the pear tree wondering what happened. I started researching the web for mealworm feeders that would foil those mockingbirds. I really hit

the jackpot when I found one with detailed plans designed by Haleya Priest. After installation, the bluebirds were again feasting on mealworms while the mockingbirds were thoroughly frustrated. The feeder's access ports are 1.5 inches – small enough to deny mockingbird entrance, while letting the bluebirds enter the feeder to retrieve mealworms. Do not make the platform smaller or the mockingbird can reach the mealworms. Oh yes, the mockingbirds still chase the bluebirds away from the feeder for a while, but then give up. Plans can be found at <http://bluebird.htmlplanet.com/fawzifeeder.html>



Photo by Linda Crum