



Bluebird Trails & Tales

The Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania
An Affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society

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The Bluebird Society of PA's 26th Annual Conference

When: March 27 & 28, 2026

Where: Eden Resort and Conference Center
222 Eden Road, Lancaster, PA 17601

<https://edenresort.com>

More information will be coming in a separate mailing in early 2026
Watch for the information on our website at www.thebsp.org



A Message from the President

Dr. Dean C. Rust, BSP President



Have you Seen Bluebirds on the Course?

(This article has been reprinted from August 2012, Lancaster Country Club's "News & Views" written by Todd Bildlespacher, Director of Golf Course Operations)

With the golf season in full swing and the sun beating down on both the golfers and the course, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss the bluebird houses on the property. In last year's issue of "News and Views," I talked about our Bluebird houses and Dean Rust, a local community member, who volunteers his free time to maintain our Bluebird nature trail.

The model of Bluebird house we use is called the Peterson model. The Peterson is also known as the "slant-front" model and is popular because it discourages raccoons and other predators from disturbing the nest. The Peterson model tapers at the bottom to allow for less nesting material to be required and the front opens easily to allow for easy observation without disturbing the nest. A 1/2" hole on the upper right and left side of the bluebird houses allows for ventilation in the summer months when it is hot. Dean

has placed a small piece of plexiglass over these holes to prevent the houses from getting wet early in the spring when night time temperatures are still cold. If the nest box is wet, the nest soon wicks up the wetness and cold as well, and the recently hatched nestlings can succumb to hypothermia. The posts stay in the ground all-year round and the bird houses are brought inside in mid-December for refurbishing.

Three of the houses we added this spring are a different model called a "slot-box model" or Kentucky bluebird house. This box has a slot stretching the width above the door of the house and a 1 and 3/16" vertical opening. The major advantage to this design is large predator birds cannot enter the house so easily and if they do, the male or female Bluebird can escape. The House Sparrow is a natural enemy of the Bluebird.

Some of the modifications to the bird houses and posts you may have noticed are as follows. A two-foot section of PVC pipe covering a portion of the steel post

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A Message from the President *continued from page 1*

discourages snakes and other predators like raccoons from climbing up the post. The snakes can slither up the post and stick their heads in the box and steal eggs without disrupting the nest. A second addition to the Bluebird houses is a small metal cage fastened to the front of the box, this cage is called a "Noel Guard," and it is 2" wide, 4" deep and 6" tall. It is the 2nd line of defense to stop snakes and raccoons from entering the box and tampering with the eggs or chicks inside.

Our Bluebird fledging totals have risen significantly since Dean began monitoring our Bluebird trail. In 2006, we started with 18 Bluebird boxes and as of July 2012, we have 32 birdhouses. Beginning in July 2010, with Dean's assistance, 40 Bluebirds FLEDGED. In 2011 we set a goal to have 100 Bluebirds FLEDGE, but we fell short of that goal only totaling 88. As of July 2012, 76 Bluebirds have already FLEDGED and we still have another month to go. We are confident we can exceed our goal of 100 in 2012!!" by Todd Bildlespacher

Additional comments by Todd:

"We have had Bluebird articles published in local newspapers and I am routinely asked to give updates on the trail in correspondence to the LCC membership. We have utilized this trail success in helping the golf course recently become certified in the Audubon Sanctuary Program. I have learned a great deal about what is involved in creating a successful Bluebird trail here at our golf course but I was not aware of the positive impacts that would be created within the membership and the surrounding community".

Update per Dean Rust:

Fast forward to September of 2025. The Lancaster Country Club now has 50 Bluebird nest boxes. 104 Bluebirds FLEDGED this past season. An average year in many ways, but July was a scorcher and the numbers in the final month of the season tapered off drastically. There was no big finish to the 2025 season!! My goal for next season is currently in the 150-160 range. I feel that 50 nest boxes is the right number for the golf course, but we need to get the "birds/box ratio" up to 3 or 3.5 to reach that goal.

I enjoy talking about my "Crown Jewel" of a Bluebird trail at the Lancaster Country Club. It was my very 1st

Bluebird trail starting in July of 2010. I look forward to each Monday morning from April to August when the 450- acre golf course is closed to member golfers and open for my "Bluebird monitoring." I visit the trail about 15 times each season in a golf cart and scribe descriptive notes on each of the 50 boxes in my LCC notebook. At the close of each season, I tabulate the FLEDGING results. Over the past 16 years, 2010-2025, my average FLEDGING number per year is: $1613/16 =$ **100.8 Bluebirds per year.**

At the end of a season is a great time to reflect on what went well and where could we improve in things going forward. There is some great weather awaiting us in the fall to make those needed changes.

1. Are all the boxes in top shape and dry inside the whole year?
2. Do any boxes need to be replaced?
3. Are all box locations productive or have some boxes never been used?
4. Change some boxes that were in questionable locations - it takes only 20 minutes.
5. Do you need to add a few boxes or take down a couple?
6. Are House Sparrows (HOSP) a problem on your trail? If so, trap them and "relocate"!
7. If you get another HOSP nest, repeat #6.
8. Are wasp nests a problem on your single box or trail? Paint liquid soap on ceiling and 2" down on all 4 walls.
9. Do you have eggs and/or chicks disappearing before they hatch or fledge? *** use a stove-pipe baffle as a predator guard plus a Noel Guard for a "double defense" system.
10. Do all your boxes face south/southeast?
11. Are any of your boxes on 4'x4' wood posts? If so, you are creating a fast-food restaurant! Use 3/4" smooth conduit to mount your boxes.
12. Do you have entrance holes enlarged to 1 3/4" - 2" or more? If so, restore the hole to the correct size

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Bluebird Pair
 Photo Credit - Mike Dickie

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A Message from the President *continued from page 2*

by adding a hardwood or metal portal of 1.5 inches.
May the 2026 season be one of your best ever as you enjoy one of God's great creations. If you check off some of the above points, you will have more successes than you've ever dreamed.

Dr. Dean C. Rust,
President of the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania
September 5, 2025



Male BB at entrance hole of nestbox



Dean at Lancaster Country Club



Very young Bluebirds



Peterson Nestbox



Slot Nestbox



LCC watering the greens



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Our Mission Statement

The mission statement of the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania is simple, yet powerful:

1. Provide and promote educational activities relating to bluebirds, birding, conservation and related subjects.
2. Monitor and conduct research relating to bluebirds, other cavity nesting birds, food sources, habitats, and trails.
3. Build, maintain, and monitor bluebird boxes and trails.
4. Provide opportunities for people to become involved in efforts that assist bluebirds and other native bird species.
5. Provide social opportunities to share information and experiences relating to bluebirds and related conservation topics.



Bluebird in flight

Photo Credit: Mike Dickie

Promotion/Ned Smith Day

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**Seeking a Chairperson for the Nomination and Speakers Bureau Committees.*

If you have an interest in serving on any committee, please contact: BSP President, Dean Rust at july7ds@aol.com or 717-669-0167

From the Editor *by Joan Watroba*

It is early September, and I am receiving inspiration from the beauty of Nature as I write this article outdoors on my laptop. For the past two weeks, we have been enjoying glorious, sunny weather in the high 70's and low 80's with little or no humidity.

I see that the Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds are currently very active at the nectar feeders and flowers, as they are adding calories to bulk up in preparation for their long journey to warmer climates in Mexico and Central America. We usually have one nesting pair, and the male already left. Next to depart will be the adult female, and then the two young fledges will leave last. I added a second feeder in another area of the yard to reduce the competition at the feeders. I usually keep the feeders filled with fresh nectar (one part white sugar to 4 parts water) until mid-October. This action can provide later migrants from farther North to find a source of nutrition to assist them with completing their migration.

The current weather is a welcome change from the very hot and humid weather in July and August, which presented challenges to the nesting birds and trail monitors. When the extreme heat arrived, I modified my schedule by checking boxes earlier in the morning instead of mid-day, being careful not to interrupt the activity of females laying and incubating eggs or brooding their young. In most cases, the adult female Bluebirds and Tree Swallows just stayed on the nest, as I noted on my weekly checklist, "female on nest," then moved on to check the next box.

I just submitted my Annual Nestbox Report to BSP; 189 bluebirds fledged--impressive results. However, the year would have been outstanding if all eggs laid had hatched. During the second nesting cycle, the main factor seemed to be the excessive heat. In most cases, only some of the eggs in a clutch hatched. In some cases, full clutches were abandoned without any sign of problems or predation. This issue affected not only the bluebirds, but also the Tree Swallows and House Wrens.

The highlight of the season was that the yard nestboxes produced 3 broods, for a total of 13 bluebirds fledged! This is noteworthy, as our habitat is quite wooded and there is often interference from House Wrens. The Bluebird parents brought their young back to the mealworm feeder, and the entire family also enjoyed the bird bath, so it was quite a show.

I did not have any white bluebird eggs this season (I usually have at least one or two clutches of white eggs). Also, I was very surprised to find a dwarf Black-Capped Chickadee egg in a nestbox with 5 normal-sized BCC eggs. The dwarf egg did not hatch. Another surprise was a successful nesting of Carolina Wrens which produced 5 fledglings from a nestbox at Fort Hunter Park, in Harrisburg (Dauphin County).

Another interesting observation was the difference in behaviors between one bluebird pair and another. Some pairs will aggressively protect their nesting site, and others are very nonchalant when I approach the nestbox to check. This happens even though they are accustomed to me frequently checking the box. I prefer them to be more aggressive, as that is a sign that they will defend their nesting sites from actual predators.

This nesting season I observed delayed fledging of "runt" songbirds, ones that are smaller or less developed as their nestmates. In one case, a bluebird fledged 4 days after its siblings (1 of 5 young) and a Tree Swallow fledged 5 days after its siblings (1 of 5 young). Usually, they will all fledge within 24 hours of one another, as the eggs usually hatch the same day or the next day. In both cases, the parents continued to feed and care for the last one, and both runts successfully fledged.

As I reflect on the 2025 nesting season, I am planning to make some changes to some of my trails. I will relocate some boxes which were not productive, repair or replace some boxes, and will also add a handful of dry, white pine needles in each box. These needles can provide some insulation inside of the nestbox, as songbirds often roost in the boxes over the Winter. The

cavity-nesting songbirds can also use the pine needles as a base for their nests in the Spring. In early March before the nesting season begins, I will check the boxes and will remove the needles, which have may have become soiled with fragments of food or feces due to multiple birds roosting in the same nestbox.

It is important to provide supplemental food sources to bluebirds and other native songbirds during the Winter months and in early Spring when natural food sources are scarce. Commercial suet cakes, homemade suet, shelled sunflower seeds, peanut hearts, fruit and nut mixes, and live or dried mealworms are suitable for bluebirds and other songbirds. Several homemade suet recipes can be found at <https://www.sialis.org/suet/>

I hope that you will continue to enjoy the beauty of Nature as the seasons change.



Chickadee nest with dwarf egg



Dwarf Bluebird



Clutch of Carolina Wren eggs

Bluebird of Happiness Day is celebrated annually on September 24th. This day honors the Bluebird, symbolizing joy, hope, and good fortune, and encourages people to embrace their happiness and appreciate the small joys in life.



The Mystery of Box #7

by Nancy Fraim

When monitoring nest boxes, you learn to expect surprises—but Box #7 delivered a real puzzle this season.

Early in the season, I found a Chickadee nest with a single egg in a nest box located within two feet of a chain-link fence. Since chickadee numbers are declining, I wanted to protect it with a 1 and 1/8" hole reducer. Unfortunately, I didn't have one with me, and weather delays and life kept me from returning for two weeks.

When I finally checked again, a Tree Swallow flew out. Inside, to my amazement, were four Chickadee eggs mixed with six Tree Swallow eggs—all warm to the touch.

What was happening here? After consulting with other bluebirders and our Facebook followers, we ruled out an "egg dump." More likely, the Tree Swallow built a rough nest of grass and feathers while reusing the Chickadee's soft nest cup. The question became: which species' eggs would hatch?

But when I returned, the story ended abruptly. All ten eggs were gone. With the nest intact, the most likely culprit was a snake.

Even though the mystery wasn't solved, Box #7 offered valuable lessons:

Always:

- Carry tools and hole reducers so repairs can be made immediately.
- Avoid placing boxes near chain-link fences—snakes climb them easily.

Predator clues:

- Eggs on the ground → likely House Wrens or House Sparrows.
- Nest pulled out through the entrance hole → raccoon or cat.
- Eggs gone but nest intact → snake (almost certainly the case here).

Box #7 may not have produced chicks this year, but it reminded me that every nest tells a story—and every surprise helps us become better monitors.

From the Editor: Many years ago, Chuck Musser conducted a bluebird trail walk on one of his bluebird trails located on the property of Masonic Homes in Bainbridge. We were very surprised to see both Bluebird eggs and Black-capped Chickadee eggs in the same nestbox. The amazing outcome was that the Black-capped Chickadee parents fledged not only their chickadee brood, but also the bluebirds. That must have been quite an accomplishment to feed and raise songbirds of two different species!



Nest with TS and BCC Eggs



Chickadees and bluebirds in same nest



A Tribute to Susan Renkel

We at BSP who knew Susan Renkel were saddened to learn of her passing on September 5th at the age of 71. She was a sweet, caring person who loved bluebirds and was actively involved in activities to share her knowledge and joy of bluebirds with others.

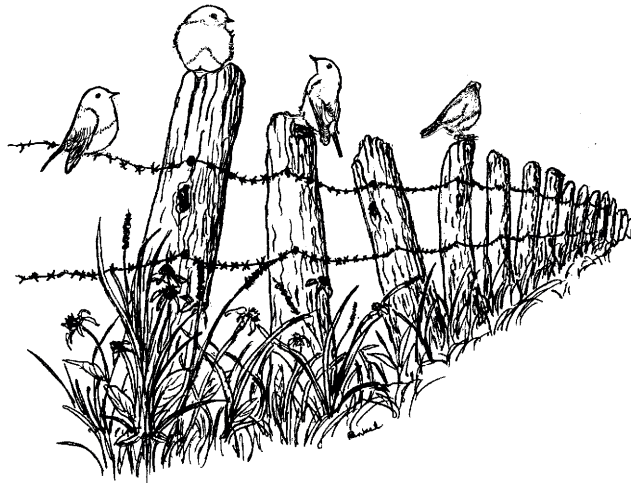
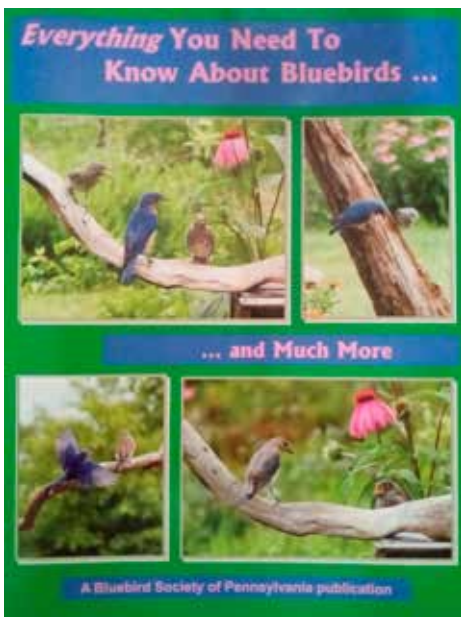
In the past, Susan served as BSP County Coordinator for Snyder County for many years. She also served as Editor for the BSP newsletter and created and edited the original bluebird publication, ***Everything You Need to Know About Bluebirds...And Much More***, a wonderful how-to guide about bluebirding, which was included in the information packet for all new BSP members for many years.

Susan was a talented photographer and illustrator, and she generously contributed her artwork to BSP publications to promote bluebird education. Her beautiful images brought joy and inspired many people to become actively involved in bluebirding.

BSP extends sincere condolences to Dan, her husband, who was very supportive of her and her efforts. Dan was also very helpful to BSP by providing technical assistance in the early days of BSP.

May Susan's spirit continue to inspire people who knew her, as she continues to inspire me.

Submitted by Joan Watroba



Snakes in a Bluebird Box

by Mark Ritke

You're likely thinking this article is about snake predation in bluebird boxes. Although snakes like the eastern rat snake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*) will make a meal of nestling bluebirds, I want to share with you the idea that some parent bluebirds purposely put live snakes in their nest box.

Mark and Lorrie live a few miles from my house, about 7 miles southwest of Titusville, PA. They have a pair of bluebird boxes that I monitor every nesting season. Their yard is perfect for bluebirds: several acres of mowed grass interspersed with trees, and a pond, all of which attract a variety of insects and spiders. Their yard is also home to the northern ring-necked snake (*Diadophis punctatus edwardsi*).

In 2023, bluebirds were nesting in one of Mark and Lorrie's nest boxes (as they do every year) and on June 28, 2023, I discovered a live ring-necked snake at the bottom of their nest that had four Day 10 nestlings. In 2024, the same pair nested in the same box, and I found live ring-necked snakes in their nests twice that year.

The first time was on June 9, in the nest of their first brood with five Day 4 nestlings. The second was on Aug. 8, in the



Live ring-necked snake that dropped from the bottom of the bluebird nest onto the inside of the front panel of the nest box when it was lowered on August 8, 2024. Blowfly larvae can also be seen.

nest of their second brood with four Day 10 nestlings. These snakes and the one from 2023 were 8-9 inches long.

Could the snakes have gotten into the nest box on their own?

Although ring-necked snakes can climb, they rarely do. And the space between the hole in the cap of my PVC predator guard and the pole is 1/8",

much too narrow for a ring-necked snake to crawl through.

In previous years, I've observed bluebirds bring small snakes to their nest box as food for nestlings and found dead snakes in old bluebird nests (photo 4). Thus, it was easy to conclude the live ring-necked snakes were brought to the nest as food for nestlings but were not eaten for some reason.

Before parent bluebirds feed large, unwieldy prey to their nestlings, it's subdued by "bashing" on a hard surface, e.g., tree limb, rock, top



Live ring-necked snake at the bottom of the bluebird nest examined on June 9, 2023. The white "flakes" on the snake and in the nest are the broken down remains of feather sheaths.



Female bluebird with what appears to be a Dekay's brown snake (*Storeria dekayi*) just before entering her nest box near Titusville, PA on May 18, 2018. Looking inside right after she flew out, I couldn't find the snake – it was apparently eaten by one of the five nestlings!



Deceased ring-necked snake on top of an old bluebird nest from which four nestlings fledged (photo taken Aug. 28, 2018). It appears to have suffered several injuries which likely were inflicted by one of the parents before it was brought to the nest.

age.

Nevertheless, my explanation for the live snakes in Mark and Lorrie's nest box seemed a little far-fetched. For one thing, their nest box is the only one in my 30 years of monitoring bluebird boxes in which I've found live ring-necked snakes. For another, there's no other published report of live ring-necked snakes being found inside bluebird boxes.

Then I came across a research paper by Gehlbach and Baldrige (1987) who found that Eastern Screech Owls in Texas bring live blind snakes (similar in size to the ring-necked snake) to their nests where the snakes feed on the insect larvae in the nest, some of which are parasites on the owl nestlings. The snakes do such a good job of getting rid of the insect pests that nestling owls with snakes in their nests grow faster and are healthier than nestlings without snakes in their nests. Now my idea didn't seem so farfetched!

Each time I found a ring-necked snake inside Mark and Lorrie's nest box, I released it, hoping to find another one in the box before the nestlings fledged. The day after discovering the ring-necked snake in August 2024, I videotaped the nest box hoping to record a parent with another snake going inside. No luck.

I'll of course need more evidence that Mark and Lorrie's bluebirds intentionally place live snakes inside their nest box. I'll be keeping a close eye on their bluebird boxes from now on!

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Powell, R., R. Conant, and J. T. Collins. 2016. Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co., New York, NY. (the source of the common and scientific names of the snakes mentioned here)

of nest box. But the live ring-necked snakes had no physical injuries of any kind and were quite active. Were the snakes not meant as food for nestlings?

The only alternative explanation I could come up with was to have the snakes feed on blowfly larvae. As every bluebird enthusiast knows, the bluebird blowfly (*Protocalliphora sialis*) is a common parasite of bluebird nestlings.

The female blowfly lays her eggs in bluebird nests with recent hatchlings. The blowfly eggs hatch in a day or so, producing larvae (aka maggots) that attach themselves to the legs and wings of the nestlings at dusk and feed on their blood until dawn (photo 5).

Heavy infestations of blowfly larvae result in anemic nestlings, and nestlings underweight for their



A bluebird blowfly larva feeding on the blood of a Day 7 bluebird nestling, a rare sight during the day.

BSP Mailbag

From: Joseph Valentine

Date: June 10, 2025

Subject: Leap of Faith

Today was the day for the young bluebirds to take a leap of faith, and they did on untested wings. They looked out the doorway and eventually stood on the threshold. Mom and dad were coaxing them from a nearby tree, and finally they got up the courage to take a leap of faith. At last they were airborne for the very first time. It's sad to see them leave, but I hope they will be back to drink from the bird bath, and perhaps, just maybe, mom and dad will raise a second brood.

I didn't get to see all of them all of them fledge, only one, but I was very privileged to see that. I wanted to know how many young were in the nest, I assume 3-5, I was just very glad to know they now had a chance at life, and an opportunity to enhance our lives.

Submitted by Joe Valentine



AFTER A LEAP OF FAITH, JUNIOR'S VERY FIIRST FLIGHT!

BSP Mailbag

To: Dean

From: Mark Ritke

Dean, I'm glad that you wrote about the Black-capped Chickadee in the latest issue of *Bluebird Trails & Tails*. You're right, they do get pushed around by other birds, even bluebirds. This year, I had a pair of bluebirds build their nest on top of a chickadee nest that had 4 eggs. I don't get many chickadees nesting in my Troyer boxes, but I'm always glad when they do. I have a friend who gets chickadees nesting in his chickadee box twice every year, and I have decided to build a bunch of chickadee boxes using his dimensions this winter and put them up at select locations this spring.

Hi Dean – I so appreciated reading your article regarding Black-capped Chickadees (BCC's!)

As I'm relatively new to the Pittsburgh area having moved from Hunt, TX, I am on my second summer with bluebirds. This year I noticed a moss nest. When I checked the box about a week later, a secondary nest was built on top by my returning bluebirds with 1 egg. I now understand the moss nest was likely from the BCC's. As suggested to me by another birder, I did end up gently removing the moss so the bluebird eggs would not be so near the entrance.

After your article, I am interested in how to encourage more BCC nesting. I have another bluebird box I would like to modify with an entrance hole reducer. My backyard is relatively small, so would you know if having a modified bluebird box not too far from my existing bluebird box be too close?

Thank you for all you do for BSP! Cheers!

Only good things, Kristina Casanova

Editor's Reply - Hi Dean—Nice communication regarding your article about BCC's. It is a good one.

I would suggest to her that it is important to have a second nestbox in her yard, even if it is a small yard. I have had chickadees and bluebirds nesting in adjacent boxes, even paired boxes.

She should have a hole reducer available, but wait to see which nestbox the chickadee is using based on seeing moss in it and then install the hole reducer on that box. The bluebirds can use the other box. After the chickadees fledge their young, she can remove the hole reducer, as the chickadees will nest only once per season and the bluebirds could have their choice of nestboxes for their second or third broods.

From: Lisa Fetterman

To: Joan Watroba

Subject: Mailbag question - Regarding Nestboxes as a Winter Roost

Joan - I have been leaving my nest boxes up year-round so that the birds have a sheltered place to gather out of the elements during the cold winter months. I do remove the old nesting material and clean the box in preparation for winter, but was curious if I should do more for our feathered friends. There is conflicting advice online about the subject. Some articles indicate the box should be cleaned and left empty for roosting, while other articles suggest that, after cleaning the nest box, materials such as straw or pine needles should be added to help with warmth. Just curious as to what is recommended by BSP. Thank you.

Reply from Joan-

Hi Lisa—There are different thoughts about this topic, and no consensus from BSP, but I have had good results if I place a handful of dry, white pine needles in each nestbox in the Fall. They do provide some insulation from the cold, and also the songbirds often use the pine needles as a base to build their nests in the Spring.

BSP Mailbag

From: John and Barb Woodward, Enola, PA

To my friends in the Bluebird Society,

We only had one bluebird nesting this season, but we had four babies fledge this year. Between the House Sparrows and House Wrens, it was quite a battle. But it worked out great for our grandson, Eli Woodward from Stanfield, North Carolina. He came to visit us the last two weeks of July and with luck, the bluebird eggs had hatched a couple of days before he arrived. I watched him keep checking on them daily. He would tap on the door and slowly open the door, and I saw him talking and singing to them every day. Then one day he came running into the house and said that all of the babies had gone. I said that they were getting too big for the box and it was time to grow up. But the good news was, about two days before he was to go home, while he was in the front yard walking the dog, he said that there were around five or six bluebirds sitting in the sugar maple just looking around the yard. When he told me that, I said that it was most likely Mom and Dad bringing the kids by to say Thank You for the babysitting and goodbye. I never saw a bigger smile on his face and when he got home, he told everyone. Again, Thank You for all of the good times.

Editor's Note: That is why so many people refer to Bluebirds as the Bluebird of Happiness. I just found out that there is a designated day to celebrate them every year:

Bluebird of Happiness Day is celebrated annually on September 24th. This day honors the Bluebird, symbolizing joy, hope, and good fortune, and encourages people to embrace their happiness and appreciate the small joys in life.





Something Bursts

(St. Vincent in Latrobe, PA)

by Tamara DiBartola

Murky shades of gray block a sunny day
nevertheless, images must be captured
to portray the essence of St. Vincent's
archaic crosses. They captivate you!

Something—
beyond comprehension
aesthetically communicates
through a landscape covered
in metal crucifixes
burial sites of monks, mere yards
from college dorms bustling with life.
Framing this picture, I notice
joyful blue streaks singing.
My spirit soars to join them!
I've never beheld a bluebird before.
Amazed, I gaze in wonder
at their flight through ebony, ceasing
atop the crosses, commanding
full awareness as the sun
Bursts—
out of darkness, a spotlight
to an astonishing scene
imparting a vivid revelation
my eyes flood, sense floating
into understanding
as the world spins in chaos
this final resting place sings in peace.
Here beginnings and endings unite
circles without end.

** Previously published in PPS Prize Poems*





Bluebird Society of PA Membership Form

Regular (single/couple)
1 year- \$15
3 years- \$40

Organization/Corporate
1 year- \$100
3 years- \$275

Lifetime
\$375 (individual only)
*Renew for 3 years & Save

Mail to: Bluebird Society of PA, P.O. Box 12, Exton PA or complete the **NEW** online form at www.thebsp.org
 New Member Renewal Donation

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____ County: _____

Phone: _____ (required) Email: _____ (required if email delivery or ?s)

Donation (optional): \$ _____ Total Amount Enclosed: \$ _____

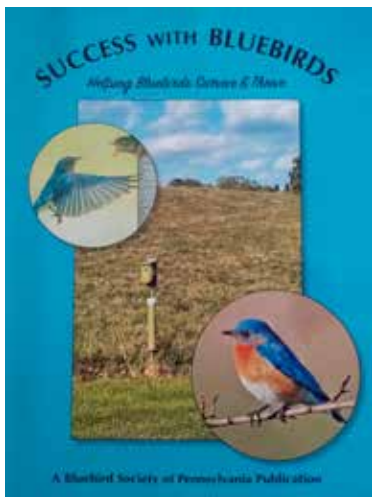
If you are a new member have you received your Membership Packet? Yes No
 How would you like to receive your newsletter? Email (saves trees) Regular mail delivery

Please consider sharing your talents by volunteering to help with:

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> County Coordinator | <input type="checkbox"/> Nest box Monitoring | <input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nest box Construction | <input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter | <input type="checkbox"/> Local Events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Photography | <input type="checkbox"/> Fundraising | <input type="checkbox"/> Social Media |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Speakers' Bureau (education) | <input type="checkbox"/> Web Design | <input type="checkbox"/> Technology |

A BSP Membership = A Great Gift Idea!

Share **Bluebird Happiness** with your loved ones by providing a gift membership to the Bluebird Society of PA. This is the gift that keeps on giving, as it includes the **full-color** BSP Publication, **Success with Bluebirds** and the seasonal newsletter, **Bluebird Trails and Tales**. Membership Forms are also posted on the BSP website and online membership is also available on the BSP web site: www.thebsp.org





Upcoming Events - Mark Your Calendars:

***Check out the BSP Facebook Page for more Bluebird Events**

2026 BSP Board/Membership Meetings:
Thursday evenings at 6:00 p.m. via Zoom
on these dates:
January 22, April 23, July 23, Oct 22

Please contact Phil Durgin at 717-732-5325 or email pdurgin@comcast.net or Nancy Fraim at 610-873-7454 or email nancyfraim@comcast.net prior to the event to receive a link to participate in the meetings, which you can join via Zoom or phone.

PA Farm Show 2026

Location: 2300 North Cameron Street, Harrisburg, PA
<https://www.farmshow.pa.gov/>

On **January 15, 16, and 17** (Thursday-Saturday), BSP will host an educational and merchandise booth at this event.

The PA Farm Show is celebrating its 250th Anniversary in 2026 and is one of the area's biggest and most popular events, and one of BSP's favorite bluebird educational outreach experiences. This is a fun event for the entire family, with interesting programs, demonstrations, a variety of animals, vendors, and delicious PA food offerings in the food court.

*Volunteers are needed to host the BSP Educational and BSP Merchandise Booth.

Contact Nancy Putt, Event Chair at: 717-712-3951 or e-mail: bluebirds@pa.net to volunteer for the event.

THANKS in advance for helping to educate others about bluebirds. New volunteers are always welcome, and you will work with another one of our volunteers who has helped us in the past. It is a great opportunity to learn about bluebirds!



Male Bluebird

Photo Credit: Marie Lee

26th Annual BSP Conference

March 27 & 28, 2026 (Friday evening and Saturday)
Eden Resort and Conference Center, Lancaster, PA
<https://edenresort.com/>

BSP is happy to host the **26th Annual Conference** in South Central PA, Lancaster County. The meeting space, food, and lodging are all available at this beautiful and spacious venue. BSP has hosted a conference here in the past, and attendees were very pleased with the venue. The Annual BSP Conference offers excellent speakers, demonstrations, vendors, a live and silent auction, a delicious luncheon, and an opportunity to learn from and socialize with people who share your love of bluebirds and other native cavity-nesters and enjoy the wonders of the natural world. The event will feature a Friday evening program and Social and a full day of activities on Saturday.

Besides Bluebirds, the conference will include these fascinating topics:

"A World of Song and Wonder: Listening to the Birds of Pennsylvania" by Stan L. LeQuire

A quick tour through the avian soundscape of our Pennsylvania woods and backyards. What do you hear this spring? This presentation will have practical information for both beginning and experienced birdwatchers. Each participant will receive a checklist/cheat sheet for the songs and calls of local birds.

The Owls of PA by Pam Dimeler

Pam's program focuses on the eight different species of owls which are hiding in plain sight here in PA—some all year round, and some only in winter. Her multimedia program includes her photography, videography, and personal stories of her encounters with owls in the wild.

Life of the Red-headed Woodpecker, a Declining Species Throughout its Range by Mark Ritke

Learn more about this beautiful and elusive cavity-nester which has been observed nesting in natural cavities at two PA golf course properties.

Birds of Prey with live animals by Patrick Miller of Miller's Wildlife & Conservation Specialists, Lebanon, PA.

A fascinating program of the life and behaviors of several birds of prey of PA.

BSP County Coordinator News

GUIDELINES FOR BSP'S COUNTY COORDINATORS

1. To provide and update your phone number and e-mail address and submit dues to BSP to maintain membership in good standing.
2. To promote educational opportunities and activities relating to bluebirds and other native cavity-nesters.
3. To encourage BSP members and County residents to maintain and monitor bluebird nestboxes.
4. To reply to phone calls and e-mails regarding bird questions. Or, to refer the question to the State C.C. or veteran members of BSP. Also to refer individuals to the "BSP Hotline" at www.thebsp.org.
5. To give the BSP State Coordinator news in your County.
6. To submit an Annual Nestbox Report Form to BSP by October 31 of the nesting season.



Male Bluebird on a Branch
Photo Credit: Marie Lee

STATE COUNTY COORDINATOR UPDATE-FALL/WINTER 2025

We welcome a new County Coordinator in **Butler County** – Pam Wilson. Her contact information: 724-355-8830 pwil@zoominternet.net

We welcome two new Co-County Coordinators in **Centre County** - Autumn Hanley, 814-468-1068 and Alyssa Carrol at lyssa1826@gmail.com 814-574-8626

We welcome a new County Coordinator in **McKean County** - Linda Rankin, rankin.ld@gmail.com



Bluebird Pair
Photo Credit: Mike Dickie

CC Resignations - BSP Thanks them for their previous service to BSP and to the bluebirds: Dr. Evan Mann, **Susquehanna County**, Bill Cuppett - **Somerset County**, Gregory Dean - **McKean County**, Kat Clark - **Sullivan County**, and Brooke Kosar – **Butler County**.

Please contact Marilyn Michalski at 610-933-0497 or emeraldmm@verizon.net if you can volunteer or to recommend a new CC for **Susquehanna County**, **Somerset County**, and **Sullivan County**.



Saving A Chickadee Nesting

by Marilyn Michalski

Chickadees tried to nest in my yard many times, but their efforts were terminated by House Wrens and House Sparrows. In 2025 I vowed to protect nesting chickadees by using the latest protective measures and techniques. With chickadee populations declining in Pennsylvania, I would support them every way I could.

Black-Capped and Carolina Chickadees interbreed in Southeastern Pennsylvania, where I live. These Northern Chickadees, or “chickadees,” entertain us with their well-known calls of “chickadee, dee, dee, dee,” and their visits to our feeders in cold weather.

Chickadee nests that fail are often caused by two bird species: House Wrens and House Sparrows. We know that House Wrens (Jenny Wrens) destroy eggs and young because they want those nestboxes for their own use. The most common victims are Chickadees and Eastern Bluebirds. The beak of the House Wren is long and sharp—twice the length of a chickadee’s, so, in every conflict over a nestbox, House Wrens are victorious. Whenever they enter a nestbox, they poke holes in the eggs they find, destroying them. They also stab newly-hatched young. The disappearance of eggs and hatchlings means that House Wrens have taken that nestbox for their own use.

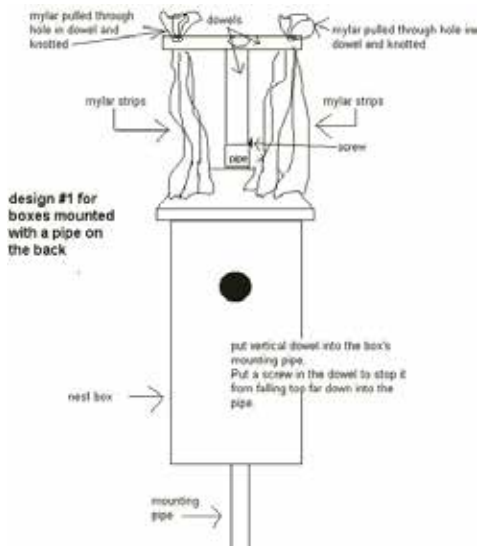
The other predator is the House Sparrow (HS)—a killer of nestlings and adults. The male HS won’t let parent birds exit their own nestboxes, as he pummels them to death. When we discover mutilated birds inside our nestboxes, we know House Sparrows have been at work.

NESTBOX LOCATION—The chickadee female often nests in a standard bluebird-style nestbox. In my yard, a chickadee constructed her moss nest in a nestbox near a small tree whose leaves camouflaged their distinctive black and white feathers. Because chickadees have so few protective weapons of their own, they perch behind leaves to keep out of sight.

MOSS NEST—At the end of March, the female completed a moss nest. I avoided conflict between chickadees and bluebirds by having a nestbox for each pair – a backyard box for chickadees and a front yard box for bluebirds. My house blocked their view of each other. Because my neighborhood is rampant with House Wrens and House Sparrows, I installed a camera inside the chickadee nestbox to view the interior every day without opening it manually. Since I could not fit my Blink camera into their chosen nestbox, I had to replace their nestbox with one containing an alternative. I have successfully completed **NESTBOX SUBSTITUTIONS, NESTBOX REPOSITIONINGS, AND NEST REPLACEMENTS**. These actions reduce or eliminate many problems such as *wasp and ant infestations, natural disasters, attacks by House Sparrows/House Wrens, and human vandalism*. Averting nestbox failures is the goal of every dedicated monitor. In BSP’s Spring Newsletter I will submit an article on **HOW TO COMPLETE** these actions: (1) Exchanging or substituting a nestbox with a safer one, (2) Transferring a nestbox to another location nearby, and (3) Replacing a defective nest with a new nest.

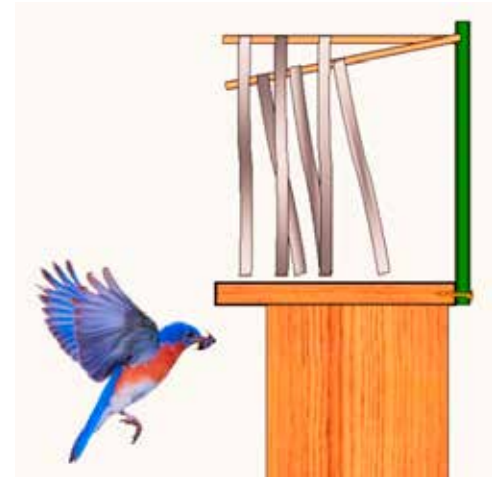
HOUSE WREN ATTACK—Every day I observed the chickadee nestbox exterior from my kitchen window. A camera by itself cannot stop predation. One morning, before eggs were laid, I saw clumps of fur on the ground below the nestbox. I dashed out and chased away a House Wren who was dismantling the nest. I replaced most of the fur clumps back inside, on top of the moss. Female chickadees normally top the moss with fur, lint, or other soft insulating material. Would the chickadees return? Or would nest damage drive them away? Thankfully, they returned.

SPARROW SPOOKER—After the first egg was laid, I added a “Sparrow Spooker” to the roof of the nestbox. I constructed my own out of two slender paint stirrers screwed together in a “T” shape. To the horizontal stirrer I attached six or seven strips of aluminum foil, each about 8 inches long and $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch wide. These strips moved in the wind above the nestbox roof and produced flashing reflections that frightened other



birds. Colorful Mylar strips can be purchased from Amazon.

HOLE REDUCER—The following day, I attached a 1.25-inch hole-reducer over the 1.5-inch standard entry hole to keep out larger birds. This would not keep out House Wrens, or, sadly, House Sparrows. My friend and colleague Nancy Fraim recommended using a



*Sparrow Spooker illustrations
courtesy of Sialis.org*

hole reducer of one-and-one-eighth inch in diameter ($1\frac{1}{8}$) but I did not have that available. I hoped the 1.25" hole reducer would suffice. How did the parent chickadees react? The female hesitated at the opening for a few seconds, then popped inside. The male circled the entry hole and perched on top of the hole reducer. It took him a considerable amount of time to enter the nestbox.

EGG DISAPPEARANCE—My chickadee female laid a clutch of 5 eggs. I worried that long absences from her nest in the afternoons would lead to disaster. A week after she began incubating the eggs, I saw, through my camera, that only two eggs remained in the nest cup. My heart sank—three eggs had vanished. I knew immediately that House Wrens had gone inside the nest. Luckily, the adult chickadees returned in time to stop the removal of all eggs. Although I despaired at this loss, I saw the female continue to incubate her remaining eggs as though nothing had happened. The huge population of House Wrens in my neighborhood forced me to trap and release a couple of wrens in distant fields. Because wrens are a native species, they are protected. NOTE: Carolina Wrens are a different species that do NOT harm other birds.

EGG DISPLACEMENT—A week later I checked the camera shortly before sunset. A horrifying sight accosted my eyes. One egg had been knocked out of the nest cup and shunted to a far corner. Because it was getting dark, I had to act fast—knowing the female could not incubate eggs in different parts of the nest. With adrenaline pulsing through my bloodstream, I opened the nestbox. In the waning light I gently picked up the displaced egg and examined it in the palm of my hand—it was still warm and had no punctures or cracks, so I gently put it back into the nest cup next to its twin. The egg would become inviable and would not hatch without the mother's warmth. After closing the nestbox, I acknowledged the Divine Power of the Universe and prayed I had done the right thing.

HATCHING—When the eggs hatched, I watched the female eat the shell from each hatchling. She would thrust her head upward to facilitate swallowing. Female birds replace body calcium when they ingest eggshells. I worried whenever she left the nestbox, but I could do nothing about that. Upon hatching, the young looked like dark blobs without feathers lying motionless in the nest; they seemed to be as small as Black Cherry pits.

Gradually they began to move in fractions of an inch. Both adult Chickadees entered the nestbox many times every hour with small, almost invisible, bits of food. Their feeding trips were so rapid that, if I blinked, I wouldn't see them enter or exit. I gazed in wonder at their devoted care of their offspring.

Hundreds of trips were made into the nestbox every day. I learned to recognize the adult flight patterns—a swift downstroke of wings enabled them to rise rapidly into the air, followed by the dipping down of their bodies as they experienced gravity. Additional downstrokes lifted them up again. Parent birds removed fecal sacs when the young birds ejected waste from all of the insects that they had been fed.

MALE CHICKADEE ALARM CALL—With nestlings in his box, the male went into high gear. Not only did he feed the young, but he became the “Lookout” for danger, making loud calls as soon as he detected a threat. He nearly went hoarse the morning newly-fledged Carolina Wrens (*not the House Wren species which interferes*) landed in the tree near his nest.

FLEDGING—The stronger nestling fledged on May 30. However, it returned to the nestbox later that day when temperatures dropped rapidly. Early on June 1st I caught sight of a House Sparrow going into the nestbox—he wasn't stopped by the 1.25-inch hole reducer. Although I immediately ran outside to drive it away, I was too late. His attack had injured the larger nestling with stabbing injuries to its head. Tragically, it died with a cry of pain. I buried it and then searched for the other nestling. Had it been killed too? Or had it been flung out of the nest? While examining the nest, I noticed a small wing on top of the nest's fur. Slowly, I pulled up on the wing and heard a peep. The remaining nestling had buried itself under the nesting material to save itself. I carefully extracted it from the moss, as I didn't think it could get out by itself. I laid the nestling on top of the nest and walked away; I could do nothing else. Soon, the parent birds called to it, begging it to fledge. Their fear of the House Sparrow was prominent! The lone survivor seemed to be all right, because it soon perched in the entry hole. Finally, it flew out to the urgent calls of its parents, giving me the opportunity to use my Van Ert trapping box, which I put in place of their nestbox temporarily. Within minutes, the House Sparrow, lurking nearby, was locked inside, and I euthanized him. The chickadee adults had been correct in their terror—that House Sparrow would have killed them all, because he wanted that nestbox for himself and his mate.

I then removed the trapping box and returned the camera box to its original location. While doing so, I looked down to see the surviving nestling on the ground—in the grass—about ten feet from its nestbox. Had it fallen to the ground on its fledging attempt, its maiden voyage? Was it injured or crippled? Did another predator attack it? My fears escalated wildly, and I wasn't sure what to do, but I picked it up and returned it to its nestbox. After this I heard the calling of the parent chickadees, once again begging it to fly out. Their fear of House Sparrows dominates their behavior and drives them to save their young. I had no way to tell them the House Sparrow could no longer hurt them. I could do nothing except hope and pray for the successful fledging of their final nestling.

Late that afternoon I used the camera to confirm the nestling had fledged for good, and the nestbox was empty. The landscape in my yard once again returned to silence. With the final nestling up in tree branches far away, I realized that I had come to the end of my avian journey. My work was done, and I felt both relief and joy. Few experiences in my birding years have been as dramatic as this one, and I confess I had an abundance of fulfillment in my heart. To me, the saving of that chickadee has made all the difference in the world. ■

How readily the bluebirds become our friends and neighbors when we offer them suitable nesting retreats!

- John Burroughs

Four Songbird Species Fledged at Fort Hunter Bluebird Trail

by Joan Watroba

It certainly was an active and productive nesting season at the Fort Hunter Park Bluebird Trail in Harrisburg (Dauphin County). This trail was rehabbed in the Fall of 2024 in preparation for the nesting season of 2025. Special thanks to Rich Leitzel who constructed and installed the 12 new cedar nestboxes. Other members of the Friends of Fort Hunter painted the outside of the boxes with beautiful, colorful designs. **Thanks to everyone's efforts, the trail was well-prepared and welcoming for returning and migrating songbirds. Regular maintenance and creative touches helped ensure both the safety and visual appeal of each nestbox.**

I was thrilled that Rich Leitzel and Steve Brindle of the Friends of Fort Hunter expressed an interest in learning how to monitor nestboxes. Every Wednesday evening, we met at the trail to check them. It was quite exciting to observe the nesting activity of four different native songbird species. Rich and Steve were so thrilled with their monitoring experience that they have volunteered to monitor this trail next season. They will also replace the remaining wooden posts with smooth conduit poles to make those nestboxes safer from climbing predators.

Here is a summary of the songbirds which fledged from the boxes:

13 Bluebirds

10 Tree Swallows

7 Chickadees

5 Carolina Wrens

Note: More information and photos of this trail were posted in the Spring 2025 issue of Bluebird Trails and Tales.



BSP Events Report: Check out the BSP Facebook Page for more events and updates

On Thursday, June 19, from 10:30 to 12 noon, BSP hosted a “box-building event” at The Lebanon Community Library. Susan Wheeler, our BSP Lebanon County Coordinator organized the event. We had 9 children and their parents watching a video, “Inside the Nest Box”, and the families enjoyed a Bluebird story reading time and “hands -on” nestbox building. Many informative handouts about Bluebirds were made available to them so that they would have more information on how to install and monitor their nestboxes.

Dean Rust

On Wednesday, September 3 at noon, I presented a Bluebird Program to members and guests of the Elizabethtown Flower Club. It was held at The Gathering Place in Mt. Joy where they regularly host their events. It was an excellent audience of 86 attendees who enjoyed learning about the nesting and habitat needs of the beautiful Bluebird.

Dean Rust



The bluebird enjoys the preeminence of being the first bit of color that cheers our northern landscape. The other birds that arrive about the same time--the sparrow, the robin, the phoebe-bird--are clad in neutral tints, gray, brown, or russet; but the bluebird brings one of the primary hues and the divinest of them all.

- John Burroughs

★ *Ken Leister, BSP Star, Honored* ★

Ken Leister of Chester County has been active with the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania since February of 2005. He served as Board Member and BSP County Coordinator for many years, and was instrumental in launching the BSP Junior Membership Program.

Ken has been actively engaged in all aspects of bluebirding for more than 20 years. He conducted bluebird programs for students within school settings. This initiative led to the creation of bluebird trails on school property. He delivered bluebird programs at BSP Conferences and within his community. He even hosted "Bluebird Chats" at a local hardware store in his community, which were very popular and well-attended.

Ken is a master woodworker and has constructed more than 3000 high-quality nestboxes for bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting songbirds. He has

generously donated his nestboxes and mounting poles to the live auction at BSP Conferences, and they always bring a high bid due to their quality materials and workmanship. Ken even designed a special nestbox to accommodate the placement of a Ring camera so that bluebirders can monitor the activity inside of their nestbox 24/7.

After so many years of service, Ken has decided that it was time to retire from active participation. The BSP Officers and Board Members are grateful for the many years of service that Ken Leister has devoted to bluebirds and to the Mission of BSP, and are proud to designate Ken as an Honorary Member of BSP.

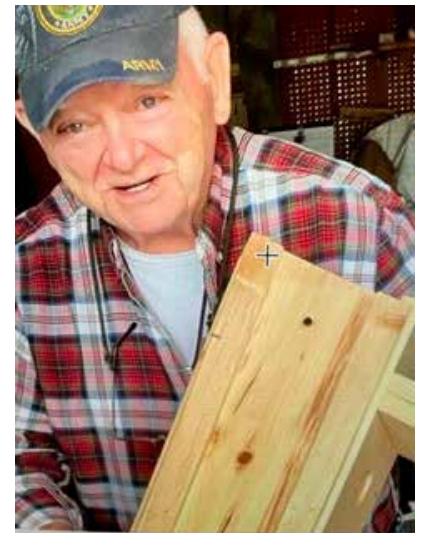
Wishing you much health and happiness in your retirement, Ken!



Ken assisting Siana with nestbox building



Ken's nestbox designed to accommodate a Ring camera and solar panel



BSP Award Nomination Form

Each year BSP would like to recognize and honor individuals or entities who you feel have greatly contributed to bluebird education and/or who have promoted the nesting success of bluebirds and other native songbirds.

Award categories are:

- **Bluebirder of the Year:** Our most prestigious award, given to an individual who has demonstrated an outstanding long-term commitment (not just during the past year) to the success of Bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting birds.
- **Blue Feather:** Awarded to individuals who have made significant and sustained contributions toward promoting Bluebirds and the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania.
- **Letter of Commendation:** Awarded to individuals who have made significant contributions toward promoting Bluebirds and the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania.

If you would like to nominate someone for a BSP Award, **please provide a brief write-up regarding your nominee, and include their name, county, and their contact information.**

Awards will be presented on **March 28, 2026** at the Annual BSP Conference.

Please submit your nominations for the 2025 BSP Awards by 12/31/25 to:

Bluebird Society of PA
Attn: BSP Awards Chair
P.O. Box 756
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055

Person(s) or Entity to be Nominated for a BSP Award:

Name _____

County: _____

Contact Information:

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Nominated by:

Your Name _____

Your Phone number _____

Your email address _____



Red-headed Woodpeckers, Another Beautiful Cavity-Nester

by Mark Ritke

I've been monitoring two pairs of nesting Red-headed Woodpeckers (RHWs) at Mt. Hope Golf Course on a daily basis. I've been fascinated with this bird ever since 2014 when I first discovered they were nesting at Mt. Hope.

This year, a retired ornithology professor and good friend of mine, Dr. Ron Mumme from Allegheny College, has been banding RHWs, not only at Mt. Hope, but also at the Country Club of Meadville. So far, he's banded 13 birds! One of our goals is to study the "migratory" (movement) patterns of banded juveniles and adults within and between nesting seasons. We also hope to shed light on the natural history of this species and its habitat requirements since, surprisingly, relatively little is known about the biology of this species. Unfortunately, it's also one of the fastest declining birds in PA for reasons unknown.

Last winter, I built a dozen woodpecker nesting boxes, and we installed them at both golf courses last spring. However, not one box was used by RHWs; they preferred excavating their own tree cavity!

I've been going to Mt. Hope daily, to keep tabs on the RHWs there. They're caching acorns like crazy now, and excavating winter roost cavities, so we believe they are going to overwinter at Mt. Hope, and also at the Country Club of Meadville. That will keep us both busy all winter, too. That's fine with me; every day I watch them, I learn something new about them, and that keeps it exciting!

We just completed a video of one of the pairs of RHWs nesting at Mt. Hope. Click on this link to view it: <https://youtu.be/De-Ty97AT24>

The following article shares the wonderful news that Red-headed Woodpeckers have been observed in Allegheny County for the first time in 35 years: (Click on this link to view it:)

<https://ziply.pk/XF9Mzy>

<https://post-gazette.com/life/goodness/2025/07/16/red-headed-woodpecker-pennsylvania/stories/202507140067?f>



Banded red-headed woodpecker
Photo Credit: Mark Ritke



***Dr. Ron Mumme, retired professor
emeritus of Biology from Allegheny College***



***Banded red-headed woodpecker with
acorn***



PO Box 12
Exton, PA 19341



BSP RENEWAL DATES/Address Changes - Please check your mailing label on your regular mailed copy to see your renewal date. You can renew for one year or for multiple years, which will provide a discount. Both e-mail and regular mail members will also receive a letter by regular mail notifying of your renewal date. *If you need to update your mailing address or your email address, please send changes to: BSP • P.O. Box 12 • Exton, PA 19341 or email: nancyfrain@comcast.net

BSP Newsletter Submission Contest/Winner Congratulations to Mark Ritke, Allegheny County, PA

Thank you for submitting your fascinating article, *Snakes in a Bluebird Box*, to this issue.

You will receive a full year of BSP Membership.

We encourage our members to submit newsletter items to us. To submit by regular mail, send to: Joan Watroba, 2408 Bumble Bee Hollow Road, Mechanicsburg, PA 17055 or submit email submissions to: bluebirdhappy365@outlook.com

One submission is randomly drawn at the cutoff date for each seasonal issue: January 7, May 7, and September 7.

Congratulations Mark!



BSP is a North American Bluebird Society Affiliate



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