



The Maryland Bluebird Society's

# BLUEBIRD CHATTER

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## President's Perch

By Ed Escalante

I know it's cold, windy and snowy, but now is a good time to check and repair your bluebird boxes. On the next sunny day, examine your boxes, and if they need repairs, take them down, and bring them home for rebuilding. On my boxes, the roof generally deteriorates faster than the other parts of the box.

At home, I hose them down and scrub them with a wire brush. After drying overnight, I remove and replace the parts that are damaged. I lightly sand the entire box, and then re-paint the outside, using white, outdoor oil based paint. I find oil based paint more durable than latex paint. However, I realize that latex paints are easier and more convenient to use, and their durability is improving.

Some boxes are used for roosting during the winter, so keeping boxes available during this period may help a cavity nester survive a very cold night. Consider changing the location of your box, if that site has not been productive. Finally, your trail will have a very different look from what is encountered during the nesting season. You can take your time and enjoy the magical appearance and changes that winter brings, while helping our feathered friends.



### **And You Thought My Grandfather Was Mad!**

The vast majority of bluebirders know the image of Michael L. Smith's "The Mad Bluebird" very well. Michael has graciously granted MBS permission to share this sequel photo of what he describes as "The Mad Bluebird's Grandson". For those interested in celebrating the photography of wildlife, be sure to attend the BLUEBIRDS FOREVER FESTIVAL at Black Hills Regional Park on Sunday May 15th, when Michael L. Smith will present "The Joy of Nature Photography".

## **BLUEBIRDS FOREVER FESTIVAL**

**Sunday May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1-4 p.m. at Black Hill Regional Park, Boyds**

### **Presentations include:**

*"Beautiful Bluebirds"* by Ed Escalante and Donna Marino, 1 – 2 p.m.

*"The Quest for a Nest"*, a bluebird play for children, performed by children from Yellow Springs Elementary School, directed by MBS County Coordinator Kathy Kremnitzer, 2 – 3 p.m.

*"The Joy of Nature Photography"* by renowned nature photographer Michael L. Smith, 3 – 4 p.m.

1 – 4 p.m. - Ongoing programs, exhibits and demonstrations including bluebird crafts, games, music, activities, hike to a bluebird nestbox, nestbox monitoring, sparrow spookers. Bluebird resource table for teachers, displays by Wild Birds Unlimited with items for sale, Maryland Bluebird Society, North American Bluebird Society, The Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs.

All programs are free and first-come, first-served. Most programs are suitable for all ages.

## Tale of Two Trails

Janice Ward--Worcester County Coordinator for MBS

To say my life changed drastically in 2006 would be an understatement. I remember the occasion well. We were at a Nature Conservancy stewardship committee meeting, discussing the reforestation of a small open field that had been previously tilled. One of our members spoke up and asked that the field remain open to try out some ideas he had. And that's when it happened. A whole new world opened for me that day because, you see, I live in the middle of that field and now those ideas Dr. Richard (Dick) Roberts wanted to try are an integral part of my life. Here is the story:

Located on the lower Eastern Shore of Maryland is the largest private nature preserve in Maryland. The Nature Conservancy has worked in this area since 1978 to protect 10,000 acres of bald cypress swamps and upland forests along Nassawango Creek, a tributary of the Pocomoke River. One small portion of this preserve has become the home of the Prothonotary Birding Trail and the Nassawango Bluebird Trail, both part of Dick's plan for the field. Nassawango Creek is a critical stopover point for migratory birds and a banding project conducted by Dick and a team of volunteers has recorded more than 60 species of songbirds as part of a long-term study of bird populations along the creek. The area has recently been named an "Important Bird Area" by the Audubon Society.

The Prothonotary Birding Trail, established by Dick and a group of Conservancy volunteers, begins near Snow Hill, Maryland, and stretches for a mile along Nassawango Creek. It weaves through an upland hardwood forest, a cypress swamp and the open field. It consists of boardwalks, benches and beautiful signage made by Todd Peterson, a member of our group. The trail opened in 2008 for guided walks arranged through TNC or the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art which has recently begun using the trail as part of its education program. The habitat varieties here allow visitors to view a wide range of wildlife and native plants. At one point in the trail Dick has established a banding station which he operates on Saturday mornings throughout the year, weather permitting. Visitors are welcome but pre-registration is required. Dick has been banding birds for more than 30 years and is only too willing to share his wealth of knowledge. He is regularly assisted by Kim Check, Education Director of the Ward Museum, along with myself and another bander. As the novice in the group, I work the nets and record data. Since 2008 we have entertained 300+ visitors from 26 states and Canada. I should note that the trail through the field skirts our yard which has 2 martin houses, several feeding areas including two mealworm stations. There are also three birdbaths, all of which provide additional viewing opportunities. The field itself is left fallow. It is mowed only once per year, within a small window of time, when wintering birds have eaten all the available seed but before spring migration has started. Paths are kept open (thanks to my husband) the rest of the year for access to the banding site and the several bluebird boxes located in the field. Four clusters of native trees and shrubs have been established which will eventually provide additional shelter and food for resident and migrant birds.

Like other cavity nesters, Prothonotary warblers are being threatened by habitat destruction. But they will use nest boxes, several of which have been placed along the trail to supplement nesting sites. They are not being monitored regularly due to

limited accessibility, so there is no nesting data. However, each year we band between 25 and 35 of these beautiful birds, which seems to indicate a stable population. This year, for the first time, a Prothonotary nested in one of the bluebird boxes in the field area. We were an excited group when the occupant was identified!

Dick witnessed a number of bluebirds in the area and hoped to be able to increase those numbers—thus the creation of the second trail. Bluebirds have suffered greatly from habitat loss. Bluebird trails have become commonplace as a solution to that problem. The first year our trail consisted of 8 boxes made by Dick and Todd. The boxes were placed in pairs in the open field around my house. The two boxes in my yard also became part of the trail. I vigilantly studied literature and began my new "career" as trail monitor. Like many other monitors, I now report my nesting data to Cornell University. I also do annual reports to Dick, TNC, The Ward Museum, and the Maryland DNR. After the first year we wanted to expand, but were out of space. Spacing the nest boxes 100 yards apart quickly used up property. Consequently, I approached my neighbors with the idea of expanding the trail and we now have 8 other properties with 37 total boxes in the vicinity of the original field. All private property owners now receive annual reports. Seven of those boxes are monitored by two property owners who then send their data to me. The remainder of the monitoring and maintenance is performed by me. Thirty-five of the boxes are mounted on poles with predator guards. Two were originally in yards, mounted on posts, and they have remained that way. Some boxes have commercial predator guards, but mostly we use large inverted plant pots for the purpose of dissuading climbing predators. Ten of the boxes are paired to reduce competition with tree swallows. The rest stand alone. I've only had one incidence of tree swallows taking over a box being used by bluebirds. In 2008, we had house sparrows using one box, but their population was strictly controlled and they have not returned. During nesting season, visitors come to the area for banding demonstrations and may also view occupied boxes on the bluebird trail. The boxes are cleaned after each nesting and may be relocated, based on yearly evaluations. I use a pyrethrum spray and soap on the underside of the roof to control pests. It's a constant learning experience.

Our fledging counts have gone up consistently from 27 in 2007 (13 boxes) to 151 (37 boxes) this year. We have been able to catch and band 23 bluebirds since 2006. In 2007 Dick received permission to color-band any bluebirds caught, and that has helped in tracking our population. One female color-banded that first year has been seen each subsequent year, nesting in the same box. Another interesting trend is that each year more boxes have multiple bluebird nestings. Our theory is that the population has a growing number of experienced adults and they start their nesting cycles earlier than younger birds. Counting birds in the winter at mealworm stations shows that increasing numbers are overwintering here and I'm finding more boxes being used for winter roosting. We have a healthy, growing bluebird population.

Yes, my life definitely changed in 2006 and I am loving it! I hope this article has whetted your interest enough to pay us a visit. Just contact Dick ([bandbird@verizon.net](mailto:bandbird@verizon.net)) or Kim ([kacheck@salisbury.edu](mailto:kacheck@salisbury.edu)) or me ([jward43.jw@gmail.com](mailto:jward43.jw@gmail.com)) for further information. See you on the trails!



YSES Bluebird Club students learn the intricacies of nest building!

### What's It Like to Build A Nest?

On Thursday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, MBS President Ed Escalante and his wife, Karen, made their 3<sup>rd</sup> annual visit to the Bluebird Club at Yellow Springs Elementary School in Frederick, MD. The 25 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders were instructed on the nesting habits of various native birds, on the act of nest building, and on the variety of materials that birds use to build their nests. Students were then given a bowl and a small pair of tweezers and were asked to “fly” to buckets of nesting material located nearby. They were to grab “beakfuls” of nesting material and “fly” back to their nesting sites, place the material in their bowls and continue this process until their nest was completed. The young bluebird enthusiasts enjoyed the activity immensely but also gained a healthy appreciation for the effort it takes for a bird to build a nest.

### Upcoming Events

- **“Nestbox Monitoring and Planting for Bluebirds”** by John and Dedra Salitrik, February 8<sup>th</sup>, Frederick County Master Gardeners, Frederick County Safety Training Facility.
- **“Bluebirds in Your Garden”**, by Ed Escalante, Tuesday February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2:30-3:00 p.m., Montgomery Master Gardeners Training, Agricultural History Farm Park.
- **Presentation to Haven House** for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders by Janice Ward, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, Snow Hill Elementary School, 3 - 5 p.m.
- **5<sup>th</sup> Annual Presentation of “Beautiful Bluebirds”**, with Donna Marino, Bluebird Monitor Training at Black Hill Regional Park, Boyds, Saturday March 5<sup>th</sup>, 12 – 1p.m.
- **“Welcome Back the Bluebirds”**, by Stan Fisher, Springfield Garden Club, Little Falls Library, 5501 Massachusetts Ave., Bethesda, Friday March 11<sup>th</sup>, 10:45 a.m. For additional information, contact Jane Wentz at 301 229-3621.
- **“Eastern Bluebirds-The Conservation Movement Continues”**, by Ed Escalante, Lecture Matters Lecture Series at Meadowside Nature Center, Thursday March 17<sup>th</sup>, 7 – 8 p.m.
- **Bluebirds Forever Festival**, Black Hills Regional Park, Sunday May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1 – 4 p.m.

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# Nesting News from Around the State

The Antietam National Battlefield's Eastern Bluebird Nestbox Trail in *Washington County* reports a very good year for 2010. There were 534 bluebird fledglings, compared to last year's record-smashing 538. The total number of fledglings for the trail since their recovery efforts began in 1979 is 7,774!!! In addition, 68 tree swallows also fledged on the Battlefield last year.

Trail managers **Mark and Jean Raabe** hope this trend of increased fledglings continues but also wonder what accounts for them. The number of nesting boxes has been constant for more than 20 years. They have improved locations of some boxes but feel that doesn't come near to accounting for the increases. The one change over the four years which appears to have made a significant difference is the implementation of the Noel wire predator guard. They are now attached to all nest boxes except for the few PVC boxes.

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MBS *Worcester County* Coordinator, **Janice Ward**, reports the following 2010 nesting data from the Nasswango Bluebird Trail:

43 Eastern Bluebird nesting attempts, with 196 eggs, 166 nestlings and 161 fledglings

13 Tree Swallow nesting attempts, with 64 eggs, 58 nestlings and 58 fledglings

1 Prothonotary Warbler nesting attempt, with 5 eggs, 5 nestlings and 5 fledglings

3 Carolina Chickadee nesting attempts, with 17 eggs, 16 nestlings and 16 fledglings

The trail is made up of 32 nestboxes.

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**Diane Seward** of *Montgomery County* reports the following for the 2010 nesting season:

**Eastern Bluebird:** 11 nesting attempts, 47 eggs, 43 nestlings and 39 fledglings

(4 nestlings died due to extreme heat on 7/4 and 7/5)

**Carolina Chickadee:** 2 nesting attempts, 12 eggs, 7 nestlings and 0 fledglings

(House wrens wreaked havoc with the nestings, removing eggs and killing nestlings)

**Tufted Titmice:** 1 nesting attempt, 6 eggs, 0 nestlings (House wrens removed all eggs)

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**Anne Sturm**, also of *Montgomery County*, reports 9 bluebird nesting attempts resulting in 22 fledglings and 2 tree swallow nesting attempts resulting in 8 fledglings.

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MBS President **Ed Escalante** monitors 32 nestboxes at Little Bennett Regional Park in *Montgomery County*. His trail fledged 81 bluebirds and 59 tree swallows.

**Kathy Kremmitzer** reports that her trails in *Frederick and Washington Counties* fledged 119 bluebirds and 81 tree swallows in 2010. 33 of the bluebirds fledged from her 6-box school trail, much to the delight of the 24 bluebird club students who monitored there. Kathy feels it is extremely important to share the joys of nature with young people, since they are the monitors of tomorrow.

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**Ranier Rothen** of *Frederick County* reports 4 bluebird nesting attempts which fledged 17 chicks. His trail also fledged 6 tree swallows and 10 chickadees.

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**Jay Jones** of *Montgomery County* fledged 15 bluebirds and 11 tree swallows from his 6 nestboxes. He hopes to add at least 4 more boxes to the trail before next nesting season.

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**Donna Marino** of *Montgomery County* fledged in excess of 70 bluebirds from the 20 nestboxes that she monitors.

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The Tuscarora Creek Trail in central *Frederick County* is managed by **John and Dedra Salitrik**. Their 12 nestboxes fledged 21 tree swallows (5 nest attempts), 8 bluebirds (2 nest attempts), and 5 house wrens (1 nest attempt). This was the trail's first nesting season.

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**Chuck Wilson and Lutie Semmes** of *Frederick County* fledged 60 bluebirds and 55 tree swallows from the 30 nestboxes located at the their Buckingham's Choice trail. The trail is now 8 years old and has grown from 8 nestboxes which fledged 24 bluebirds in 2003. 2009 was their best nesting season so far, totaling 78 bluebirds fledged. They feel that their decreased numbers this year were due both to the severe winter weather losses of breeding adults and to house sparrow predation.

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**Tricia Smucker** reports fledging 53 bluebirds from the Heritage Farm Park trail she monitors in *Frederick County*. She performed a major rehab on the trail of 20+ nestboxes last year and has been vigilant in preventing house sparrows from nesting there. She has also fashioned her own design of a sparrow spooker and reports much success from its use.

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**Matt Storms** of *Baltimore County* reports fledging 36 bluebirds, 10 chickadees, 10 tree swallows and (unintentionally) 5 house wrens.