



Principles and Nestbox Monitoring Protocol

Introduction

As part of the educational component of our Mission, the Florida Bluebird Society has developed the following Principles and Nestbox Monitoring Protocol.

Principles

Florida Bluebird Society members should exercise a sense of responsibility in all interactions with birds. Realizing others learn from example, we adhere to the following Principles:

1. Always put the interest of the birds first. Be conscious of their welfare at all times as they are our highest priority.
2. Consider the impact of your activities on the birds before you take action.
3. Ensure that nestboxes and any other structures you provide for birds are safe.
4. Obey bird protection laws. Do not touch nests, eggs, or birds.
5. Keep disturbances to a minimum. Only open a nestbox when necessary to collect data. Follow the Florida Bluebird Society's Nestbox Monitoring Protocol.

Nestbox Monitoring Protocol

The Florida Bluebird Society's Nestbox Monitoring Protocol has been distilled from several sources, including the North American Bluebird Society, Cornell Lab of Ornithology NestWatch Nest Monitor's Code of Conduct, the American Birding Association Principles of Birding Ethics, state bluebird organizations, and web sites such as Sialis.org.

Our Protocol seeks to adhere to two guiding principles:

- A. The Florida Bluebird Society recognizes the need to provide nestboxes if there is to be a healthy population of Eastern Bluebirds in Florida. We will, as much as possible, confine its role to that of providing nestboxes and refrain as much as possible from assuming a caretaker role.
- B. The Florida Bluebird Society promotes the monitoring of nestboxes with minimal disturbance to help ensure bluebird nesting activities remain as "natural" as possible, and that the bluebirds retain their "wild" status.

FLORIDA BLUEBIRD SOCIETY NESTBOX MONITORING PROTOCOL

1. Ensure the Safety and Well-being of the Birds

The first principle of monitoring a nestbox is that no observation should jeopardize the safety and well-being of the birds. All activities associated with the bluebird nesting box should be done as quickly, quietly, and carefully as possible.

We strive to avoid stressing the birds and do everything possible to ensure the least amount of impact upon the birds. Our activities must not jeopardize their nesting success.

Everything the monitor needs to know can be obtained very quickly, preferably in one minute or less. When taking photographs, there is no reason to keep the nestbox open for a prolonged period of time.

2. Plan Ahead to Minimize Disturbance

Nestboxes are monitored only for data collection. Planning is important to maximize monitoring efforts and minimize time at the nestbox.

- Learn to identify the nests of different species. This will enable you to know what you're looking at when you open the box.
- Learn the normal time frame for the nesting events.
- Plan a regular schedule of visits to the nestbox in order to obtain an accurate record of the nesting events.
- Prepare in advance the field data sheets to record the information.
- Move away from active nestboxes when recording the data to avoid unduly stressing the birds.

3. Caution is the Key

Announce your presence before opening the nestbox. In many instances the birds will flush from the nest before the monitor arrives at the box. When this doesn't occur, lightly tap the side of the box before opening it very slowly. If the adult doesn't get off the nest, carefully close the box and leave the area. When opening the box or tapping the side of the open box, stand to one side, not in front of the box. This is for two reasons: 1. If there is a parent in the box, this will let the bird fly out, and 2. standing to the side will protect you if there is any other creature in the box, such as a snake. You don't want any surprises coming at you.

4. Hands OFF

When monitoring the nestbox, do not handle the bluebird nest, eggs, nestlings or parents during an active nesting period. In Florida, individuals wanting to handle the bluebird nest or its contents during the active nesting period need to possess the proper federal and/or state permits. An active nesting period is defined as follows: Nest building, egg laying, egg incubation or nestlings present. Please note, if a nest was built but no breeding activity was observed, it is still considered active until the end of the full breeding season.

It is recommended that a camera phone (with no flash), mechanic's mirror or dental mirror be used to view the inside of the nest to count the eggs or nestlings. If unable to make an accurate count of the eggs or nestlings, indicate it is a minimum number rather than handle the nest contents.

English sparrows and starlings are not protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Act. The nests, eggs, nestlings and any adults should be removed if found in a nestbox. House sparrows are small enough to enter a nestbox through a 1½" entry hole and will destroy bluebird eggs. They will attack and kill both nestlings and adult birds trapped inside a nestbox. It is important to recognize the birds and nests protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Act and those non-native species which are not protected.

5. How Often and When

Nestboxes should be monitored once a week in order to obtain accurate data, to inspect and make any necessary repairs to the nestboxes, to determine the status of the nestlings, and to avoid interfering with the natural nesting schedule of the chicks. Monitoring weekly is sufficient to gather all the necessary information and to determine the status of the nestbox and the chicks.

Regular monitoring also helps identify and address potential problems, such as the invasive species of house sparrows or Cuban tree frogs present in the nestbox or fire ants nearby.

Nestboxes opened too frequently can cause a number of problems including abandonment, increased predation, and premature fledging.

There also are certain times when nestboxes should not be opened. **DO NOT OPEN** when:

- nestlings are more than 12 days old. This underscores the importance of regularly scheduled monitoring and the necessity for keeping accurate records of when the eggs are laid and hatch.
- it is raining in order to keep the nest from getting wet.
- the female is laying eggs during the early mornings.

6. Cleaning the Nestbox

Nestboxes should be cleaned out at the end of the nesting season, necessary repairs made during the off-season, and inspected again immediately prior to the start of a new nesting season to ensure that the boxes are ready to be used by bluebirds. Although it is not necessary, a nest can be removed during nesting season after chicks have fledged or after a nest failure, including any nest inactive for at least one month, but extreme caution must be observed to ensure that the nest truly is inactive.

Caution should be used when cleaning out a nestbox. Wear gloves and stand with the wind at your back to ensure you don't breathe in any waste material. The nest should be placed in a bag (you can place a plastic bag over your hand and invert it like a gloved to grab it with) and disposed of in the trash. Do not throw it on the ground where it could attract predators and possibly endanger any further nesting in that nest box. If desired, brush out the interior, again make sure the wind is at your back. Wash your hands well with soap and sanitizer immediately afterwards.

7. Transitions

We recognize and appreciate the enthusiasm and efforts from those who monitor bluebird trails (whether it is one or many boxes). However, there are some extra guidelines that should be adhered to that may present themselves:

- Do not put up more boxes than you are willing to monitor on a regular basis. Please take boxes down if you are not going to monitor anymore. They can get filled with invasive, non-native species such as the house sparrows or Cuban tree frogs and cause long-term harm to the environment.
- Do not put boxes up without effective predator guards. If you invite a bluebird in to make a nest in the box, and not protect it, it basically becomes a feeding station for predators.
- If some parts of your regular trail become too burdensome to you for monitoring and managing, we suggest you try and get nearby homeowner to take over or take it down.

8. Data Recording - Help Measure Nature's Success

We recommend you submit your data to Cornell's NestWatch at: <https://nestwatch.org/>. You will be helping scientists by collecting valuable data on the successes and failures of nesting birds. Cornell has recently created a very handy app for your phone where you can take a photo and upload it immediately to your nesting attempt, then record the site visit all within a couple of minutes.

In adhering to the above Nestbox Monitoring Protocol, members of the Florida Bluebird Society should serve as examples to other individuals who are interested in helping insure a brighter future for bluebirds in the Sunshine State.

For questions, please send an email to: fbs.inquiries1@floridabluebirdsociety.org or visit us at: www.floridabluebirdsociety.org or <https://www.facebook.com/floridabluebirdsociety/>