

The Florida Bluebird Society

Dedicated to the Protection and Conservation of Bluebirds in Florida



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Follow-up on 2015 Florida Bluebird Society Grant & Reflections on a Record 2020 Nesting Season

Brett Moyer, PhD

“Do I want to drive one hour to Penney Farms today?” I asked myself in August of 2015. I had noticed the annual meeting of the Florida Bluebird Society (FBS) on a calendar of regional environmental events, but at that time, bluebirds held no greater status in my eyes than a robin or a chickadee. The weather on that morning was pleasant though, so my wife and I made the drive. That tipped the first domino in a series of events. I now have a bluebird trail that produced 125 fledglings in 2020, and my wife and I (she’s a pharmacist) chose “Bluebird Pharmacy” for the name of the business we opened in 2018.

Since I teach science at the Bolles School, I am always on the lookout for new opportunities to engage students with Nature. I knew enough about bluebirds and their willingness to nest on campuses to recognize the potential of having an azure gem take up residence right outside our classroom. After a hands-on tour of the bluebird trail at Penney Farms, I was pretty sure that this was a seed worth planting. The fertilizer was then provided when I applied for a grant from the FBS and received the good news in December of 2015. Shortly thereafter, we installed eight nest boxes on the main campus of the Bolles School, and we documented 26 fledglings in 2016!



The tour of the bluebird trail at Penney Farms during the annual meeting of the Florida Bluebird Society in 2015. Author indicated by red arrow.

In subsequent years, students in my Honors Environmental Science classes and in the Environmental Club helped broaden the effort by installing nest boxes on the other campuses of the Bolles School and in a few nearby parks. They also conducted various projects with the bluebirds and taught students in the lower school about them. We even installed a camera in a nest box and livestreamed the footage to the school’s website!



Environmental Science students installing bluebird nest boxes on the Bartram campus of the Bolles School in January of 2017.



Environmental Science students teaching lower school students about bluebirds on the Whitehurst campus of the Bolles School in April of 2017.

Bluebirds charm folks of all ages, not just students. About the time we opened Bluebird Pharmacy in 2018, I found out that some of our customers were also smitten. One retiree started helping each week to monitor our two dozen nest boxes, now stretching across Duval and St. Johns Counties. Another kindly offered to sponsor a nest box on the campus of Palencia Elementary—a school near our store. And so it grew. With the 125 fledglings in 2020, the effort has now produced 473 bluebird youngsters in its five years.



All bow to King Blue on the San Jose campus of the Bolles School!



The role of the mother is not insignificant! Bartram campus of the Bolles School



This is what it is all about, folks! A new fledgling makes his way out into the world near our nest box at River Oaks Park.

The learning curve during the first few years was steep, but I've gradually figured out what works in Northeast Florida. For instance, I noticed that ungalvanized metal poles rust rather quickly in Florida's humid coastal environment, and that nest boxes made of pine don't hold up as well as cedar, and that nest boxes in NE Florida get darn hot in the summer. Other prospective bluebirders started to ask me for advice and suggestions. Since some of the materials were tough to find, I started keeping items in stock in our store: (1) poles, raccoon baffles, and other hardware made of galvanized metal, (2) nest boxes made of cedar wood, and (3) constructed according to the recommendations of the Florida Bluebird Society, which includes extra ventilation holes and a wider roof to protect the birds from the storms and summer sun.

Dozens of bluebird nest box and pole kits from our store have been installed across Nassau, Duval, St Johns and Putnam Counties. For example, we supplied the poles and boxes for the new bluebird trail at the Welaka Fish Hatchery in a collaboration between the St. Johns County Audubon and the Florida Bluebird Society. The first 14 boxes were installed in Fall of 2019 and an additional six will be installed this Fall. With these ancillary projects, it is satisfying to think that we've had a role in bringing hundreds of other bluebirds into the world, in addition to the ones reared in the boxes we monitor.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has caused immense stress for humans, it, curiously, has likely contributed to the record production of bluebird fledglings we had in 2020. The nest boxes we monitor are located on school campuses and public parks. Bluebirds are tolerant of humans, but the activity of hundreds of students and parents during carpool, the passing of classes, and athletic events has some impact on the birds. The stay-at-home recommendations and school closings of this past spring meant that April and May were months of unprecedented peace for bluebirds on school campuses and public parks. Accordingly, those bluebirds were able to focus on breeding and feeding their young.

An interesting anecdote from 2020 concerns drones. When I was checking the nest boxes earlier this year at a public park, before the pandemic, a resident who walks his dog at the park struck up a conversation. He said that he had seen fewer bluebirds so far this year, and he suspected it was owing to a club that flew drones at that park. The latest technology of drones has a camera that sends live video to goggles that the drone operator wears. Accordingly, the drone pilot, while seated comfortably at a park bench, can get the sensation of flying like a bird. I had seen one of these fellows on one of my nest checks, donning his goggles, and steering his drone through the air. A club of these folks apparently met regularly during the week at this park and practiced zipping their drones around the open canopy of the big oaks. My dog-walking friend hypothesized that the bluebirds might eschew nesting in territories that were regularly crisscrossed by metal and plastic beasts with falcon-like maneuverability. Several weeks later, the pandemic set in, the drone club was grounded, and the bluebirds returned and produced many babies over the ensuing months. If we have to endure the gloom of the pandemic, we'll embrace any such silver linings!



The author and his niece checking the nest box at Palencia Elementary School in July of 2020

I sometimes think back to that last Saturday of August in 2015. I wonder, what if it had been pouring rain that morning, or what if I decided I was too busy and I chose not to make the drive to Penney Farms for the FBS annual meeting. Every day brings such seemingly insignificant decisions that can lead to delightful twists and turns in life. Don't overanalyze. Just enjoy the ride.

If you'd like to hear more about this five-year project on Eastern Bluebirds and see more photos documenting the stories along the way, I invite you to attend the virtual presentation on Bluebirds that I'll be giving on December 9th for the St Johns County Audubon Society. Visit <https://stjohnsaudubon.com/calendar/> for details.

Many thanks to the Florida Bluebird Society for starting this journey, and many thanks to the numerous individuals who have generously helped me and provided cheerful camaraderie along the way.



Bluebird Trail 2020 Summary from Bay County

By Pam Overmyer, *FBS Board & Bay Co. Coordinator*

The year 2020 has been an unusual year with lives altered by a global pandemic and economic uncertainty. However, the Eastern Bluebirds on my bluebird trails carried on just like nothing had changed. It was very comforting to visit the trails and again see the bluebirds busily building nests, laying eggs and raising babies. It was also a nice way to "social distance" out in nature with no one around but the birds.

My bluebird trails are on Bay County-owned property that was terribly damaged by the Category 5 Hurricane Michael in 2018. I had a total of 32 boxes prior to the hurricane; 24 boxes survived the storm. During the cleanup, I lost another 3 boxes so currently I have 21 boxes on the trails. I also have 6 personal boxes. So 2020 had me monitoring 27 total boxes.

The 2020 nesting season started with the first egg laid 2/14/20 and first hatchlings on 3/2/20. This was a more typical time to start the season, unlike the 2019 season, which was the first after the hurricane. In 2019, the first egg was laid 1/28/19 with the first hatchlings 2/14/19, the earliest documented in the whole state! The bluebirds seemed to be back on a normal schedule the second season after the hurricane.

This year I documented a total of 263 eggs with 187 fledglings. This was fewer than 2019, which had 297 eggs with 215 fledglings. I suspect the loss of three boxes was the main reason for the decrease. The park cleanup and re-construction also may have contributed to the decrease.

I did have 2 boxes that had Cowbird eggs. In one box, the Cowbird eggs disappeared, so it's possible the Bluebird parents recognized the foreign eggs and removed them. In the other box, the Cowbird baby fledged, but the Bluebird baby did not and unfortunately died.

We also were able to re-nest a bluebird hatchling. Three bluebird babies were found after a storm damaged someone's nestbox and they took them to a rehabber. Two babies didn't make it, but the third did and was rehomed into a box with bluebird babies the same age. They were monitored and the adopted baby thrived and fledged along with the rest.

So despite the challenges the humans faced in 2020, the bluebirds were still doing what bluebirds do. Those beautiful little birds carried on and sang their sweet songs just like they always did. And spending time with them made me happy, just like it always has.



News from Jim Higdon, FBS Member



While checking one of my bluebird nestboxes this season a male bluebird actually lit on my arm. He looked me in the eye and seemed to say, "What are you doing messing with my house?" It was quite an amazing experience.

My age and health have slowed me down a great deal, but I still love to build bluebird houses, and I try to monitor 16 boxes every year in the mid-western part of Citrus County, which is over on the west coast of central Florida.

Do You Have a Bluebird Story?

Have you had a special experience with a bluebird? Could you write a summary of your experiences during the last nesting season? We are always looking for bluebird-related stories to share with our members in this newsletter. Send your story and a photo, if possible, to FloridaBluebirdSociety@gmail.com.

Charter Member's Story

Teri Tate Pollard

November seems a fitting time to honor two of the Florida Bluebird Society's Charter members, David Foster and Lonnie Tate. Lonnie, my Dad, was a lifetime resident of Jacksonville. When he met David Foster they quickly became good friends. It was David who introduced him to bluebirds and Lonnie found this to be so very interesting. David shared with him the importance of saving bluebirds, their nesting habits, and needs. Lonnie quickly went to work building nesting boxes for everyone he knew as building nesting boxes was right up his alley. Once he had a few built, he would simply show up at friends' and neighbors' homes and install one in their backyard in the 'perfect' spot for bluebirds. When friends or neighbors came home from work they knew who had placed the bluebird nesting box there, and there is where it generally stayed. Each year Lonnie would call them or drop by to remind them to clean out the nesting box and check to see if any repairs were needed.



Lonnie Tate, FBS Charter Member

Since Lonnie was not internet savvy, David would print pictures for Lonnie of nearby members' nesting boxes with eggs and tell him of updates from fellow bluebird lovers around the state. It was something they loved sharing together.

Lonnie passed away October 2011 from Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML). To share in his love of bluebirds, I remind those with one of his bluebird nesting boxes to prepare them for the new season just as Dad would have done.



We have since moved away from our family home in Jacksonville. But, we did leave behind one of Dad's bluebird nesting boxes for the new homeowner along with the instructions on how to care for it and the bluebirds who might use it in the future.

My mom and I now reside in Callahan, Florida. The first thing placed in our yard was one of the last bluebird houses Dad built. Our first little family of bluebirds moved right in and returned again this season.

David and Dad's love for bluebirds inspired me to join the Florida Bluebird Society in 2019 in their honor and continue their purpose. Since November is the birth month of David Foster and my Dad, it seemed like a great time to share their story with you. Give your friends a gift this year of a bluebird nesting box and memories that will last a lifetime.



David and Lonnie!

Time to Clean and Repair Nestboxes

Nesting season has ended. If you have not already done so, now is the time to submit your data for the season to nestwatch.org. Now is also the time to prepare for next season. We suggest you not only clean out your boxes, but take a good look at them. Do you see any damage? Are there any cracks that need to be sealed with caulk? If you see anything about your box or predator guards that might pose a hazard to birds now is the time to make repairs.

After necessary repairs, put your nestbox back in place. Bluebirds are known to huddle in empty nestboxes on cold winter nights.



Nestbox Surprise

Hope Botterbusch, Coordinator

The Heritage Pines Community, located in the northwestern region of Pasco County, is the 2019 recipient of the Florida Bluebird Society's Bluebird Trail Upgrade Grant. The monitors of the trail had recently been conducting maintenance on their nesting boxes by checking each box to make sure it's ready for the 2021 nesting season. They thought they had empty nesting boxes, but much to their surprise they found flying squirrels in two boxes. The first nest was removed not knowing anything was living there. Behind the nest they found 4 baby flying squirrels and their mother. They quickly placed the babies back in the nest and the nest back in the box and quickly left the area with the hope the mother would return to calm her babies. They found a second nesting box full of babies with Mom peeking out from the nest. Here are photos of the cute box crashers. The Trail monitors said they didn't have the heart to remove the cute flying squirrels since the Bluebirds are not nesting at this time.



Help ID Birds by Sound

Faith Jones, Board Member

Created by Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Chemnitz University of Technology, BirdNET is an endeavor to determine how computers learn birds from sounds. Using machine learning, avian sounds are detected and classified from recordings made by people like us. At least 984 of the most common species found in North America and Europe are now identifiable, and the list is expanding as more and more people use the application.

At this point it is still a prototype and by no means should it be considered a final product. But, the current version is markedly improved since it was first released. I recently started using it again and have been very impressed with how quickly it can identify a bird sound in a recording. On occasion it will respond that a positive ID is not possible and will offer a wild guess. Realize it is a wild guess and do not take that as a positive ID.

I suggest you visit <https://birdnet.cornell.edu/> and view the Live Stream Demo. It clearly explains how to use the app. If you have never tried BirdNET or if you tried it when it was first released, as I did, and dismissed it as being of no value, I suggest you give it another try.





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Select your desired Membership type:

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Faith Jones, Treasurer
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Yes No If yes, # of boxes _____

Location of trail _____

Willing to actively participate in FBS

Willing to serve as County or Area Coordinator

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