



# The Maryland Bluebird Society's BLUEBIRD CHATTER

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## President's Perch

By Ed Escalante

Last year was a whirlwind summer, and the 2009 bluebird nesting season is just a memory. If you haven't done so already, now is a good time to prepare your trail nest boxes for this coming spring. Check each box for maintenance needs. My first step is to clean out old nests and debris, and I wear gloves and stay up wind of flying dust.

Next, I replace cracked or warped roofs, and the same for side walls that are rotten and spongy. The intent is to make the nest box as water tight as possible. This is difficult, because the box needs an entrance opening, ventilation and drainage holes, all possible water entry sites. A wide overhang on a roof helps keep water out of the box.

I like to paint my boxes with white exterior enamel paint, but a good quality latex paint will also work. My boxes need to be repainted about every two or three years. If the box needs a major repair, as described

above, I prefer to take it down, and do repairs and painting at home. I don't take them all down at once. I bring them home a few at a time.

Being outdoors on my trail is something I enjoy, and I hope you do too.

## County Coordinators Needed

The Maryland Bluebird Society is looking for a few good members willing to serve as coordinators for their respective counties. As this program is developed, duties may include the following : 1) facilitating conservation efforts for bluebirds, 2) attempting to contact, unite and organize bluebirders within your county, 3) compiling a list of known trails and monitors within your county, 4) serving as liaison between your county and MBS. Though this program is in the early stages of development, MBS is optimistic that it will become a valuable tool and resource for bluebirders throughout Maryland.



The quiet beauty of the female Eastern Bluebird as photographed by David Kinneer.

## Nesting News from Buckingham's Choice Retirement Community

Hello all you bluebird lovers (and there are a lot of you!):

This was a breakout year on the BC Bluebird Trail. After several years of trying to produce as many as 70 fledglings, this season we finally blew through the ceiling with a record total of 78. After a lot of analysis aimed at trying to figure out what we did to make this year the best ever, the answer seems to be, "darned if I know!"

We added a few boxes at mid-season (bringing our total to 30), but they didn't invite anything but more nasty house sparrows, the invasive non-natives that destroy bluebird nests and compete for their nesting cavities. To give you an idea of why our bluebird boxes must be monitored so diligently, in the course of the activity this season we removed 105 house sparrow nests and 131 of their eggs. On the other hand we fostered 32 tree swallow fledglings, wonderful mosquito-eating birds that also compete for space in the bluebird boxes. It requires constant attention from March through August to sort out the good birds from the undesirables.

Bluebirds can sometimes be persuaded to nest more than once in a season and this year 5 of our boxes had two broods each. For you statisticians, 17 of our 30 boxes produced bluebirds and tree swallows and 13 of the 17 were bluebirds only. This means that 13 boxes produced nothing at all, which seems like a lot of work for nothing but is actually about what is required for the results achieved.

There are always a few anomalies: like the box on the trail behind the Neuenschwander's in which a bluebird laid 4 eggs without building a nest first (they never hatched); or like the box on the trail behind Darby Clay's where a baby bluebird appeared among and was raised along with a clutch of tree swallows. Nature is truly wonderful to behold (we're not making that up!), so keep a sharp eye out for small flocks of bluebirds in pursuit of bugs and berries through the BC winter.

Respectfully submitted,  
Lutie Semmes and Chuck Wilson

**The Sparrow Spooker:**  
**A valuable addition to your monitoring kit**

by Kathy Kremnitzer

As a responsible bluebird landlord, I often find myself in a state of worry over the potential harm that can befall a bluebird or tree swallow nesting, mainly from the dreaded house sparrow. Several years ago, after tragedy struck one of the nestboxes in my yard, I did some reading on one of my favorite web sites: [www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org). Listed as a useful tool in repelling sparrows was something called a “sparrow spooker”. The spooker, it seems, is a device made from dowel rods with attached streamers that move in the breeze and scare or “spook” house sparrows, causing them to avoid the nestbox. A spooker can either be ordered from a listed supplier or made following plans provided on the sialis web site.

I monitor over 30 nestboxes in several different locations and decided it would be convenient to have a few of the spookers on hand. I placed an order from [www.sparrowtraps.net](http://www.sparrowtraps.net) and my spookers arrived within a week. They were a cinch to install as parts and directions are included with each kit. Each spooker even came with 2 mounting brackets so that the brackets could be installed on 2 separate nestboxes. The spooker could then be quickly installed on the nestbox in need. Due to a variation in roof design, I did have trouble fitting the spooker to one of my nestboxes, but help was only an e-mail away. Blaine Johnson, designer of the commercially made spooker, contacted me with possible solutions and the problem was promptly solved.

I must admit that I was afraid to place much confidence in the spooker idea but, much to my relief and delight, the device works wonders! In the 4 years I have been using sparrow spookers to protect my nestboxes; I have only lost one bluebird nestling to house sparrow attack. Two summers ago, the last little female in a nesting of 6 was severely injured by a male house sparrow before she could fledge with the rest of her siblings. I can only suppose that the excitement of fledging day caused the house sparrow to overcome his fear of the spooker’s streamers.

Many fellow bluebirders believe profoundly in installing a sparrow spooker to their bluebird nestboxes as a matter of course. However, the following suggestions should be adhered to for best results:

\*\*\***A sparrow spooker should be installed only after the host bird nest has its first egg.** Once an egg is laid, the nesting birds are more strongly bonded to the nestbox and are less likely to abandon their nest. The nestbox should be observed after the spooker is installed to be certain that the nesting pair accepts the change and enters the nestbox. This can take several minutes to more than an hour. If the change is not accepted, the spooker should be removed. Repeat attempts may be made until the change is accepted.

\*\*\***Streamers should be adjusted to hang so that ends brush the top of the nestbox as close to the entrance hole as possible.** It sometimes helps to clip the streamers together and release a few at a time if the nesting pair is having trouble accepting the spooker.

\*\*\***Nestboxes should be checked after storms or high winds to be certain that they are still correctly positioned to protect the nesting birds.**

\*\*\***Spookers should be removed as soon as fledging occurs so that house sparrows do not become desensitized to them. Spookers should never be permanently installed on a nestbox for this reason.**

I have had occasion to observe many bluebirds as they adjust to having this protective device installed on their homes. In my experience, the female bluebird is the first to overcome her fear and she is almost always the first to return to the nest. I have even seen bluebirds sit on the dowels and attempt to peck the streamers off! This past nesting season, nature photographer Steve Ferendo was visiting Fountain Rock Park in Frederick County where I monitor several nestboxes. He took the following photos of a nestbox which had just had a spooker installed. It took the female bluebird about 30 minutes to work up her courage but she finally entered the box and resumed nesting.

I believe in actively controlling the house sparrow population that tries to use any of the nestboxes on my trails and I do trap regularly. However, there are times when it is impossible to keep a constant vigil on a specific nestbox and it is comforting to know that the sparrow spooker is on duty. This device does not remove the responsibility for other measures of house sparrow control but is a worthwhile tool in helping to protect the precious contents of a nestbox.



A properly installed sparrow spooker.  
Photo by Kathy Kremnitzer



Bluebirds can also be “spooked” by a sparrow spooker and need time to adjust.  
Photo by Steve Ferendo.



A male bluebird overcomes his fear of the spooker and accepts the change. When a spooker is added to a nestbox, the box should be monitored to be certain the change is accepted by nesting birds. If birds do not re-enter the box within a reasonable amount of time, spooker should be removed. Photo by Steve Ferendo.

**LEARN MORE**

To learn more about bluebirds, visit:  
[www.nabluebirdsociety.org](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org) or  
[www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org)

To learn more about bluebirds and bluebirders in our area, visit the Maryland Bluebird Society at:  
[www.mdbluebirdsociety.org](http://www.mdbluebirdsociety.org)

## Monitor's Corner

**Question:** I would like to become more involved with the Maryland Bluebird Society but am not an "expert" at bluebirding and don't have a lot of spare time. Can I still become an active participant?

**Answer:** There is a simple answer to this question, YES!!!! The Maryland Bluebird Society is a non-profit organization made up solely of volunteers with a shared passion for all things bluebird! While many in our group do have years of bluebirding experience under their belts, we also have many novice members who have only recently embarked on the journey of learning how best to help this native species. I'm certain that each and every experienced bluebirder would eschew the notion of being considered an "expert". As we have all learned, Mother Nature has a way of humbling even the most seasoned among us. Speaking from personal experience, I learn something new each and every nesting season and rely greatly on the observations and experiences of my fellow enthusiasts. The mission statement of the Maryland Bluebird Society is a dedication to increasing Eastern Bluebird populations through conservation, education and research. We welcome all who are interested to join us in our goal to make the beautiful state of Maryland a haven for our beloved bluebirds. To become involved, please visit our website at: [www.mdbluebirdsociety.org](http://www.mdbluebirdsociety.org) and click on the Contact Us tab. You will reach one of our directors who will gladly give you additional information.

**Question:** Is it okay to offer mealworms and suet to bluebirds? Is it health to feed them year-round?

**Answer:** Offering supplementary foods to bluebirds (or other wild birds) should be undertaken with caution, especially during nesting season. Why? Breeding birds and growing chicks have high requirement for dietary calcium. Both mealworms and most suet mixtures are very low in calcium.

Help your birds stay healthy and raise more young by following these guidelines:

- 1) Offer these items as treats (not more than 10-15 mealworms OR 1-2 teaspoons of suet crumbles/daily per bluebird family).
- 2) Do NOT offer unlimited access to suet/suet crumble mixes to wild birds in the summer.
- 3) Discontinue all feeding of suet/suet mixtures in warm weather (over 80-85 F). Fats can easily spoil at high temperatures.
- 4) *Please note that during periods of unusually cold weather or extended rain, it is OK to offer more generous quantities of mealworms/suet crumbles.*
- 5) Chicken egg shells may be crushed and added to homemade suet mixtures to increase calcium content. (for additional information, visit <http://www.sialis.org/calcium.htm> )

# Nesting News from Around the State

The Antietam National Battlefield's Eastern Bluebird Nestbox Trail in **Washington County** reports an exceptional and record-smashing year for 2009. There were 538 bluebird fledglings, compared to previous highs of 453 and 454 recorded in 2008 and 2007, respectively. The total number of fledglings for the trail since their recovery efforts began in 1979 is 7,240!!! The trail also fledged 37 tree swallows in 2009.

Trail operators **Mark and Jean Raabe** attribute last year's success to several factors. Spring 2009 presented little in the way of adverse spring weather and, by late April, there were more than 60 bluebird pairs nesting. By the end of summer there were a number of third broods and fledgings continued into late August.

The Raabes also credit the success to a decrease in predator activity and increased protection afforded by the Noel wire guards when attacks did occur. Predation by house sparrows, house wrens, black snakes and raccoons all occurred less than in previous years.

A slight increase in blowfly infestation was reported but damage was minimized by the changing of nesting material once an infestation was identified.

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**Anne Sturm** monitors a 25-box trail in **Montgomery County**. She reports fledging 54 bluebirds and 13 tree swallows from her trail in 2009.

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**Diane Seward** of **Montgomery County** reports fledging 34 eastern bluebirds in 2009. Nestings of robins fledged 7 young and a nesting of Carolina chickadees fledged 6 young.

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**Ed Escalante** monitors a 32-box trail in **Montgomery County**. He reports that his fledging numbers are the second lowest in the 13 years he has tended this trail. From 32 boxes, which are paired (15 pairs and two unpaired) he had 68 BBs fledge and 38 TS.

He adds that this year he replaced all of the boxes, and all now have a roof with at least a 2 inch overhang all around. This eliminated water leakage problems that were occurring with the old Zeleny top opening boxes. He feels that perhaps the BBs didn't like the new box style but will wait for fledging reports from others in this part of the county before blaming the boxes.

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**Matt Storms** reports from **Baltimore County** that 45 bluebirds, 6 tree swallows and 4 Carolina Chickadees fledged from his trails.

**Tricia Smucker**, trail manager for Heritage Farm Park in **Frederick County** reports fledging 37 bluebirds in 2009. Tricia took over the trail this spring and performed major renovations. She looks forward to even greater success next year.

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**Kathy Krennitzer** reports that her trails in **Frederick County** fledged 109 bluebirds, 60 tree swallows and 5 chickadees. She attributes the high rate of success with the number of bluebirds to the late start in nesting. She had early nestings on only 2 of her 5 trails and provided mealworms to those breeding pairs during long periods of rainy weather. In addition, she lost only one brood of 5 chicks to house sparrow attack.

The chickadee nesting occurred on her school's 6-box trail which is monitored by 4th and 5th grade students participating in a bluebird club. During supervised monitoring visits, the students were excited to see a nest that was unlike bluebird, tree swallow or house sparrow nests and quickly identified it as belonging to chickadees. They were amazed at the small size of the chickadee eggs were in awe of the tiny chicks..

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**Michael L. Smith** of **Carroll County** reports fledging 15 bluebirds in 2009. He had trouble with house wrens which destroyed a chickadee nesting, though he was able to keep them from bothering the bluebirds. Michael also had phoebes, song sparrows, mourning doves, cardinals and wood ducks nest this season. Unfortunately a pair of red bellied woodpeckers was harassed by starlings and did not nest successfully. Michael fears that the female red belly was killed during the pair's last attempt.

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The Area 1 - Up County Park 2009 Report for **Montgomery County** on bluebird nesting compiled by **Denise Gibbs**, naturalist, shows that at 17 county parks, 758 bluebirds fledged from 289 boxes as reported by 31 bluebird monitors. There was an increase in predation by house sparrows and ants. Unfortunately, human vandalism was reported at several boxes at some parks. However, she describes the 2009 nesting season as one of the best yet!

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**Chuck Wilson** and **Lutie Semmes** of Buckingham's Choice Retirement Community in **Frederick County** report fledging 78 bluebirds and 32 tree swallows from their 30-box trail. This was a record-breaking year for them.