

# The Florida Bluebird Society

**Dedicated to the Protection  
and Conservation of Bluebirds in  
Florida**



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## Study Questions Necessity Of Removing In-season Nests

One swallow doesn't make a summer, and a two-year study on removing nests from bluebird boxes as soon as the chicks have fledged may not really prove anything.

That said, it is worth reporting results of the study made during the 2012 and 2013 nesting seasons at the Penney Retirement Community (PRC) in Penney Farms, Clay County.

Most people accept as "gospel" the oft-stated truism that nests should be removed from boxes after the chicks have fledged. I was among folks monitoring bluebird boxes who faithfully



**IS IT NECESSARY? -**  
Study shows removing in-season nests may not be necessary.

followed that procedure, believing bluebirds preferred a clean box and removing old nests would encourage

parents to start another brood.

Two years after its creation the Florida Bluebird Society (FBS) applied to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) for a Scientific Collecting Permit. In the FWC application the FBS said monitoring procedures included the following:

"After the nestlings have fledged the old nest is removed and placed in a plastic bag for disposal. Prior to placing the old nest in the plastic bag it is examined to determine if there are any unhatched eggs buried in the nest

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## Study Questions Necessity Of Removing In-season Nests

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**KEEPING POSTED -**  
Male bluebird sits atop nest box post.

material or if any insects (such as blow flies, ants or mites) may have gotten into the next box. If so, the box is cleaned with a solution of bleach (10 percent) and water (90 percent)."

But the FWC Scientific Collecting Permit issued to the FBS in 2011 stated:

**Permittee(s) are to inspect next boxes without disturbing (touching) nests, eggs, or young during the breeding season. Permittee(s) are to clean out the nest boxes after the nest season has passed in order to allow re-nesting in subsequent years."**

This resulted in some strong -- but futile -- protests to have the section amended or deleted. Although research

and email correspondence with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Permit Office revealed the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act doesn't prohibit "removing complete, empty inactive nests from which all nestlings have fledged" during the nesting season, the FWC was unwavering in its stance.

There seemed to be two main issues:

First, in a natural setting, such as a tree cavity, nests are obviously not removed. Although nest boxes are artificial nesting cavities, the FWC wanted to maintain the natural state as much as possible.

Secondly, there seemed to be no available research to prove removing empty nests was necessary. In addition, no one really could give a satisfactory answer on how the practice of removing nests started.

### **Procedural Change Initiates FBS Study**

This led to the initiation of the study at PRC, where I currently monitor 39 bluebird nest boxes. I must admit, I started the study hoping to prove the advantage of removing nests immediately after the chicks have fledged.

The study was simple: nest boxes from which empty nests were or were not to be removed were selected at random. Inactive nest boxes were excluded from the study. Results of the first two years of the study were unexpected.

### **Unexpected Results Of Nest Box Study**

Bluebirds nested in 31 of 39 boxes during the 2012 season; nests were not removed from 13 boxes. In 2013 there were 33 active boxes; nests were not removed from 14 boxes. The per-box average of eggs laid, eggs hatched, chick fledged, and of re-nestings was higher in the boxes where nests had **not** been removed.

The attached chart compares the totals and averages for the two seasons.

It has been interesting to note the activity in boxes from which nests were not removed. In most cases new nests were built on top of old nests. In three nestings the top of the last nest came precariously close to the opening. I have no evidence this had any impact on the success of the nesting. In a few cases eggs were laid in the old nest, particularly when all eggs from the previous clutch hatched.

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## Unexpected Results of Nest Box Study

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Not removing nests immediately after the chicks fledged did make it more difficult to keep accurate in-season records. When removing nests during the season I tear them apart to inspect for unhatched buried eggs and for any evidence of unwanted "critters." When a nest was not removed, I sometimes had to revise my records. In at least one case a new nest with

eggs was built on top of a previous nest containing eggs, creating a confusing situation which wasn't solved until the nest box was emptied after the season had ended.

Because these are the first two seasons of what is planned to be a five-year study I hesitate to draw any firm conclusions on whether nests should be removed immediately after the birds have fledged. In other parts

of the country there may be valid reasons for removing empty nests. So far, however, I have not seen any increase in any type of infestation in those boxes from which nests have not been removed.

I welcome other monitors who keep accurate records to participate in this study. If interested, contact me at [floridabluebirdsociety@yahoo.com](mailto:floridabluebirdsociety@yahoo.com) prior to the 2014 nesting season.

### Chart comparing averages per box for different years

Number of Active Boxes	Eggs Laid	Eggs Hatched	Unhatched Eggs	Birds Fledged	Renestings
<b>2012</b>					
13 ( <b>not</b> removed)	166	117	49	116	36
Average per box	13	9	3.5	8.2	2.5
18 (nests removed)	176	136	40	136	38
Average per box	9.7	7.5	2.2	7.5	2.1
<b>2013</b>					
14 ( <b>not</b> removed)	155	109	46	109	35
Average per box	11	7.8	3.3	7.8	2.5
19 (nests removed)	168	106	62	105	39
Average per box	8.8	5.5	3.2	5.5	2

## FBS Fall Bluebird Blitz Set for Nov. 8-9



**FIRST FLIGHT** - Fledgling looks out of nest box moments before launching itself into the world, hopefully to be counted in Fall Blitz to be held November 8-9.

The Florida Bluebird Society's 2013 Statewide Fall Bluebird Blitz will be held Friday, November 8, and Saturday, November 9.

Based on results from the 2013 Spring Blitz, the FBS will continue the new reporting procedures for the 2013 Fall Bluebird Blitz. Under the new reporting system initiated during the 2013 Spring Blitz, FBS members will receive an email with an Excel spread sheet attached prior to the Fall Blitz. Sightings then are to be entered on the spread sheet and emailed back to the FBS. The returns then will be merged

into one document and posted on the FBS Web Site. The new electronic reporting system is intended to replace the manual tabulation of reports.

In addition, bluebird sightings can be submitted to e-bird. These sighting then will be incorporated into the final Blitz report.

Blitz participants will continue to have the option of downloading forms from the FBS web site, and sending the completed form to the FBS either by email or by US mail. These reports then will be entered

manually into an Excel spread sheet.

The new reporting method received resounding approval from Faith Jones, the FBS Treasurer responsible for compiling the reports. Jones, who created the new electronic reporting system, said use of spread sheets made her job much easier. Anyone who has compiled reports from handwritten submissions can appreciate what an improvement electronic submissions can make. Jones also said she believes use of the electronic submissions reduces the chance of human error because the data does not have to be re-entered manually.

Under the new reporting system, the 2013 Spring Blitz recorded a record high 104 participants and a record high 43 counties in which bluebirds were reported seen. Bluebirds were reported in 10 counties for the first time during the 2013 Spring blitz. The 10 counties and the number of bluebirds reported were: Bay (13); Brevard (4); Hardee (3); Indian River (2); Jackson (4); Miami-Dade (2); Okeechobee (1); Putnam (2); Taylor (4); and Washington (2).



## Bluebird Enthusiasts Will Have Opportunity To Exchange Info, Ideas at Two Area Meetings Being Planned by FBS In February 2014

The Florida Bluebird Society has tentatively scheduled two area meetings in February 2014.

The meetings will be held in February, prior to the start of the nesting season, to give bluebirders the opportunity to share their information and experiences with other individuals who monitor nest boxes.

Board Members Louis Nipper and Cheri Martin-Spray are working on an area meeting planned for February 1, 2014, and FBS President Bill Pennewill is working on holding an area meeting on February 22.

The decision to plan the two area meetings was based on the very positive feedback received from individuals who attended the area meeting in Clay County on Sept. 3.

Present and past FBS members and their friends who are interested in bluebirds are invited to attend the meetings. The February 1 meeting will include Levy, Citrus, Hernando, Pasco, Hillsborough, Pinellas and Sumter counties. The February 22 meeting will include Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Duval,

Flagler, Nassau, Putnam, St. Johns and Union counties.

Details on the two meetings - which are open to all bluebird enthusiasts, whether or not they live in the listed counties -- will be published later.



## FBS Display At Museum's ButterflyFest

Come visit representatives of the Florida Bluebird Society during the Florida Museum of Natural History's 8th annual ButterflyFest.

The FBS will staff a display on Saturday, Oct. 19, from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., the first day of the two-day event which will focus on the conservation and preservation of backyard wildlife and habitat.

Theme of the ButterflyFest is "Water and Wildlife," with the focus on "A Celebration of Wings and Backyard Things."

## Proper Placement Of Nest Boxes Still A Puzzle

Placing a nest box in the right location is an absolute necessity if it is going to be used continually by bluebirds.

Yet after a good many years of monitoring nest boxes I still can't say with any degree of assurance why bluebirds will select one box over another. Of course, there are the basic prerequisites, such as proper spacing, an area with short grass, a near-by tree and morning sun. Think golf course, and you have a pretty good idea of preferred bluebird habitat.

But having inherited a bluebird trail with a super-abundance of nest boxes in a retirement community where development requires continual change, proper placement is a critical issue. But I still can't make any definitive statements and often place nest boxes just because it seem right.

Let me give you some examples. My wife wanted a nest box along with a number of bird feeders outside our cottage apartment. For several Springs we watched

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# Proper Placement of Nest Boxes A Puzzle Only Bluebirds Can Solve

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bluebirds inspect and reject the nest box. I came to the conclusion the nest box was too close to the feeders and moved it across the street, where it has had moderate success if the bluebirds could out-fight the mockingbirds which called that territory "home." Recently I was told of a successful nest box in the midst of feeders. So other birds fighting over the feed nearby may not have been the problem. What was? I don't know.

I believe people usually are no problem. One of the most successful nest boxes has been near a tee box on the golf course. Golf carts buzzing by or people standing around chatting have been no deterrent to the bluebird sitting on top of the nearby nest box.

A nest box relocated three years ago seemed to be just what the bluebirds wanted. The first year seven birds fledged from the box; the second year 12



## WHY THIS BOX? -

Bluebird sits on top of box with history of intermittent nestings. Ten birds fledged in 2010; none in 2011 or 2012, seven in 2013.

birds fledged from the box; last year not one nest was built in the box. I wish I knew what changed between the second and third years.

In another instance I had a box which had been unproductive for three years. I kept thinking I

should move it, but just never go around to doing it. Last season four birds fledged from that box. It will be interesting to see what happens in the 2014 season.

As I scan my comparison of boxes for the past four years I see many boxes have been utilized continually during that time. I also see boxes that have been used on and off during those years. Some boxes have one nesting per season, other boxes have three nestings. Why? Maybe if I keep at this long enough I'll have an answer. Right now I'm just a traveler on the road of knowledge, with no end in sight.



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