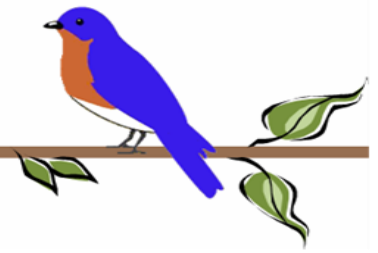


TEXAS Blues



Texas Bluebird Society Newsletter · Volume 11. Issue 2

MAY 2012

WHY SO BLUE?

For decades, scientists have known how birds with yellow or red feathers usually get their color: It comes from pigments in foods the birds eat. Flamingoes, for instance, extract pink pigments from algae and crustaceans they filter out of the water. The challenge has been to figure out exactly how bluebirds get their color. It can't be their diet: blue pigments, like those in blueberries, are destroyed when birds digest them. Scientists theorized that birds look blue for the same reason the sky looks blue: Red and yellow wavelengths pass through the atmosphere, but shorter blue wavelengths bounce off of particles and scatter, emitting a blue glow in every direction.

Richard Prum, an ornithologist at Yale, discovered that birds make blue feathers in a different way. "Let's look at some birds!" he says as he pulls out a drawer full of the sewn-up skins of various species of cotingas, birds that live in Central and South America. At first they all look like pretty bluebirds with black marks. But look closer, and the different species have slightly different shades of blue.

To find the origins of avian blue, Prum and his colleagues have analyzed hundreds of feathers—from representatives of almost every group that evolved blue coloration—at the Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois, where particle accelerators generate extremely strong X-rays.

Prum discovered that as a blue feather grows something amazing happens. Inside each cell, stringy keratin molecules separate from water like oil from vinegar. When the cell dies, the water dries away and is replaced by air, leaving a structure of keratin protein interspersed with air pockets, like a sponge or a box of spaghetti. When white light strikes a blue feather, the keratin pattern causes red and yellow wavelengths to cancel each other out while blue wavelength of light reinforce and amplify one another and

reflect back to the beholder's eye. The result: blue, an example of what scientists call a structural color (as opposed to a pigmented color) because it's generated by light interacting with a feather's 3-D arrangement. And different shapes and sizes of these air pockets and keratin make different shades of blue.

Building such precise nanostructures is an exceptional evolutionary feat of engineering, yet the color blue has popped up independently on many different branches of the bird family tree, especially in males. Which raises the question: Why? One theory is that a set of fine blue feathers signifies a healthy, well-fed male, advertising his good genes to potential mates. "This is like match.com, complete with how much money you have in the bank, who your family was, religion, do you have sexually transmitted diseases—all these practical things," Prum says. But he thinks biologists have gone too far with the idea that male ornaments, such as antlers or wattles, are signals to females. "I think that can be true, but that it's mostly not true," he says; perhaps they are "merely beautiful."



New research into a long puzzling feature of avian life shows there is more to color than meets the eye.

What if birds, like humans, have a sense of beauty? Rather than being cold, calculating egg laying machines, what if female birds just like pretty boys? Prum has been teaching a class called "Evolution of Beauty" and is working on a theory that combines evolution and aesthetics; he thinks physical beauty in animals evolves along with attraction to it. Prum elaborates with philosophers, mathematicians and physicists; his willingness to think across disciplines was part of what won him a MacArthur Fellowship, or "genius grant," a few years ago. He's using the highest tech tools to study an age-old question. "It's simultaneously about physics, etcetera, but it's really about, what do females want? It's really about beauty."

By Helen Field *Reprinted from Smithsonian.com March 2012*

Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, April 3, 1852
"Bluebirds carry the sky on their backs."

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Contact Us

TBS
PO Box 40868
Austin, TX 78704

Pauline Tom
512.268.5678
ptom5678@gmail.com

Visit our website
www.txblues.org

Volunteers Are Appreciated!

Special thanks to Mauro Leibelt, Fulgent Web Solutions (Kingston WA), for creating, enhancing, and maintaining our website, hosting the server, and generously donating 8.5 years of service to TBS.

Clark Beasley
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TBS recently transferred the website to a new host and hired Clyde Camp, CRC Enterprises, to convert the website from custom code to HTML, providing TBS with support access.

Need Volunteers

TBS (webteam@txblues.org) is accepting resumes for a Volunteer Webmaster and Volunteer Assistant Webmaster. Experience with HTML & DreamWeaver is required for these positions.

TBS Thanks Donors For Their Financial Support!

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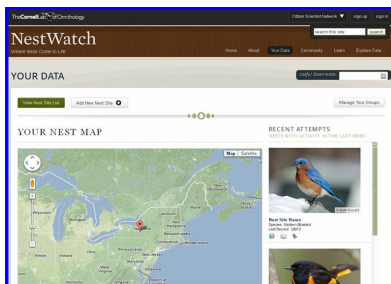
We print names of all new members who give to us permission on Membership Form.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Exploring and Conserving Nature

Get a New View of Bird Life with NestWatch Help track changes in bird nesting activities

(April 13, 2012 Press Release) *Ithaca, NY*—Across the continent, birds are in a flutter of wooing and nest-building. Perhaps there's an American Robin building her mud and grass bowl on your porch light or a Northern Mockingbird weaving a twiggy nest in your shrubs. If you find a nest nearby, you have a front-row seat to the daily drama of bird life. It's also a perfect opportunity to become part of the [NestWatch](#) project at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. NestWatch has been tracking trends in the nesting success of hundreds of species of birds across the country for more than 40 years.



New features, new logo, new look!
NestWatch is even easier.

"It's only when many thousands of volunteers are collecting data over a vast area that scientists can fully measure the impacts of environmental change and land-use on breeding birds," says Jason

Martin, NestWatch project leader. "Take climate change, for example. We need a massive amount of data to investigate the potential impacts that altered climatic patterns may have on breeding birds. If birds start nesting sooner, as some species are doing, they may eventually become out of sync with their food supplies."

As a NestWatch participant, you'll visit one or more nests or nest boxes every 3 to 4 days and report what you see at www.NestWatch.org—when the first eggs are laid, total number of eggs and young, and when the hatchlings take their first faltering flights. After signing up, you'll first do a bit of online training to understand how best to observe nesting birds without disturbing them. You'll learn the best time to check nests and how to avoid accidentally leading predators to them.

Participation in NestWatch is open to anyone who is interested in birds and nature and is free. Signing up is easy via the NestWatch website www.nestwatch.org. There are online tutorials to help you along the way and a chance to share your experiences with others on [Facebook](#). It's a great way to connect with other bird watchers and with nature in your own backyard

Share The Bluebirds Create A Bluebird Trail

In early February, the Golden Triangle Audubon Society (GTAS), wanted to add a bluebird trail as one of their community and educational projects. GTAS asked their members John and Debbie Park to install a trail at Tyrrell Park located in Beaumont. In turn, the Parks' enlisted the help of their friends and fellow TBS members, Johnnie and Jennifer Fleming to help with the installation and to assist with reporting nesting activity into the NestWatch monitoring program.



Tyrrell Park employees and visitors alike were very interested in the installation of five TBS nest-boxes as eight or nine bluebirds



Installation sites and relevant information was entered in NestWatch.

Bluebird trails in public parks and gardens are a great way for everyone to enjoy our bluebird friends, and contributes to the TBS conservation efforts. There are many trails in Texas, check for a local trail near you.



Walk the gardens and bluebird trail at Beaumont Botanical Gardens in Tyrrell Park. Located on Babe Zaharias Drive Beaumont, Texas.

Photos by John Park

Neighborhood Watch—Keeping Native Cavity-Nesters Safe

By a North Texas Bluebird Enthusiast

IN AN EFFORT TO IMPROVE THE BREEDING SUCCESS of Eastern Bluebirds and Purple Martins, a group of households in one North Texas neighborhood embarked on an avian “Neighborhood Watch” program to help their feathered friends. The basic needs of all beings are food, water, shelter, and a place to raise their young. Add protection from predators and environmental hazards such as pesticide use, and you have a summary of the issues facing native cavity nesting birds.

Competition for nesting sites is tremendous and bluebirds and martins suffer intense pressure from two non-native bird species; House Sparrows and European Starlings. Unfortunately, these invasive species eliminate their competitors (the native cavity-nesting birds) by destroying nests and eggs and even killing the adult bluebirds and martins. Finding martin eggs on the ground and adult bluebirds pecked to death in their houses inspired the neighbors to learn more about assisting the birds they enjoyed so much.



Male and female HOSP.
Photo by Tom Vezo.

Note: House sparrows (also known as English sparrows) should not be confused with the numerous native sparrow species. (The male appears with a black throat, white cheeks, and a chestnut nape, while the females lack the black throat and have a dingy breast with a dull eye-stripe).

Native sparrows do not use nestboxes or pose a threat to other native birds.

Food

Food and water are obvious needs. Much has been written about “wildscaping” or creating habitat for wildlife by planting native plants and providing safe sources of clean water. Texas Parks and Wildlife <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us> and the National Wildlife Federation <http://www.nwf.org> are good starting points for more information. Shrubs such as this native elderberry (just getting ready to bloom) provide valuable berries as well as shelter.



Supplement food supply with native plants

In this neighborhood, bird feeding is popular. House Sparrows are notorious for eating “junk food” (ever see one in a McDonald’s parking lot?) and will eat grains that most native birds don’t like. To avoid encouraging House Sparrows, the group stopped feeding the inexpensive bird seed mixes containing milo and other grains as fillers. Even if these mixes seemed to be saving money, much of the mix was wasted anyway. A smaller amount of black oil sunflower seed for the same cost is more attractive to native seed eaters and less attractive to the House Sparrows.

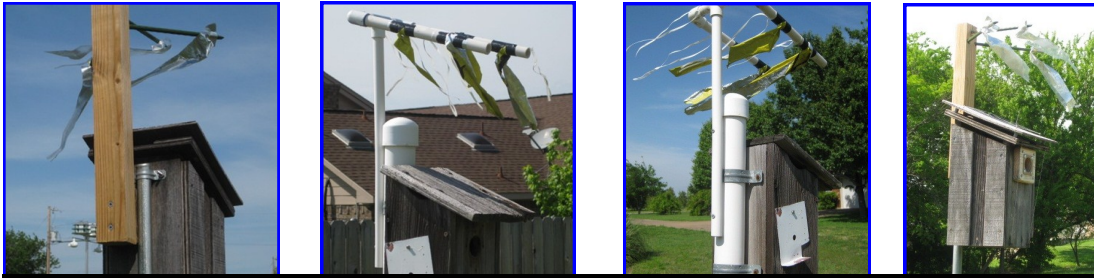
Shelter

House Sparrows will nest in almost any cavity. Any bird house that provides a successful House Sparrow nest site is a detriment to the natives, as more sparrows equals more danger to the natives. Ornamental houses that can’t be opened for proper cleaning and monitoring the health of the nest aren’t good nest sites, even though they are fun to look at. The openings of these houses were plugged and the houses left in place as decorations. Starlings can be readily excluded from bluebird housing by providing nestboxes with the properly sized 1.5” opening and martins can be protected by providing housing with SREH, starling resistant entry holes. Safe housing designed for bluebirds is available from the Texas Bluebird Society at <http://texasbluebirdsociety.org/Sales.php>.



Block holes on ornamental houses. They are designed for “art,” not for use as true nestboxes.

House Sparrows are very suspicious and can usually be kept away from active bluebird nests by using a “sparrow spooker.” Sparrow spookers are devices attached to the nestboxes that have shiny flutter strips hanging down that frighten the sparrows away. Bluebirds are not as sensitive to spookers but spookers should not be added to the houses until the bluebirds have committed to the nestbox by building a nest and laying the first egg. At that point, they will not abandon the nest, even if they are suspicious of the spooker. It is important not to leave the spookers up all the time, as eventually the sparrows might also become acclimated to them. Spookers are used only until the young bluebirds fledge; then they are removed and replaced when the next bluebird eggs are laid. While spookers are commercially available, they are easy and inexpensive to make as demonstrated by the photos of homemade spookers. All bluebird nestboxes in the neighborhood are protected with spookers after the first bluebird egg is laid.



A variety of homemade sparrow spookers are shown above. Proven protection against House Sparrows if used after 1st egg is laid.

Finally, a trapping program was begun. Any time traps are used, they must be carefully observed to ensure any native birds that are trapped are quickly released unharmed. A very effective trap known as the Spare-O-Door <http://purplemartin.org/shop> is used in an old converted martin house, but the Spare-O-door can be easily added to a homemade nest box and still be effective. As house sparrows are always looking for competitor nests to eliminate, they will come to check out this "nestbox" even if they have a nest site elsewhere. The use of this trap allows most sparrows to be caught before they attempt to take over a bluebird house. All the blue bird nestboxes are fitted in advance to accept the Van Ert sparrow trap <http://www.vanerttraps.com> and is utilized when a nesting sparrow pair is found in a bluebird box.



The left-hand door has been replaced with a Spare-O-Door, an ingenious trap-door for catching House Sparrows



Orange dot indicates a bird is now trapped.

Editor's Note: The "Texas Nestbox" sold by TBS is fitted in advance (with screws beneath entrance hole) to accept the Van Ert sparrow trap.

Trapping sparrows raises a difficult question: What does one do with the sparrows that are caught? Each person must make their own decision. On the surface, taking the sparrows elsewhere and releasing them sounds like a good solution, but in reality it only creates more problems. First, birds have great navigation systems and can easily find their way back home, even if driven a long distance before being released. Purple Martins fly thousands of miles every year to and from their winter sites in Brazil, yet banding studies reveal they reliably return to the exact same North American nest sites every spring. So taking a sparrow 20 miles away is not likely to solve the problem. Even if the sparrow did stay in the new location, the problem has simply been relocated and the sparrow is still a danger to native birds in the new environment.



HOS with clipped tail feathers

A second option is to prevent the birds from breeding by either clipping their tails very short or clipping their wings. Neither of these techniques harms the birds but apparently affects their behavior enough that they don't try to nest that year and will not bother other nesting birds. The feathers do grow back though, so those same sparrows will try to nest the next year. Instructions on how to clip wings can found at <http://sialis.org>. Clipping all the tail feathers very short seems to have the same effect.

Finally, many who trap sparrows chose to humanely euthanize them. There is an informative discussion of acceptable euthanasia methods on the sialis.org website. It goes without saying that no one should undertake this solution until they can accurately identify house sparrows. All native birds are protected by Federal law, but as non-natives, house sparrows are not covered by these laws.

Protection from predators

Other predators such as snakes, raccoons, and cats will also enter bluebird houses and kill and eat eggs, nestlings and adults. Houses should be installed on non-climbable poles and outfitted with predator guards. Like spookers, commercial predator guards are available but they can be easily built for less than \$10. Plans for the predator guard pictured are available from the Texas Bluebird Society site at <http://texasbluebirdsociety.org/BuildingPlans.php> (Predator Baffle tab).

Results

After several years of following these practices, the neighborhood now abounds with bluebird pairs. The bluebirds seem to enjoy using the martin houses as convenient perches from which to hunt for bugs while the martins soar overhead feasting on the flying insects!



Nestbox predator protected with spooker, baffle, and single pole installation.



Musings From The Master...

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.

THE LATE GREAT JACK FINCH started each morning at 4:30 out in his workshop. He had a night helper to care for his wife Ruby till about 7 AM. So he would get up early and go out and cut lumber into nestbox parts till about 6 AM, then go outside and sit in the pre-dawn chill and listen to the world of birds wake up around him while he warmed his hands with a cup of coffee or tea.

He counted the various pairs of his bluebirds that survived the night each morning just by their voices, as they called from the same perch each morning.

If you miss the hour before dawn and the actual sunrise, then both Jack and I believe you have missed the most magnificent hours of life. There is a full chorus of birds that begin singing and calling well before dawn. Jack would sit on his porch as night slipped away and pre-dawn light crept in and amongst the trees and bushes, more like a breeze than a solid, straight beam of light.

As each species of birds wakes up they begin clearing their vocal

cords. They chirp out single notes as if checking out the strings on a violin or the random key strokes on a piano. In the dark these can be piercing notes that startle a person like a dagger thrust, or they can be as gentle as a cold drop of morning mist landing on your cheek.

As the birds warm up and wake up on these spring mornings they begin stringing together one note into another creating unique tapestries of morning music. Each species weaves lines and notes into their own music; they create and repeat their own rhyme and rhythm.

There is a point in time each morning when all of the local birds are practicing the various parts to their songs; songs that have been passed down through the ages. From a time before planes and

cars, way back before copper was hammered into tools. Birds repeat this music of their ancestors each morning before dawn, lest they forget their family traditions and their family history.

Interesting that the birds normally quit singing about the time that we humans fire up our cars and trucks and roar off down the highways. Find a quiet place once in a while and enjoy the miracles around us!

Our sense of smell and hearing is best in the hour before sunrise. Few folks EVER open a bedroom window to allow the sounds and smells of nature to invade our busy lives.

Just walk out into a weedy lawn and see how many different tiny flowers you can find with your grand children!

Photograph by John Park



AUGUST

Summer Bluebird Symposium 2012

Saturday

11



Photo by JohnEnglishPhoto.com

9:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. at Gainesville Civic Center (about 12 miles south of WinStar Casino)

Annual symposium with featured speakers Keith Kridler, author and naturalist (Bluebirds & More) and Dr. Ken Steigman, Director at Lewisville Lake Environmental Learning Area (Bluebird Banding at LLELA). Other topics covered are bluebird basics, House Sparrow control, gardening for bluebirds and more. Also the popular Silent Auction fundraiser.

Advanced-Early-Bird registration deadline is July 11 with Advanced registration ending July 28. \$12 registration includes BBQ lunch. At-the-Door registration available (without lunch)

Chat with fellow bluebird aficionados at Friday night social dinner takes place at Neu Ranch House.

Host Lodging: Holiday Inn Express, \$105.99 Ask for Texas Bluebird Society rate (940) 665-0505

To donate a Silent Auction item: Jimmie & Bennie Konvicka 1315 North Dale Ave. Stephenville, TX 76401-1604 ikonvicka@gmail.com or 254 968-6663;

For more information: Don Lawrence, Local Coordinator, 725 CR 132, Whitesboro TX 76273 donekelaw1@aol.com or 903 564 1035.

Check www.txblues.org. Registration form and more details will be available soon.



Keith Kridler was featured speaker at 2011 Symposium.

Build Them And They Will Go... Across Texas



Brian & Judy Hetherington, with the help of a few volunteers from the Big County Master Naturalists, ripped the lumber and assembled 254 nestboxes for TBS.

Next, the delivery! From Bronte, all the way across Texas to the TBS storage facility in Kyle (near Austin), all 254 nestboxes were safely transported and unloaded.



Ron Tom lends Brian and Judy a helping hand to make room in storage and then unload nestboxes.

Now, back to Bronte, to pick up another 250 nestboxes. This load is going to our storage facility in Conroe for distribution to southeast TX.



Winter Visitation

Now that breeding season is over, these western bluebirds (notice the blue throats) are not concerned with defending territories. Groups of adults are often seen in the non-breeding season. They have gathered at the community birdbath, perhaps to brag about their kids, and enjoy a sunny day at Bob Houck's ranch in Robert Lee, Texas.

Photo by Judy Heatherington.

Monitoring Tip

REMEMBER, DON'T LEAVE A DEAD-END TRAIL!

- Predators can follow your tracks
- Take a different path to and from



Reprint from Cornell Lab of Ornithology



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

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

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 disturb the birds or the nest.

Monitor the nest and report to NestWatch.

Bluebirds Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time

Mark Your Calendars

Bluebird Festivals Everywhere!

Saturday, May 5th

10 Year Anniversary

9:00AM—5:00PM

Lake Tawakoni State Park

10822 FM 2475

Wills Point, TX

Attracting Bluebirds To The Garden

9:00AM—10:00AM

Spring Creek Greenway Nature Center

1300 Riley Fuzzel Rd

Spring, TX

Gainesville Spring Fling

10:00AM—5:00PM

Leonard Park

900 W California St

Gainesville, TX

Upcoming Events

Thursday, May 17th

6:30 - 8:00PM

Attracting Bluebirds To The Garden

Stephen F. Austin University

Nacogdoches, TX

Saturday, May 19th

10:00AM - 4:00PM

Jack Phillips Bluebird Festival

Community Center

Ravenna, TX

Saturday June 9th

8:00AM - 4:00PM

23rd Annual Blueberry Festival

Visitor Center in Historic Downtown

200 East Main St, Nacogdoches, TX

Saturday, August 11th

9:00AM - 2:30PM

2012 Summer Symposium

Gainesville Civic Center

Gainesville, TX

October 4 - 6

NABS Conference

Newport Beach, CA

<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org>

Membership in NABS is not required for registration. But NABS membership is available to members of TBS for \$15. Ask for "A-plus" membership. NABS members receive a quarterly full color journal, *Bluebird*.

BLUEBIRD HABITAT HERE



Many TBS members, like Nancy Podio, participate in the Wildlife Tax Valuation program. The Bluebird Habitat sign is a perfect way to publicly display that you are meeting one of your wildlife management goals.

Habitat signs are not limited to Wildlife Tax Valuation participants. Anyone can proudly display "proof" of their dedicated conservation efforts to help maintain the appropriate bluebird environment.

Even our sign educates the public on the habitat preferred by bluebirds.

Visit our website www.txblues.org for ordering details. Click on **SALES** from the main menu. TBS does not receive any portion of the sale.