

BRAS Bluebird Newsletter July 2019

Mid July is here and the trails are markedly quieter now that the majority of tree swallows which used our nestboxes have fledged! There is no longer the expectation of extended trail walks. Take time to enjoy the journey! The only birds we typically see nesting in our nestboxes in late July are bluebirds or house wrens so walks don't take as long. It is still VERY important to continue weekly nestbox checks until the end of July and at least every two weeks in August. You just never know when a bluebird will start a second or possibly third nesting! ☺ The latest fledging of bluebirds reported in our group was in early September about 4 years ago. The one constant of bluebird trail monitoring is that there IS no constant- changes and surprises are found on each trail walk, right?

Of course, the non-native house sparrow will still try to nest in available nestboxes so please continue to monitor and remove them before they are successful! I have seen at least three trails this week with house sparrow nesting attempts even though there were none earlier in the season! It's almost as if they are trying to take advantage of the newly vacated nestboxes which fledged swallows recently. Trapping juvenile house sparrows at this time of year on private residences can help keep future populations more manageable. Ground sparrow traps are especially effective now. They should of course be carefully monitored at least hourly whenever any trap is being used.

In the May 2019 Bluebird newsletter, we asked for counts from all the Black River Audubon Society bluebird trail monitors plus any private bluebird landlords interested in sending their information to be included on our June 1st count spreadsheet. This document is included as an attachment to this current newsletter. Please review it for accuracy and contact me if corrections are needed. I would like to thank Stephanie Bevan for the incredible job she did in creating an attractive and legible document from the raw material I sent her! She is amazing!!

Thanks, so much Stephanie!



Male Bluebird



Unusual white bluebird eggs

Some of the other baby birds seen this year in nestboxes were black capped chickadees pictured below (yes, all eight fledged!) and newly hatched tree swallows.



The kestrel program had its best year ever with three successful clutches of kestrels fledging. Program director Larry Wilson is very happy! Pictured below is a female kestrel on her eggs, the clutch of kestrel eggs and kestrel monitor Diana Steele- also very happy with a kestrel chick!



The Black River Audubon Society Purple Martin program has been busy too this year. We were treated to an afternoon of watching the program director John Ryan count purple martin chicks at his home with the assistance of his 12-year-old knowledgeable helper, Charlie. They also monitor the purple martin nestboxes at Lakeview Park in Lorain plus some private ones at a summer home. It is a unique nest monitoring art- very different from bluebird trails in many ways but with the same satisfaction when the young birds successfully fledge.



In mid-June there were a significant number of tree swallow chick losses which were related to the heavy rains and subsequent inability of parent tree swallows to obtain sufficient food for their young. Since tree swallows are aerial insectivores, they catch their food flying on the wing. When there are long periods of heavy rain, insects are not flying and food is not available for the young swallows. It was a shock to see so many deaths however on our trails. It was unlike anything I have seen but the amount of rainfall directly corresponded to the subsequent finding of dead young. The bluebirds seemed to fare better during this period- perhaps because they are not dependent on flying insects but choose primarily those on the ground and their diets even include some seeds and berries. Not all trails had losses but some had very high percentages. Here is a list of the tree swallow losses reported by monitors on their trail checks from 6/17- 7/5. Multiple numbers indicate multiple trails visits with dead found.

Bur Oak 6+7+2=14

Caley 2

CMA in Oberlin 23+4+1+2=30

Duck Pond 1+5=6

Equestrian North and South trails 2

Carlisle Visitor Center 7+3+2=12

Columbia 0

Crook St. 1 TRES plus 4 dead bluebirds

Days 1+1=2

Eastern Avenue 0

Findley 0

Forest Hills 0

Hale Road 18

High Meadows $9+4+3+3=19$

Indian Hollow 0

Kendal 3

LCCC $4+13=17$

Bacon House 0

Bacon Woods $5+1+1=7$

New Russia Township $1+2+2=5$

New Russia Cemetery 0

Oberlin College Meadow 4

Olsen 0

Ridge Hill $5+3=8$

Royal Oaks $6+4=10$

Sandy Ridge $5+6=11$

Sherod 0

Wellington 11

Westwood 0

Dalton 0 TRES (loss of 5 bluebirds however)

Private homeowner Tammy Martin reported the loss of 3 out of her 6 young TRES during this time also.

Altogether there were at least 185 TRES chicks found dead during this period of heavy rains. Our June 1st count of tree swallow eggs or chicks totaled 1306 this year on the trails so to lose 185 of those within a short time frame was rough. A 14 % loss! It was very hard to find these young dead- the only thing we could do was to try to change wet nests with dry ones whenever possible and remove the dead young in an attempt to prevent illness and disease in surviving chicks in the clutches. Sometimes an entire clutch was lost, in other cases it was only part of the clutch. Factors which impacted the reasons for higher mortality on some trails versus other locations could include age of chicks during actual heavy rain periods, possibly spacing distances of nestboxes, habitat, and even condition and maturity of parents related to food foraging.

Emails sent to the Ohio Bluebird Society confirmed that this was not just a local Lorain County occurrence but was happening throughout the state. Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Nestwatch program was contacted also to seek opinions about any other possible causes for the high numbers of deaths (like disease outbreak, etc.) but the responses agreed with the hypothesis of starvation related to excessive unusual rain. A weather site called Wunderground shows that between June 12 and 20 there was a rainfall total of 4.08 inches compared to the usual 1.1 inches in our area, almost 4 times what is normal.

On a happier note... I received the following three very cool photos from Mike Smith, monitor for the Carlisle Equestrian trails. He found a tree swallow nest with an extravagant egret feather inside. Quite a touch of class!! He also sent the photo below of an unusual misshapen egg which was found in another nest. Possibly a double yolk egg? Rarely do these unusual shaped eggs hatch. Mike reported that only four of these eggs did hatch.



If you are looking for an excuse to travel next March 11-15, 2020 there will be a conference of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) in Kearney, Nebraska. It has an impressive list of birding field trips, speakers, bird watching opportunities and entertainment. This is the area where 80 percent of the world's sandhill cranes visit every spring on their migration to Artic and sub-Artic nesting grounds. My husband and I are really looking forward to this conference and hope to see many of you there too! Check out this link for more info:

http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/event/nabs-conference/?instance_id=15

As summer ends and your nestboxes empty completely I ask that all trail monitors please send me your reports and monitoring notes. Each year, with the help of computer whiz volunteers, we are able to enter data on hundreds of nesting attempts into Cornell Lab's Nestwatch site. Last year we entered 100% of our nesting records into Nestwatch! Let's do it again!

Information from private home nestboxes is included with the fledgling report which will be submitted to the Ohio Bluebird Society each fall. Please email me at pennybrandau@gmail.com

with simply a listing of what birds nested in your bluebird boxes and how many eggs, chicks and fledglings they had. Thank you!!



Pictured above are our two youngest trail monitors! The brothers help their dad on his trail and are learning a lot about bluebird conservation as they enjoy time in nature. Photo by Tim McDaniel.

“Once upon a time...there was the simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy. The birds still remember what we have forgotten, that the world is meant to be celebrated.” quote by Terry Tempest Williams.

I wish you bluebirds and the joy of morning and evening song!

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