

TEXAS Blues



The Newsletter of the Texas Bluebird Society Volume 8, Issue 1

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Look for **"TXblues.org"** in this issue. It is a shortcut to texasbluebirdsociety.org, which often gets hyphenated in print. Use 11 characters vs. 24 characters. Try it! Visit www.TXblues.org. Substitute "@TXBlues.org" with any of our custom email addresses.

Digital Camera — Makes Nestwatching a Snap

by Keith Kridler

During the 2008 nesting season, a monitor in Wisconsin suggested a digital camera instead of an "automobile inspection mirror" to obtain data for nesting records.

He snapshots the "box number" on the outside of the nestbox, and then the nest and eggs. After he visits nestboxes, he reviews photos to count eggs and chicks. The observations can be recorded directly into NestWatch, the North American database housed at Cornell Lab of Ornithology (www.nestwatch.org).

Carrying digital cameras on the trails is a very good idea. You can record all sorts of stuff as you travel your trails.

Nest shots of bluebird eggs would be really interesting as when an egg is first laid they are dull and sometimes have streaks of blood or white streaks of feces on them. The next time you monitor, the eggs should have been moved or turned and they will be facing different directions. Females roll the eggs around every hour or so.

By day ten the color of the eggs should be changing as the chicks form inside the egg. This changes the translucent properties of the eggs. The air sack in the large end of the eggs changes size or seems to disappear.

The turning and rubbing of the eggs against each other will begin to give the eggs a shiny or glossy look. The blood streaks should have faded by now and the white streaks should have worn off for the most part.

Any time the eggs remain in the same position from week to week probably means they were abandoned.



It's time to begin recording weekly nestbox observations at www.nestwatch.org

TBS DROPS "INDIVIDUAL" OPTION

TBS no longer offers a \$10 individual membership. The Board made this decision because the little used option complicated bookkeeping and membership record data entry.

EASTERN BLUEBIRD POPULATION DOWN 19% IN TEXAS

Audubon unpublished data shows a 19% decrease in the population of Eastern Bluebirds in Texas (1966–2005,) as compared to a 311% increase nationwide and a northward shift of 115 miles, according to Rob Fergus, Senior Scientist for Urban Bird Conservation, National Audubon Society on February 15, 2009.



"OPEN SHADE"

This picture shows a nestbox that was active late last summer. The story by Barbara Vinson, in Volume 7, issue 4 brought speculation. *Why did bluebirds select open shade nestboxes rather than 'out-in-the-open' nestboxes in 2008?*

TBS will monitor temperature and productivity this season in nestboxes at Hornsby Bend that are in shade; in direct sun; and, in sun with HeatShields installed. Dataloggers for this study were loaned to TBS by Cornell Lab of Ornithology.



Photo by Barbara Vinson.

Azle's Trailblazer — Harry Evans

by Barb Ohlman, a TBS Ambassador in Keller

In 2007 when the City of Azle began the planning stages for a new park, Texas Bluebird Society was contacted by Kyle Culwell with Azle Parks Dept. He was looking for someone who could advise them with where to place a bluebird trail and provide consulting services as they went along in the process. The person who came to Pauline's (TBS President) mind as "the man for the job" was member, Harry Evans.



Pauline and Ron Tom join Harry Evans at the Bluebird Trail in Azle's Central Park

Harry earned his Bird Study Merit Badge over 50 years ago and has been a bird enthusiast ever since. His home sits on the shores of Eagle

Mountain Lake. This gives him the opportunity to feed and watch the many birds which are attracted to the lake and surrounding habitat. Harry also knows bluebirds. Harry has helped Cheryl Anderson, previous owner of The Birdhouse in Azle, monitor the existing Azle Bluebird Trail for the past 3 years. After joining TBS he mounted 2 bluebird nest boxes on his property and has helped encourage many of his friends to place boxes on their properties. So he welcomed the opportunity to work with the City of Azle.

When Harry Evans and Kyle Culwell met for the first time, they surveyed the park together. With Harry's direction, it was determined that 6 nestboxes would be mounted in a roughly 3 acre area. This past summer, Azle was ready for the bluebird trail. The City provided the hardware, TBS provided the nestboxes and Harry provided the knowledge and labor. Thanks to TBS and Harry Evans, the City of Azle now has a Bluebird Trail for the residents to enjoy.



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

John Bailey	TH, Montgomery	RJP, McDade
JB, Corpus Christi	MH, Del Valle	NP, Round Rock
Edra Bogucki	Michelle Hertter	Jo Diane Potter
Jack Boyd	NH, Clyde	Linda Prestz
J. E. & Mary Burton	Joan & Anastacio Hoyumpa	CP, Abilene
Linda Chapel	Bill & Julie Hughes	JR, Abilene
Judy Collier	Christi Hutchins	Rex & Alice Reavis
Charlie Crabbe	EH, Tuscola	PR, Comanche
Joe & Lorelei De Angelis	BK, Austin	NS, Bastrop
Dick Colburn	Dolores Leeper	Ann Seavert
TD, Mt. Vernon	John Lineweaver	JS, Rockwall
Jean Dotson	KL, Utopia	LS, Round Rock
Patty Esposito	Donna Martin-Warren	Ann Strand
Ann Fiske	CM, San Angelo	TA, Round Rock
Marsha Gavitt	Peggy McCollum	DW, Tuscola
RH, Abilene	Moira Namuth	JW, Cedar Creek
Thomas Hamilton	CN, Elgin	PW, The Woodlands
CHR, Mansfield	Jim & Ann Patton	
MH, Abilene	J.P. Pawlus	

Special Thanks to Volunteers!

Doug Rohde, TBS Life Member and former Board Member, made a TBS presentation to Robson Ranch Garden Club on November 17th. **Barb Ohlman**, **Harry Evans**, and **Susan Tartaglino** assisted with set-up and “One Nestbox” membership exchanges.

Larry LeGrand, made a trip from Montgomery to Bronte in February to ferry nestboxes back to our storage unit in Conroe—a 14-hour trip.

Thanks, as always, to our long-time volunteers **Bob Houck** and **Brian & Judy Hetherington** who constructed the nestboxes. **Members of Big Country Master Naturalists** assisted in the assembly.

The Hetheringtons presented the bluebird portions of the January “Wildlife Habitat” seminar in Abilene. (TBS served as a co-sponsor.)

Larry LeGrand volunteered to ship “official TBS nestboxes” ordered through our website. So, we’re now set to ship nestboxes in increments of four, when nestboxes are available.

Karen Sterling, Wildlife Habitat Steward, staffed the “One Nestbox” membership exchange table at TBS’ presentation to Bastrop County Audubon Society.

THANK YOU TO THOSE WHO GAVE A DONATION SINCE THE LAST NEWSLETTER.

Per Board decision, all undesignated donations in 2009 will go towards the purchase of lumber for TBS nestboxes.

Dr. Michael Amsden	Bill Griffith	Larry Rankin
Bastrop Co. Audubon	R. L. Langley	Jo & Ruth Reeves
Dorothy Borders	Cathie Lehman	Robson Ranch
Edra Bogucki	Marijane Lipscomb	Paula Santagata
Martha Carlson	Ed Melson	Melinda Walker
Barbara Coldwell	Barb Ohlman	Ricky Walker
Harry Evans	Jeri Porter	K. & Melanie Welch
Jo Ann Graves	Charles & Jackie Post	Mike Whelan

Matthew Duerr Completes Eagle Scout Project



"NestWatch ready" nestboxes at Lake Tawakoni State Park in Wills Point, "Bluebird Capital of Texas."



TBS sponsored the project, along with Texas Parks & Wildlife. TBS Members provided major funding. TBS Member, David Shiels (his assistant Scout Master), provided technical advice. Troop 332 in Kaufman assisted in nestbox construction and preparation. Read the story of installation in the next issue of Texas Blues.

CLASSIFIEDS

On Demand List "Gopher": Several times a month, we need a volunteer to "gopher" specific names and email addresses in our massive membership Excel spreadsheet—1,726 rows (and growing) and 58 columns, which is stored on an FTP. For instance, a Board Member might request "Names & Email addresses of members and former members in Montgomery County." Using Excel's "filter" feature, the custom list can be created in minutes.

CPA: Review TBS 2008 financial records in Quick Books and give occasional pro bono advice to the Treasurer or Board.

Woodcraftsman: Rip and detail front panel for nestboxes in batches of 250 according to specifications: sanded 1/8-inch hole; "kerfs"; two screws in exact spots to make each nestbox "Van Ert Trap-ready"; and, woodburning the TBS logo.

Interested in one of these volunteer opportunities? Contact Pauline Tom, pauline@TXblues.org or 512.268.5678.

Upcoming Events

April							May						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			1	2	3	4						1	2
5	6	7	8	9	10	11	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
12	13	14	15	16	17	18	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
19	20	21	22	23	24	25	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
26	27	28	29	30			24	25	26	27	28	29	30
													31

- April 4 Pace Creek Spring Fling, Hemphill
- April 18 Earth Day, The Woodlands & Bryan/CS
- April 25 Bluebird Festival, Wills Point
- May 26 TX Outdoor Woman Network, Austin
- May 30 Founder's Day Festival, Rockwall
- June 13 Texas Blueberry Festival, Nacogdoches
- August 8 7th Annual TBS Symposium, Waxahachie
- October 3 TP&W EXPO, Austin
- October 9 Celebrate Roanoke, Roanoke

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, all 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

(Continued on page 6)



FROM THE MAILBOX

Danny Seale, longtime TBS member, has periodically corresponded with Pauline Tom. More than once, he asked for a TBS cap, which is now available through our website's "Sales" page. In late 2008, he noticed her husband's name. Danny and Ron were in the same unit at Texas A&M in the late 60's! Pauline asked for details on "his" bluebirds in the Golden Triangle. Danny gets credit for suggesting to TBS the Red Bud Festival in Buna (March 14th.)

I live in West Orange, I've got a box on a pipeline crossing that hatched two nestings, total of 7 birds including parents. The best perches for them are the high lines, and it's easy to drive down the road and count them in the summer and for sure during the winter.

We've got some other pairs of bluebirds that are nesting on the pipeline right-of-ways, in high line poles, not a tree in sight for 150 yards or more. They have keyed on the woodpecker holes and nest in them. But, they for some reason don't fledge many birds, maybe only two for the season, or at least when you see the family units in early fall, you don't see many birds. I think that might be from in-breeding and eggs not hatching - can't figure out why in all the places, those two pairs of bluebirds chose to nest under pipeline right of ways.

But, that being said, we're starting to get other pairs nesting where they should, around people's houses and I got a friend with some open land, we've got boxes there and they are being used.

My sister, Joyce Miller in Little Cypress (north of Orange), has bluebirds building in her box every year. The area has lots and trees and open spaces. There are lot's of bluebirds there, too. Quite a few people have boxes.

The local Camp Fire girls bunch has a bluebird event in the spring for the little girls. One year I donated some cut out boxes and showed the ladies how to nail and screw them together, and the fathers helped.

One of the little girls in the Camp Fire is the daughter of my sister's friends, and they have older girls the same age, so I know the family. I had put up a box out of their kitchen window and birds had used it a time or two, but not every year. When she got her Camp Fire box put up, she put it about 6 ft. from the box (my box) - Well, a pair of bluebirds moved in and fledged about 4. They looked at them and the little girl was thrilled that they had chosen her box.

Some Texans' bluebirds show absolutely no interest in freeze-dried mealworms. But, Danny Seale shares an entirely different experience:

We put up a bluebird feeder and have been using freeze dried larvae, the birds really like them and come back every year when the weather cools, perching on the feeder as if to say "It's that time of year again. Where is the food?"

You can really train them with food. I've got a pair of Carolina Wrens that I feed year around. Once last year, I counted 6 baby fledglings that they were feeding with the freeze dried larvae worms. They are so much easier to fool with than mealworms.

—Danny Seale

1/6/2009

We live in semi-rural Ellis County just south of Dallas. We have four nesting boxes and last year we had between 15 and 18 baby birds. The first nest had only one baby.

At the end of the nesting season I cleaned all the boxes. Over Christmas, we noticed a lot of activity around one of the boxes we can see from our kitchen window. We checked the box on New Years day and found a nest and one egg! No additional eggs to date. I am not a Bluebird specialist (of course), but assume this is somewhat unusual.

Assuming no additional eggs in the next few days, should I remove the nest and/or egg, or should I just leave it as is?

—WSP, Waxahachie

I've heard of bluebirds delaying incubation for two weeks or longer at the beginning of the nesting season. Typically, a bluebird lays her clutch one egg a day, one day after another.

Although it's highly unlikely that she'll complete this clutch, I suggest waiting until late January to remove the egg.

Last year, the earliest viable egg we heard of in Texas was dated February 7th with a fledge date of March 13th.

Plumage, Molt

(Continued from page 5)

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.

Reprinted from Volume 4, Issue 1. Most TBS members have not seen this article. All past newsletters are available through our [website](#).



Bluebird Symposium 2009 in Waxahachie (with Silent Auction)

Saturday, August 8, 2009
 Lakeview Camp and Conference Center
 5128 FM 66 • Waxahachie, TX 75167
 (7 miles from Exit 399 A on I 35 E, toward Maypearl)

Registration at the Door 8:30 AM

Silent Auction

Speakers 9:00 AM – 3:30 PM

Featured Speaker: Keith Kridler

- Author, Speaker, Naturalist
- Nestbox basics for success
 - How, What & Why of Bluebirds

Other Speakers:

- Nestbox installation
- Gardening to draw Bluebirds
- Human impact on Bluebirds
- Predator control for Bluebirds
- Recordkeeping in NestWatch

Early Bird Registration Bonus: Register by July 1, 2009, and receive 10 chances toward drawing of original Bluebird oil painting by Mary Rabien, noted TX artist.

Pre-registration required for lunch. \$15.00 total. Must be postmarked by July 28, 2009.

At the Door Registration (No Lunch) \$10.00

Lunch Menu: Lunch includes choice of two entrees, two vegetables, salad and potato bar, dessert bar.



Eastern Bluebird Painting by Mary Rabien will be raffled.

Raffle tickets available at door: \$3 each or 10 for \$15

(Early Bird Registrants receive 10 chances in the raffle.)

Registration Form

Registrant #1 Name _____ Name for Name Tag _____
 Street Address _____ City _____
 State _____ Zip _____
 Home Phone _____ Work Phone _____
 E-mail _____

Registrant #2 Name _____ Name for Name Tag _____
 Street Address _____ City _____
 State _____ Zip _____
 Home Phone _____ Work Phone _____
 E-mail _____

Registrant # (Please Circle)	Description	Cost
1 2	Member	\$15
1 2	New Member*	\$15
1 2	Non-Member	\$15
Total Due:		

* If you would like to join TBS, you may register as a "TBS New Member". We will also reserve a complimentary nestbox for you.

Mail Registration Form with payment (\$15.00 per registrant) made payable to "Texas Bluebird Society" to:
 Dan Rayfield, Registrar
 3232 Stout Road
 Midlothian, TX 76065

For more information contact:
 Lysle Mockler
 lbmockler@mac.com
 972.351.2911 or 972.435.6271.

Please send donations (tax deductible as allowed by law) for Silent Auction to: (if using UPS or FedEx)
 Carolyn Gritzmaker
 PO Box 260
 Maypearl TX 76064-0260

Contact Carolyn at c.gritzmaker@gmail.com or 972.435.2731



BLUES NEWS

Harold has donated one of these birdbaths, crafted with recycled materials, for the "Bluebird Symposium 2009 in Waxahachie" Silent Auction.



Photo by Harold Williams, Dripping Springs.



Texas Bluebird Society
PO Box 40868
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RETURN SERVICE
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Do bluebirds have "breeding plumage"? Learn about juvenal plumage, molt, and feathers from Texas ornithologist, John Arvin. Page 5.

There has been a drought in Comanche, Texas.

This Eastern Bluebird got lucky when he found some ice left from the morning dew.



Photo taken by Polly Reed

In January and February, TBS received reports of bluebirds building nests.



Bill Griffith snapped this photo of a complete pine straw nest in Conroe in mid-February. (Most often in Texas, bluebirds build nests with dried grass.)



TBS Board of Directors

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- LeAnn Sharp, Utopia, Vice President
- David Smith, San Antonio, Secretary
- Linda Crum, Treasurer, The Woodlands
- Norm Shoemaker, Woden
- Jennifer Fleming, Orange
- Caryn Brewer, Conroe
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- Debbie Bradshaw Park, Sour Lake

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