



Are You Ready?

By Kathy Kremnitzer

Nesting season is fast approaching and many bluebird landlords are scrambling to make certain their nestboxes are ready for occupancy! I'm happy to say that all 35+ nestboxes that I monitor are in good repair, are properly baffled, and are awaiting tenants. This was no easy feat. Hours have been spent replacing hardware, adjusting and replacing equipment, and relocating boxes to (hopefully) more productive locations. A bluebird monitor's work is truly never done and while the prospect of spring brings us hope for the proliferation of our beautiful blues, we are also aware that nesting season, our marathon, will hold challenges and possible tragedies as well.

During nesting season 2007, one of my trails experienced more than its fair share of vandalism. Several nestbox set-ups were damaged and one nesting ended with the tragic loss of a female bluebird and her 5 eggs. The thoughtless act of the individual(s) who caused harm to this beautiful creature and her potential offspring broke my heart. My husband, who often accompanies me on my monitoring visits, witnessed my sadness and gently suggested that perhaps I should limit my bluebirding to those few boxes at our home, where we have a bit more control. I will admit that I allowed myself to consider this option, albeit for only a second.

I cannot seriously imagine myself abandoning the bluebirds and tree swallows that nest on my trails. They don't give up when Mother Nature deals them a blow or when human interference causes harm. They persevere. Their determination to survive and thrive sends the message that they will not give up and neither must we. So, nesting season 2009 . . . I'm ready. Are you?

LEARN MORE

To learn more about bluebirds, visit:
www.nabluebirdsociety.org or
www.sialis.org

To learn more about bluebirds and bluebirders in our area, visit the Maryland Bluebird Society at:
www.mdbluebirdsociety.org

The President's Perch

By Ed Escalante

Deer ticks and the Lyme disease bacteria they can carry are a threat to anyone that spends time outdoors, including bluebird monitors. In this writing I will describe how I protect myself and my family from becoming infected. The procedure I will describe is something that I do each and every time I inspect the bluebird boxes on my trail.

Upon arriving at the first boxes on my trail, I stop in a nearby gravel parking lot and begin to prepare for my monitoring visits. Here, I tuck the bottom of my pants into my socks so that ticks can't crawl under my clothing. I then spray 30% Deet on my boots, socks and pants, up to my calves.

At this point I should mention that about 4 times per nesting/monitoring season (during the time when grass grows most vigorously) I mow an 8 foot diameter circle around the base of each of my nestboxes, which are supported on a metal pole. Generally, I can drive within 10 to 15 feet of my boxes, so I also mow a path to my truck and a small area around my truck tailgate and also around the driver-side door. I use a lightweight, aluminum deck, 21 inch gas powered mower for this task. By mowing, I eliminate the necessity of walking through tall grass. I realize that some may view this as an extreme step, but it makes me feel safer. Many may choose to skip the mowing, but I strongly recommend that all other steps be followed as closely as possible.

Once I've completed my monitoring duties and arrive at home, I remove all articles of clothing that I've worn and run them through a 20 minute cycle in the clothes dryer. This will kill any ticks that might be hiding in my clothes. I then inspect myself thoroughly for ticks and, if my wife is home, she also inspects me from head to toe. I then shower, scrubbing myself with a wash cloth.

Occasionally, I do find a tick which may be lightly imbedded. I use sharp tweezers, grasping the tick around its head, as close to the skin as possible, and pull it out. This method of prevention has worked for me and I will continue to perform it until I come up with something better.

Healthy Feeder Fare

By Felicia Lovelett

There are a number of “suet crumble” recipes for bluebirds. All are based on mixtures of cereal grains (cornmeal and/or wheat flour), nuts (usually peanut butter or peanut hearts), and dried fruit with added melted suet to form a crumble or dough. These mixtures have several things in common: they are very low in calcium, are high in phosphorus, and contain proteins that are relatively low in biological value. Traditional suet recipes provide a source of energy but are so nutritionally deficient that they may possibly be harmful to breeding birds.

Why this is a problem:

In late winter, early spring breeding female birds (such as bluebirds) must build up adequate body stores of calcium to meet the demand for egg-laying. If their diet is very deficient in calcium, egg-laying females are at risk of developing Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD). Symptoms may include swollen joints, fractures, and eventually death. A possible case of MBD associated with over-consumption of suet dough was documented by naturalist-artist/NPR commentator, Julie Zickefoose last summer:

<http://www.juliezickefoose.com/blog/2008/06/uh-oh-zick-dough.html>

As available habitat shrinks, “feeder-fare” may be forming a larger percentage of the diet of many wild birds. It is our responsibility to offer more nutritionally balanced foods whenever possible. Suet mixtures are so palatable that wild birds may consume them to the exclusion of other more natural and nutritious food items. Birds can be addicted to junk food too!

What can you do?

Base the crumble recipe on a formulated diet that provides adequate calcium, high quality proteins and other essential nutrients. These diets have been formulated by animal nutrition experts using sophisticated software and laboratory analysis. It is also possible to at least correct the calcium content of your favorite crumble recipe using a spreadsheet program, the USDA nutrient tables, and an accurate gram scale.

- 1) Dry Cat Food (use a brand with less than 35% protein Purina One or Harmony Farms Indoor Cat Formula are examples) grocery/\$\$
- 2) Chick Starter (must make certain it is NON-MEDICATED) feed store/\$

Balanced Suet Crumbles:

Grind together in blender (you might want to use a dedicated blender jar and blade) until fine:

8-10 parts formulated diet: (Listed in order of preference with source/cost information—may mix and match)

- 1) ZuPreem or Mazuri Softbill Diet (pelleted zoo diet specially formulated for softbills/exotic songbirds) online/\$\$\$\$
- 2) Pelleted Hi-Potency/Breeder Parrot Diet (Harrison’s Bird Diet, Roudybush, ZuPreem Natural have no artificial color) pet stores/avian vets/\$\$\$

1-2 parts dried fruit (raisins, currants, cherries or blueberries)

Melt plain suet (a crock pot is much safer than the stove). In large metal bowl thoroughly mix about 5-6 parts dry mix to 1 part melted suet to form a dry crumbly mix. Hands work better than utensils but it’s very messy.

(Optional) add ¼ cup dried meal worms (not to exceed ½ part of total mix)

Notes:

To exclude large, aggressive birds, I use mealworm feeders (either 1 ½” X 1 ½” wire feeder or a Droll Yankee excluder dome feeder) for the crumbles.

I do not feed any suet products once the weather is warm (over 65-70°).

- 1) Suet (or other fat) goes rancid in hot weather and poses a danger to all birds.
- 2) Insects and berries are abundant: natural foods are always best for nestlings.

If this is too much trouble there is another option:

Avian Cuisine is a commercially available formulated wild bird diet. It is available as crumbles, logs, and blocks in three flavors.

http://www.natureskeepers.com/our_products.html

If you have any questions, please feel free to e-mail me and I will be happy answer questions or point you to reference material on avian nutrition.

Felicia Lovelett c5nest@gmail.com lives in Sykesville, MD and struggles to make sure that both the indoor and outdoor birds eat right...

Antietam National Battlefield 2008 Nesting Report

by Mark Raabe

It is with great pleasure that we submit our Antietam National Battlefield Eastern Bluebird nesting report for 2008. After analyzing the data, we count 453 fledglings, or one short of the record-breaking year in 2007. This brings the total to 6,702 fledglings since this recovery effort was undertaken thirty years ago, in 1979. The trail also produced 42 tree swallows and 13 black-capped chickadees.

There were approximately 10% more eggs laid in 2008 than in any previous year, a reflection of increasing numbers of adult birds. Unfortunately, this did not translate into a greater number of fledglings. House sparrows continued to be the principal nemesis with 20 instances of vandalism, versus 17 the previous year. House wrens became a problem with 6 acts of vandalism. There were 5 incidents with black snakes compared to 3 in 2007, with 1 found in the Mumma farmyard nest box having just ingested its bluebird contents. Mice disrupted 1 nesting and several had problems of unidentifiable origin including apparent abandonments. The wire predator guard continued to do a good job of protecting against raccoons and house cats with a total of only 4 confirmed problems.

In addition, we saw an unusually severe infestation of blowflies adversely affecting at least six nests. Bird blowflies are bloodsucking parasites of nestling birds. The larvae stage lives in the nest coming out after dark when the nestlings are easy prey. We were able to minimize the damage by changing the nesting materials once a problem was identified.

Following is a comparison of data over the past eight years, beginning with 2001, our third best year:

	<u>2008</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2001</u>
* Successful nests	117	113	79	47	55	30	67	92
* Unsuccessful attempts	52	31	59	54	29	48	92	58
* Rate of successful nests	69%	78%	57%	46%	65%	38%	42%	61%
* Total bluebird eggs laid	679	608	566	383	374	295	614	606
* Bluebirds fledged	453	454	317	194	230	112	265	377
* Rate of success to egg laid	67%	74%	56%	51%	61%	38%	43%	62%
* Ave. fledglings per nest	3.9	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.2	3.7	4.0	4.1

Once again, we thank Judy and John Lilga for their expert monitoring help when we were away. The success of this trail would not be possible without their able assistance. Thanks also to the National Park Service for their support and for allowing us to continue this conservation effort. We are privileged indeed to carry on this work on the hallowed and beautiful grounds of Antietam National Battlefield.

Monitor's Corner

Q: Why is it important to monitor a nestbox? Isn't it helping enough to just put up a box for birds to nest in? Isn't it interfering to open a box when birds are nesting?

A: Monitoring a nestbox is the most important part of the process of helping bluebirds. Houses should be monitored to make certain they are used by native birds only. Allowing non-native birds, such as house sparrows, to use a nestbox creates more competition for our native bluebirds, tree swallows, titmice, chickadees, and other cavity nesters. If you truly want to help our native birds, make certain that your nestboxes are not used by non-native species. Most cavity nesting birds are very tolerant of human observers. However, it is important to make your check of the nest as quickly as possible so as not to over-stress the birds.

HAPPINESS CAN BE BLUE

By Sherry Rodeheaver

The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) is one of our most beautiful native birds. Not long ago, the loss of habitat, use of pesticides, and introduction of the English House Sparrow to North America decimated the bluebird population. The North American Bluebird Society or NABS (nabluebirdsociety.org) was created to promote the education, conservation, and research of bluebirds and other native cavity nesting birds. Currently, the bluebird population is stable, but continues to need our help. Please visit the NABS website for complete information about bluebirds. Additionally, the Maryland Bluebird Society website (mdbluebirdsociety.org) and a book entitled "The Bluebird Monitor's Guide," by Cynthia Berger, et al, are excellent resources.

Here are a few points to ponder before you begin attracting bluebirds to your garden:

Habitat: Bluebirds prefer open spaces for hunting such as meadows, parks, and fields. They nest in cavities such as dead trees, wooden fencerows, and nest boxes provided by bluebird lovers. If your yard is not an open space, but you live near one, bluebirds may still decide to call your yard home.

Food: Insects are the primary food for bluebirds. Please use pesticides cautiously! Many birds are harmed or killed by ingesting poisoned insects. When insects are scarce (such as in winter), bluebirds survive by eating a variety of berries found in the landscape. There are many plants native to our region that will provide seasonal fruit year round. Native plants occur naturally in a location and have evolved to survive in that climate. Wildlife depends on many regional plants for food and shelter, so consider native species when planning your backyard landscape. Bluebirds are particularly fond of berries from the Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*). Other native plants with fruits at various times of year are American Holly (*Ilex opaca*) and the Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*). For more information about native plants, log onto the Maryland Native Plant Society website (mdflora.org). Bluebirds also love mealworms, which are not worms at all, but the larva of the darkling beetle. "Mealies" may be purchased online, at nature stores, or raised at home. Suet mixes are beneficial in winter when many other food sources are depleted.

Water: A birdbath or other water source is vital. Use a heating element for birdbaths in winter to keep water from freezing. Replacing water daily helps prevent mosquitoes from breeding during warmer months.

Nest boxes: Providing a nest box is an easy way to encourage bluebirds to come to your yard. February is not too early for bluebirds to start looking for places to nest in the spring. If you put up a nest box, you must monitor it! If you are not willing to monitor the nest box, do not put one up. There is nothing worse than inviting bluebirds to move in, and then allowing them to be killed by predators such as the non-native House Sparrow or the cat next door. House Sparrows are aggressive cavity nesters and will destroy any birds, nestlings, or eggs in a nest box they have taken over. Since they are non-native, it is legal to remove their nests, eggs, and the birds themselves from your nest boxes. Be sure to positively identify non-native species before removing.

Other Cavity Nesters: There are native cavity-nesters that may occupy your nest box. The Tree Swallows, House Wrens and Black Capped Chickadees are common. It is illegal to remove native birds from your bluebird boxes.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in [Frederick](#) County, call the [Frederick](#) County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301-600-1596, or visit www.Frederick.umd.edu. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.



A male Eastern Bluebird in Sherry Rodeheaver's backyard.