



Bluebird Tales

PO Box 794, Ronan, MT 59864

Fall 2021

Western Bluebirds — Mineral County (near the airport).



This couple is raising their 2nd clutch of 5 (chicks are about 12 days).

Why is this notable?

Three pairs near the airport had just started setting on their 2nd clutches when fire season started early.

Mineral County's little airport became crowded with about 8 helicopter teams and other personnel to fight the fires here in Mineral County.

Lots of noise, lots of people, lots of traffic, and neon signs in front of two of the boxes.

Since Bluebird boxes are fairly common, I put little laminated "do not disturb active bluebird nest box, thank you for keeping us safe", and a # for questions signs on those three boxes.

For two weeks I held my breath, and hoped they would persevere, and they did!

It's inspiring..... Anyway, being a trail monitor is so worthwhile, and why I continue.





Letter From the Editor

Good-by Fire Season (also known as summer) and Hello to Fall! Hoping to see many of you at the conference in Helena! We plan to have a wonderful time, learn a few things and reconnect with old and new friends!

I included an article about bluebird widows/widowers. Nora Jean's success story should encourage you that if you encounter a 'bluebird emergency" your interventions can make a difference. Norajean has promised me a picture, so look for it in the winter newsletter! The trail monitors guide also has some information, but Bet Zimmerman Smith's article very informative. I encourage you to keep good records of your monitoring so that you will know the ages of the nestlings on your trails. It makes a huge difference. There are many forms, some available online, a few listed in the Trail Monitoring guide. I made my own before I met and learned to band from Erv Davis . It was surprisingly like the one he used on his trails! I modify it once in a while. If you would like to see or use it, send me an email, and I will send it to you.

I actually have as a part of my "tool box" a plastic container of old clean (or never used) nests. I keep them in a plastic container as I don't want them inhabited by mice in the winter during storage. Fall is a great time for collecting a box of nests for your emergency "stash." I don't often need to replace one, but when I do, I'm always glad to have them.

Remember to send your fledgling report, and please comment on your trail adventures this year, also any pictures! Happy Trails!

~ Jane



Mountain Bluebird Trails is an Affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS). Their website www.nabluebirdsociety.org is a wealth of information with printable PDF fact sheets on bluebirds and other cavity nesters in addition to many educational and research topics that concern bluebirds and other cavity nesters. Members receive the Bluebird Journal 4x a year that comes with gorgeous pictures and articles of our favorite topic. As a bonus, NABS also has past issues archived for your reading pleasure. MBT encourages you to broaden your bluebird enjoyment by joining bluebirders at the local level (MBT) and national level (NABS)!



MY ANXIETY WITH THE ORPHANS

By Norajean Malinak

I was driving home at the end of my bluebird route, going past another route I had finished the day before. I caught a glimpse (in my rearview mirror) of a bird hanging by one leg, swinging gently in the breeze, and set me in a scarry mood. I backed up to the bird box it was dangling from, to see it was a male bluebird! It was dead, the leg bound in some baler twine and it's head was picked bare on its back side by some other bird. Momma bird was nowhere to be seen, scared off by the episode no doubt. (I had seen the

twine the day before but the chicks had just hatched and I wished not to disrupt them for a few days, knowing full well the dangers of the twine and chicks.) The babies looked dead and when I reached in to dispose of them they felt like I had just taken them out of my refrigerator, so I dropped two on the ground. With the other two I thought I saw and felt a little movement so I cupped them in my hands and they did wiggle a little. The car was hot in the sun so I sat there warming them in with my hands. Then I thought the other two might be still alive so, dashing across the road I discovered they were still living and they joined the first two I was

heating up in the car under my sweater. Soon they stunk, and I discovered they were passing poop. Fortunately, I carry a package of baby wipes in my car at all times and was able to clean that up... but as they tried to lift their heads I was wondering what this old lady was going to do with four

naked baby birds! I could not "dispose" of them but neither did I have a place to keep them warm and fed every few minutes until they could fly away! Finally, after looking over the records of my bluebird routes, I discovered there was a nest about two miles away that seemed to be hatched the same day as these. I drove there and, sure enough they were the same size and there was only two babies, and thinking the parents could certainly look after 6 "kids" I plopped them in with the others. Watching from the car for some time I see mother bird went in and came out in a few seconds. chirping to her mate. He went in and didn't stay as long, but did take off and came back very shortly with a bug. Momma blue bird went back in and stayed there, and would not let papa in right away. He kept coming

back to the door with the bug and she would not let him in. Finally after many tries she let him bring in the food. Immediately he went hunting and found more bugs, but again mamma

would not let him in for several minutes. He sat on the barbed wire, trying off and on, to come in the door, but no, they were not ready for some reason, and he waited until she gave him the signal, then she welcomed him when he came to the door. I wish I had a tiny camera in there to see what she was doing for so long. I watched this for half an hour before going home for my own supper. The next morning I checked in the nest and all looked hunky-dory. Checking that evening, all was well... and the six babies fledged successfully about 14-15 days later. Oh, what a relief it is!!!

I had 60 dead bluebird babies altogether. Also, I have two females that are laying white eggs this year.

Happy 4th of July! Norajean

I visited with Nora jean in August, and she has had to foster 4 more chicks. She found the male dead on the road, probably hit by a car, the female not around, probably abandoned the nest as the chicks were not being cared for. She looked over her records and was able to split the chicks up into 2 other nestboxes. They all fledaed!

*editor's note Norajean monitors 60 boxes on her family ranch in Sanders County and drives over 30 miles to do so at the age of almost 90! Her Bluebird trail was started in 1969. Art Aylesworth was their insurance agent, and her husband John came home with a load of bluebird boxes! Her husband did hang them, but Nora jean has always monitored them. She was also a close friend of Vivian Aylesworth for many years.





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MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD TRAILS, INC. FLEDGLING REPORT

This is the fledgling report for 20_____

Your information is very important to Mountain bluebird Trails and we encourage you to report information about your trail. *If you monitored at least one nest box, you have a trail. You can re-fold this form and return it by mail or you can email the information to: fledglingre-port@mountainbluebirdtrails.com Thank- You for your report!

Please mail to: Myrna Lauckner 173 Nashua Rd. N Nashua, MT 59248

about your experiences this year. Attach another sheet if needed!)	NAME	Auuless			
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Mountain Bluebird Trails 2021 Conference Helena, Montana September 24 – 26



We have reserved rooms at the Jorgensen's Inn & Suites at the special rate of \$99/night until September 1st. When you make your reservations, let them know you are with MBT. Call as soon as possible: 406-442-1770.

Speakers: Dr. Harry Power, III, Ph.D Ornithologist

Steve Sherman, presenting his work with sage grouse, and is a professional

photographer.

LouAnn Harris, President of Bozeman Audubon, Adopt-a-box for the year. Brent Sarchet, Arborist, Horticulturist, Landscape designer. Birdscaping your yard with native plants & shrubs.

Donations for the Auction are welcome!

Registration dens. Dinner Sat		,		•	, ,	nic at Tizer Gar- Roast Tur-
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Send completed registration and check (made out to Mountain Bluebird Trails) to:

Jane Brockway, PO Box 1188, Superior MT 59872

Questions? Call Jane at 406-822-3345 or 406-822-2145



The Saga of W2

By Kathy Heffernan

I am now convinced of the value of hand warmers in saving young bluebirds during cold spells. Several years ago, I read about bluebird groups in Oregon that deployed hand warmers in special drawers under nests during wet, cold weather. Since then, I have occasionally added hand warmers to the sides of nests during May snows or cold June rains. In any box where I added hand warmers, I never lost all the nestlings, but I could not be sure my intervention was the key action that ensured the survival of the nestlings. The saga of Box W2 convinced me that hand warmers can sometimes provide the warmth necessary to ensure nestling survival in unsavory conditions.

On May 25th, I visited Box W2 in the North Hills of Missoula. Inside, three nestlings had hatched and three remained inside their eggs. I was grateful they had <u>all</u> remained eggs during three preceding cold, rainy days. Along my trail on May 25th, I removed two clutches of dead bluebird nestlings and one dead adult. I had also found a clutch of abandoned bluebird eggs. The sun peaked out of the clouds but it was a cool, disappointing day.

That night, cold rain fell and continued into the next day. Worried about the new nestlings, I hiked up to the box midday. I found no parents in the vicinity. Inside the nestlings were as cold as the chilly air, but I detected some writhing movements. I removed the 5 naked nestlings and one egg and held them in my closed hands. They became more active and opened their tiny mouths for food. I had brought live mealworms, but alone, it was nearly impossible to feed the fragile nestlings. I managed to split two mealworms and get half mealworms down the gullets of two eager nestlings. I replaced the revived nestlings in the cozy, dry nest, placed two activated hand warmers on either side of the nest (along box sides with plenty of nesting material between warmers and nestlings!), and replaced the top. I left live mealworms on the box roof and on a nearby post. I surveyed the area. Still no parents! I wondered if I was only prolonging the tiny nestlings' agony. Convinced there was nothing more I could do, I hiked down the hill. At the bottom, I had a sinking feeling that I had not secured the box lid securely. Up I hiked again to find bluebird parents entering the box. Hallelujah! Now, I could only hope that the parents would find adequate food in the cold storm, that the nestlings would remain sufficiently warm to beg for food, that the mother would brood the youngsters during the cold night, that the bitter weather would abate soon.

On May 31st, my husband checked most of the boxes on our trail. As we approached W2, I knew there was a good chance the nestlings would be dead. We crested the hill and I



Photo: W2 nestlings on May 31st

spotted Western Bluebird parents on a nearby wire with food!! Still, I doubted that all had survived and was prepared to clean the dead ones out. I opened the box and found 5 warm and healthy nestlings. That beautiful day, we found no dead nestlings in any boxes. It was a day of hope and sunshine.



Sing to me, Autumn

Sing to me, Autumn, with the rustle of your leaves.

Breathe on me your spicy scents that flow within your breeze.

Dance with me, Autumn, your waltz that bends the boughs of trees. Now tell me all the secrets you've whispered to the seas.

Sleep with me, Autumn, beneath your starlit skies. Let your yellow harvest moon shimmer in our eyes.

Kiss me, Autumn, with your enchanting spellbound ways That changes all you touch into crimson golden days.

Love me, Autumn, and behold this love so true

That I'll be waiting faithfully each year to be with you.

~Patricia Cisco

Bluebird Widows, Widowers, and Orphans

By Bet Zimmerman Smith Reprinted from Bluebird, Journal of the North American Bluebird Society. Spring 20009 Vol.#31 no. 2

Unfortunately, sometimes during a nesting, a male or female bluebird disappears. It's a tough a tough world out there. And you may never know what happened. You may not even realize it happened unless, you are a backyard bluebirder who recognizes the look and behavior of individual birds (e.g. whether they come to your mealworm feeder or not) or find the dead parent.

Bluebird parents work as a team during nesting season. Females build the nest pretty much by themselves but depend on their mate to help protect the nest site from predators like house sparrows, help feed hungry babies in the nest and feed juveniles for about a month after they fledge. Male bluebirds do not incubate eggs or brood young, but they do feed an protect young, and bring food to the female while she is incubating/brooding, so she can keep the eggs/young warm (especially important during wet or cold weather as very young nestlings cannot regulate their own temperature and protect them.

Sometimes people think one or both parents are missing, when in fact they are around! Remember bluebirds lay one egg a day sometimes skipping a day and do not spend much if any time on the nest until incubation begins. Even then, especially during warm weather, they may be away from the box for extended periods of time. Some males perch on a box, others hang out in trees, and are less visible, especially during incubation (perhaps to avoid drawing attention to the nest site). To check for activity, wedge a blade of grass of a tiny twig in the entrance hole and check back later to see if it is still there. If the eggs have hatched, parents should be in the box at least every hour or tow to feed during the day.

If one of the pair does disappear, it's possible that the remaining parent may find a new mate. That depends on how many unattached bluebirds there are in the area. Sometimes they find a new partner in a day, sometimes it takes weeks, sometimes it doesn't happen. A lone make may sing forlornly all day long. The new mate may or may not help care for the young. A new male may feed the existing female, or just stuff himself at a mealworm feeder.

On occasion, males are somewhat or very aggressive towards the young of another male (they may swoop at them, chase the, or try to prevent the female from feeding). In one case the new male removed a small nestling from the box (but the landlord saw it happen found and returned the baby to the box and it did survive). If the second or their brood is affected by a lost parent, the younger siblings may pitch in.

Here are some possible scenarios:

Either Parent lost:

*If a male or female are lost then the nestlings are very small, the lone parent will have difficulty caring for the,

*If the nestlings are fully feathered (and better able to regulate their own temperature), a widow/widower may be able to successfully fledge all or some of them.

*If the babies have fledged (left the box), one parent can care for them, but it is a load. Supplemental feeding can really help, especially during the first week. Occasionally, after fledging a female will leave and pair up with a different male, leaving the original male behind to tend to the fledglings. The male will feed them for about 30 days, after which they can feed themselves. If the male is lost after fledging the female will do the same and the young will be okay, but the chicks are very vulnerable once they are out in the world.

*Nest sanitation may suffer (especially if the female disappears), so consider a nest change if it gets bad.

Lost Male:

*If a male is lost during egg laying, and the female does not find a new partner, she will likely abandon the nest. However, do not rush to clean out the box until you are CERTAIN the nest is abandoned.

*If a male is lost during incubation, the female may successfully go it alone but it will be more difficult without assistance. If she does find a new partner, she may successfully fledge the young.

*There are reports of females successfully fledging young that are about 1 week old on their own.

*Sometimes the female finds a new mate—the new male may or may not help feed the young (it he does, probably significantly less than the original male.).

Lost Female:

*If the female is lost during egg laying, nothing can be done about the eggs. If the male finds new mate, and she



chooses the same box, she may remove the old eggs or cover them with nesting material before laying her own.

*If the female is lost when the nestlings are very young (unfeathered), odds are not too good, as the male does not brood young nestlings. Even if you help with the feeding, the babies may get chilled and die. However, I have seen one report of babies surviving when the male disappeared just two days after hatching.

*If the female is lost when the nestlings are closer to fledging (at least older than 7 days old), they may make it.

*If the male finds a new female, she may be indifferent to the existing nestlings or kill them, or she may feed them (especially if they are not too young or old.).

What you can do to help

*Let the remaining parent raise the young. Nestlings are usually better off with their natural parents. Only a bird can properly teach their young to hunt for food and find water, sing, and defend themselves from the danger of the natural world.

*Eggs: You can NOT incubate eggs. Do NOT remove eggs from a nest unless you are 100% certain they have been abandoned. Do NOT "foster" eggs into another nest. This can overload the parents, and if incubation has already begun in one nest, they will be out of synch for hatching.

*Supplemental feeding. You CAN help by offering supplemental food. This enables the parent to spend more time feeding, brooding, and protecting the young. Most eastern bluebirds have been trained to come to a feeder. A variety of food (berries, mealworms, Suet crumbles) is best for nestling health and development. (please see editors note) If offering mealworms (which can be calcium depleting), dust with calcium.

*Protect from House Sparrow attack: If you have House Sparrows in the area, you can always protect eggs and young by putting up a sparrow spooker.

*Monitor: in this situation, it is okay to check on the babies once a day to make sure they are okay (monitor VERY carefully after day 13 to avoid premature fledgling).

*Nest change: Fecal sacks may pile up in the nest because the parent is focused on feeding. If it gets bad, you can do a nest change.

*In a true emergency-- i.e., BOTH parents gone, or one parent not feeding at ALL (e.g. for more than two hours of daylight) and babies are cold and listless and are not gaping (not to be confused with older nestlings which hunker down when box is opened, contact a wild life rehabber specializing in songbirds. Nestlings can live 24 hours without food, after that, time is of the essence.

*Fostering: If you are a monitor with many boxes, and you have another nestbox with babies of also or just the same age, and both parent are dead or only the male remains with very young nestlings (no feathers) you can attempt to foster orphaned nesting in with another brood though, so supplemental feeding is a good idea.

**Do NOT put bluebirds nestling in the box of another species, as dietary needs, care and fledging ages are too different. See info on transporting babies.

**Do NOT put abandoned eggs into the nest of another bird or the same or different species. For them to hatch the same time they would have to be at the same stage (e.g. incubation was at the same stage). Also increasing the clutch size puts a big load on the parents who will have to feed the young.

Plug up the box after fledging or a couple of days if a widowed female does not pay attention to newly fledged young and only seems interested in starting anew brood with a new mate. Fledging depend on their parent(s) for food for 30 days after leaving the nest.*Try to figure out with happend to the lost parent: so that you can prevent recurrence.

*Last but not least, recognize that you can't fix everything.

Bet Zimmerman is a Certified Environmental Professional and member of the local Conservation Commission. She is also a board member of the North American Bluebird Society She maintains an education website on the small cavity nesters at www.sialis.org and monitors several bluebird trails with about 80 boxes in northeastern Connecticut.

Editors note: In the eastern U.S. it is pretty common for eastern bluebirds to live in areas that are not considered rural. Many people feed suet and mealworms in their backyards. Here in the west, the reverse is true. I have left mealworms on the roofs on some of my boxes that that need a little help. Never suet, as that would attract bears and raccoons. One of the perks/blessings that one gets of monitoring a trail, is the knowing the ages of the chicks on your trail. I have

Norajean Malinak received a call from a friend who had found a banded bluebird in her yard in Sanders County, North West Montana. Norajean then called me! I was happy to send the report to the banding lab, but anyone who finds a banded bird can do so by going to the USGS birdbanding portal and following the directions on the website. You will receive a thank-you from the banding lab!

The recovered Western bluebird was a bright western female. NoraJean sees Mountain Bluebirds on her trail, so the pictured deceased western bluebird looked like a male to her. You will also notice that the bird has 4 bands, 3 colored and 1 aluminum. The aluminum one has the numbers that will identify the bird to the bander, location and dates. The pictures and info were also sent to Reneé Duckworth who bands in Missoula County. She was happy to receive



the information. She had info about the bird that was banded on her trail as a fledgling and also provide more info to the banding lab for their data base.

To report a band, go to: https://www.usgsbirdbanding laboratory. Click on the reportband.gov. box. The site will walk you through the info needed. You WILL hear from them. More info may be needed, but will be easy to submit. Below is what you will read on the site. Just follow the yellow brick road! If you need some support, just call me! Below is from the website, and provided for your information.

The Bird Banding Laboratory (BBL) is an integrated scientific program established in 1920 supporting the collection, archiving, management and dissemination of information from banded and marked birds in North America. This information is used to monitor the status and trends of resident and migratory bird populations. Because birds are good indicators of the health of the environment, the status and trends of bird populations are critical for identifying and understanding many ecological issues and for developing effective science, management and conservation practices.

The BBL, since 1923 and in collaboration with the Bird Banding Office (BBO) of the Canadian Wildlife Service, administer the North American Bird Banding Program (NABBP), which manages more than 77 million archived banding records and more than 5 million records of encounters. In addition, each year approximately 1 million bands are shipped from the BBL to banders in the United States and Canada, and nearly 100,000 band encounter reports are submitted into the BBL systems.

Why Do We Band Birds?

Bird banding data are useful in both scientific research and management and conservation projects. Individual identification of birds makes possible studies of dispersal and migration, behavior and social structure, life-span and survival rate, reproductive success and population growth.

Dispersal and Migration

Every bander participates in studies of dispersal and migration by sending all their banding data into a central site, the Bird Banding Laboratory. When banded birds are captured, released alive and reported from somewhere else we can reconstruct the movements of the individual bird.

In this way we have learned that some species go south in one pathway and return north by another pathway. Nesting and wintering grounds have been located for some species, and specific nesting grounds have been connected to specific wintering areas. The Arctic Tern makes the longest migration flight of any living species, making an annual round trip flight of 25,000 miles. The migration routes used by this species have been determined by band recoveries in part.



Behavior and Social Structure

Many researchers use banding as one tool in their studies of bird populations and communities. The Bird Norajean Malinak received a call from a friend who had found a banded bluebird in her yard in Sanders County, Northwest Montana. Norajean then called me! I was happy to send the report to the banding lab, but anyone who finds a banded bird can do so by going to the USGS birdbanding portal and following the directions on the website. You will receive a thank-you from the banding lab!

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In this way we have learned that some species go south in one pathway and return north by another pathway. Nesting and wintering grounds have been located for some species, and specific nesting grounds have been connected to specific wintering areas. The Arctic Tern makes the longest migration flight of any living species, making an annual round trip flight of 25,000 miles. The migration routes used by this species have been determined by band recoveries in part.

Behavior and Social Structure

Many researchers use banding as one tool in their studies of bird populations and communities. The Bird Banding Laboratory can give banders permission to use additional techniques to study birds, including markers that are more visible than the metal service bands. Some banders use colored leg bands to mark individual birds and study their local movements and behaviors from a distance. Individual identification of birds allows many things to be studied

without handling the bird again. Some things that may be studied include territorial behavior, mate fidelity, territory size and fidelity, reproductive behavior (e.g. which bird builds the nest or feed the young? How often?).

Determining Life Span

Banding allows the determination of the minimum length of time that an individual bird lives. Without an individual marker, there would be no way to determine if the Cardinal that is outside your window is the same bird that you saw last year or not. With a bird band, if you catch that Cardinal today and band it, you will know if that one bird is caught again in the future.

We have learned, for example, that it is not uncommon for individuals of some species to live 10 to 20 years or more in the wild. Small songbirds that we may think of as short-lived may live a surprising length of time. We have a record of a hummingbird living as long as 12 years! However, the average life span of the majority of the individuals is much shorter.

Population Studies

Banding and marking birds can also be used to estimate the numbers of birds in a population using a mark-recapture technique. Birds are marked in one period, and then recaptured or re-sighted in a later period. The number of birds marked in the first period and the ratio of marked to unmarked birds in the population in the second period allow the total population of birds to be estimated.

Estimating Survival and Productivity

Banding data allows for the comparison of normal, wild banded birds with birds that may have had their survival altered by exposure to oil or other hazards. Survival and Productivity can be studied by using a constant effort banding site, such as those required by the <u>Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship</u> (MAPS) program, a cooperative research effort of the Institute for Bird Populations and banders throughout North America.

Toxicology and Disease Research

Birds can be vectors of diseases which affect people, including encephalitis and Lyme disease. Sampling wild birds for serious disease helps determine the prevalence of the disease in the population. Banding allows for birds that have been sampled once to be avoided in the next sample--or to be resampled, depending on the study.

Toxicology projects using banding assess the turnover time or how long birds use an area once they arrive in it. This allows the researcher to determine the potential exposure of birds to chemicals in contaminated areas.

Other Uses of Game Bird Data

An analysis of banding information from game birds is completed annually and is essential for hunting regulations development and for detecting changes in waterfowl populations. Banding data can be used to assess the hunting pressure, estimate productivity and survival, and measure the vulnerability of the age/sex classes to hunting pressure.

See <u>USGS publications</u> associated with the Bird Banding Laboratory
As you can read from the above information, bird banding is vital to document bird behaviors.

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The Nest Box — www.nestbox.com

Phil's Bluebird Page — www.mpls.k12.mn.us/~pheo/Blueb.html

Cornell Nest Box Network — birdsource.cornell.edu/cnbn

Cornell Lab of Ornithology — secure3.birds.cornell.ed

Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society — oebs.ca

Ohio Bluebird Society — www.ohiobluebirdsociety.org
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Jane Brockway, Editor PO Box 1188

Superior, MT 59872 406-822-3345

editor@mountainbluebirdtrails.com

Lynne Conn

2205 N Ridgeview Drive Post Falls, ID 83854 208-661-7345,

lynneac2021@outlook.com

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