

NESTBOX NEWS

Newsletter of the South Carolina Bluebird Society
(An affiliate of NABS)



OCTOBER 2025

southcarolinabluebirds.org



PHOTO CREDIT: BILL BENDER

PRESIDENT'S LETTER:

HALLELUJA Fall has actually arrived. Cooler temperatures, leaves turning, Halloween candy, and our feathered friends are **frisky**. I venture to say you may be seeing a “Flurry” of activity. Several callers have been inquiring about the increased number of Bluebirds showing up at feeders. While folks are ecstatic seeing our Blue Friends and watching their antics, they wonder where did they all come from recently?

Primarily, our birds do not migrate and are being joined by their Northern cousins to begin wintering over with us as it gets colder up there. So, this is a good time to review a few items: **(a)** Keep your feeders and water features filled **(b)** Use this “non-nesting” time to do any needed nestbox cleaning and repairs **(c)** Doublecheck your nestbox locations to ensure that sprinklers are NOT reaching them **(d)** Consider adding some energy providing SUET at your feeders **(e)** Make sure that predator guards/baffles are in good shape and tightly attached. All these actions will enhance your Fall and Winter watching enjoyment and provide clean, safe nestboxes for the birds to “Snuggle Together” in on the colder nights.

While SCBS continues to be successful with our programs and activities, we do need to bring your attention to a couple critical areas.

1) MEMBERSHIP:

Just like many other conservation and education focused organizations, we need to continue to build our membership. We have had a decrease in renewals and many of our longtime members are “aging out”. These facts indicate that we need to attract new and often younger members in order to sustain our continued growth and existence to support our mission. Please reach out to individuals you may know and encourage them to join us and support our volunteer activities and programs. Direct them to our website <https://southcarolinabluebirds.org> or our Membership Coordinator, **Deby Stewart** at bluebirds@donzas.com

2) VACANT POSITIONS:

We are in need of interested individuals to fill two critical positions:

A) Treasurer - - seeking an individual to transition with our current Treasurer to learn the ropes of SCBS. Person should have knowledge of Financial Management, attention to detail and good communication skills. This is a Board of Directors position.

B) Newsletter Editor - - need a creative person with, ideally, experience with graphics, newsletter creation, composition, editing and associated software.

If interested or need additional details, please contact me cmdebruhl@atlanticbb.net or any Board Member.

Until next time ... Enjoy the Fall and get ready for Winter

Cheers Mike

Mike DeBruhl

In this issue:

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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Send us your pictures, articles and stories about your bluebirds to trailboss@southcarolinabluebirds.org

SCBS Board of Directors

Mike DeBruhl - President/CEO

Glen Hendry - Vice President/Trail & Data Coordinator

Steve Roschelle - Outreach Coordinator

Doug Woods - Member at Large

David Slaunwhite Ph.D. - Treasurer

Ron Brenneman - Emeritus Member

Jim Sproull Ph.D. - Member at large

Janis Krauss - Secretary

Dr. Michelle Vieyra - Member at large

Visit our website:

- View dates for upcoming meetings and presentations
- Purchase a Nestbox setup (box, pole & guard)
- Register for a Bluebird seminar with Steve Roschelle via our website

southcarolinabluebirds.org



SOUTH CAROLINA BLUEBIRD SOCIETY



THE DOCTOR SAYS...

An Article by Dr. Michelle Vieyra



Nestbox Nightmares: Predators at the Door

As the days grow shorter and the evenings become cooler many of us get into the spirit of Halloween by hanging ghostly decorations, watching spine-tingling movies, or dressing up as our favorite creepy monster. But for backyard birders there's a horror far more real than any haunted house or scary story - nestbox predation!

Nestbox predation can result in a loss of eggs, hatchlings, or even the incubating female. Finding this nightmare in a carefully tended nestbox can discourage a nestbox custodian from continuing to provide this important tool in Bluebird conservation. In this article I will share information about predation in Eastern Bluebird nestboxes: Who are the usual perpetrators? How can you tell who did it? And what can we, as nestbox custodians, do to prevent nestbox predation?

In the Southeastern United States the most likely perpetrators of nestbox predation are cats, racoons, and snakes. Less likely suspects include fire ants, crows, and squirrels.

Cats and racoons access the nest by reaching into the entrance hole. Cats cannot grasp the eggs, but they may break them, and they can grab nestlings and/or incubating females with their claws. Racoons have hands that can easily grasp eggs, nestlings, and adult birds. Both will leave the nest messy, with racoons often pulling some of the nesting material out of the hole. Scratches may be found on the nestbox and feathers or partial remains may be found in or near the box. It is easy for these predators to access the nestbox if it is attached to a tree or fence so boxes should be placed on a pole in an open area. An entrance hole extender or a Noel guard (a wire cage extending from the entrance) can deter this style of predation. Stovepipe baffles are cited as somewhat effective against mammalian ground access, although racoons can climb them if they are less than 8" in diameter. Cone style baffles are not very effective against these predators.

Snakes are by far the most common predator of nestboxes, with rat snakes being the most common snake predator followed by the corn snake and black racer. Snakes will fully enter the nestbox through the entrance hole and will usually eat EVERYTHING inside leaving no trace of eggshells or partial remains. They will leave the nest intact but slightly flattened. Entrance extenders and Noel guards will not prevent a snake from entering the box but both the stovepipe and cone style baffle have been cited as effective. Rat snakes can reach up to 6 feet long and larger snakes are known to bypass either obstacle. An extra long baffle with a cone at the top has been shown to be the most effective combination against snake predation. It is also important to keep the vegetation around the box trimmed, including any branches that a snake could drop down or extend from.

In summary, predator prevention begins with placing the nestbox in fairly open space without tall bushes or overhanging branches that could allow a predator easy access. Using any type of predator guard will reduce the likelihood of predation, but studies have shown that using a combination of predator guards is the most effective strategy. The best bet is to install multiple predator exclusion devices that are effective against both snakes and mammalian predators. This includes either a hole extender or a Noel guard and both a stovepipe and cone baffle. Unfortunately, nothing is 100% fool-proof and despite all our efforts some of us will still face the nightmare of nest predation. Bluebirds need our continued conservation efforts so I urge you not to be discouraged. Our final line of defense is to try to prevent predation from happening a second time. Look for signs that can help you identify the culprit and beef up defenses against that particular predator. And finally, because predators quickly learn where easy prey can be found, a nestbox custodian should move their box to a new location after a predator strikes.

For more information check out:

Bailey RL, Bonter DN. 2017. Predator guards on nest boxes improve nesting success of birds. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 41(3): 434-441.

Marcus JM, Hart AG, Goodenough AE. 2024. Predator-proofing avian nestboxes: A review of interventions, opportunities, and challenges. *Birds* 5: 1-23.

Rogers AM, Lermite F, Griffin AS, vanRensburg BJ, Kark S. 2023. Alien vs. predator: Impacts of invasive species and native predators on urban nest box use by native birds. *Animals* 13: 1-14.



Dr. Michelle Vieyra is a Professor of Biology at USC Aiken. Her undergraduate lab maintains and monitors 31 nestboxes on the USCA campus in collaboration with the SCBS.



Georgia Department of Natural Resources Weekly Digest Bulletin 4/7/2025

Out My Backdoor: The Appeal of Mealworms



Mealworms (Terry W. Johnson)

By Terry W. Johnson

Mealworms are different things to different people. To an angler, they are a great bait to catch everything from trout to bass, panfish and even catfish. To wildlife rehabilitators, they are a great food for feeding injured and orphaned birds. To millions of people throughout the world, mealworms are an important source of protein.

And to those folks who share the hobby of feeding birds in their backyards, they are an ideal food that will attract a wide range of songbirds.

Who would have ever thought that the larvae of an insect known as the mealworm or darkling beetle (*Tenebrio molitor*), a pest that plagues grain storage facilities, would become the focal point of multimillion-dollar enterprises? For example, China alone produces and ships more than 260,000 tons of dried and live mealworms per year to foreign markets.

That being said, let's take a quick look at the art of feeding mealworms to hungry wild birds.

Both live and dried mealworms are excellent sources of nutrition. Live mealworms contain 20 percent crude protein and 13 percent crude fat, while dried mealworms pack 53 percent protein and 28 percent fat. In comparison, black oil sunflower seeds are about 15 percent crude protein and 25 percent crude fat.

Most experts agree that live mealworms benefit birds more than those that are dried. However, while dried mealworms can be stored practically anywhere, live mealworms must be stored in airtight containers and refrigerated. In addition, the live worms need to be fed oatmeal or bran meal.

Live or dried, mealworms attract lots of birds, including species such as kinglets and yellow-rumped warblers that are not attracted to seeds. Many other backyard favorites also dine on mealworms. That list features bluebirds, white- and red-breasted nuthatches, purple martins, cardinals, Carolina wrens, American robins, gray catbirds, brown thrashers, mockingbirds, Carolina chickadees, and tufted titmice. Unfortunately, mealworms are also eaten by house sparrows and European starlings, introduced species considered as pests by most bird enthusiasts. It should come as no surprise to learn that another arch nemesis of backyard bird-feeding fans, the gray squirrel, also gobbles up mealworms.

You can buy mealworms at stores that specialize in birding supplies, as well as bait shops and, of course, online.

Mealworms can be fed in tray feeders and feeders designed specifically for the worms. For live mealworms, feeders should have sides that are at least 2 inches tall. This keeps the insects from crawling away. Some feeders are made of clear plastic and equipped with entrance holes to prevent large birds from quickly devouring the mealworms.

When I bought my first mealworm feeder and a supply of dried mealworms from The Bird Store in Macon, the proprietor, Tommy Willard, told me that some folks have great luck feeding mealworms, while others never seem to enjoy any success. Well, I quickly realized that I am a member of the latter group. As hard as I try, the birds simply ignore my mealworm offerings.

However, others have told me they have great success. In fact, Linda Guy, the retired manager of Big Lazer Creek Wildlife Management Area near Talbotton, has to buy 5 pounds of dried mealworms at a time in order to keep up the demand for them at her feeders.

One of the most interesting mealworm-related stories I have heard was told to me by a Macon resident. It seems that a friend asked her to “babysit” the friend’s bluebirds while she was on vacation. The person instructed her to, once a day, take a one of the plastic containers of mealworms stored in a refrigerator in the garage and scatter the contents in a wheelbarrow sitting in the yard. Then tap the side of the wheelbarrow with a trowel to let the birds know it was mealtime.

On the first day her friend was away, the woman emptied the mealworms into the wheelbarrow, tapped on the side of it with the trowel, and walked away. Within minutes, bluebirds seemed to appear out of nowhere and began swallowing the golden-colored mealworms. The woman told me she simply could not believe what she was seeing.

Until I unlock the secret of feeding mealworms, I guess I will never enjoy the sweet smell of success. But perhaps I should begin offering mealworms in a wheelbarrow. Now that I think about it, I just might give that a try.

If you try feeding mealworms to the birds in your backyard, I sincerely hope you are more successful than I have been so far!

Terry W. Johnson is a retired Georgia DNR program manager and executive director of The Environmental Resources Network, or TERN, the friends group of [DNR’s Wildlife Conservation Section](#). Check out [past columns](#), his [Backyard Wildlife Connection blog](#) and his book [“A Journey of Discovery: Monroe County Outdoors.”](#) Permission is required to [reprint a column](#).

A Wonderful Donation in support of Our Student Scholarship Program

Gail Ebner, wife of former City Council Members Reggie Ebner, is a friend and member of the Pine Needle Garden Club. Last week she asked me about our Bluebird Scholarship program and I gave her the info. Well ... she just sent me a note that their GC is going to donate \$500 to be put toward our scholarship program

!!! How about that !!

I reiterated how the scholarship works and how the students participate in some research under tutelage of Dr Vierya. Assured her / them that such designated donation dollars will be directed at funding the scholarships. They may mail the check, made to SCBS, to me and I will let you know when it arrives.

Another "WOWZER" moment

Cheers Mike

What should you believe?

With the advent of the web, information has never been easier to obtain, but there is also a dark side. There are few organizations that oversee the accuracy of what is written on the web. Podcasts, influencers, Facebook, X, Tic Tok and AI all allow free speech, which is their right, but much of the content is anecdotal, biased, misinterpreted or just plain incorrect.

Who should you trust?

When it comes to information concerning Bluebirds, you can be assured that the information on the websites of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) and the South Carolina Bluebird Society (SCBS) is accurate. Since 2010, SCBS has fledged over 53,000 Bluebirds from a total today of more than 2,000 Nestboxes that volunteers monitor weekly during the nesting season. Conservatively we have “peeked” 250,000 times in these Nestboxes and recorded data on more than 15,000 Bluebird clutches with 140,000 data points collected concerning their behavior and activity. With 3 Ph.D. scientists, 1 former South Carolina Department of National Resources (SCDNR) employee on the SCBS Board of Directors and Ph.D. scientists at NABS, our depth of knowledge is unsurpassed. If you see one of those uncensored articles on social media which seem questionable, go to our website, southcarolinabluebirds.org. If the answer is not found, click on Contact, fill in and submit the information request form and one of our Board members will contact you. Remember, people can say and write whatever they choose to, but it does NOT necessarily make it true. Inaccurate information just confuses the people who care.

-David Slaunwhite Ph.D.

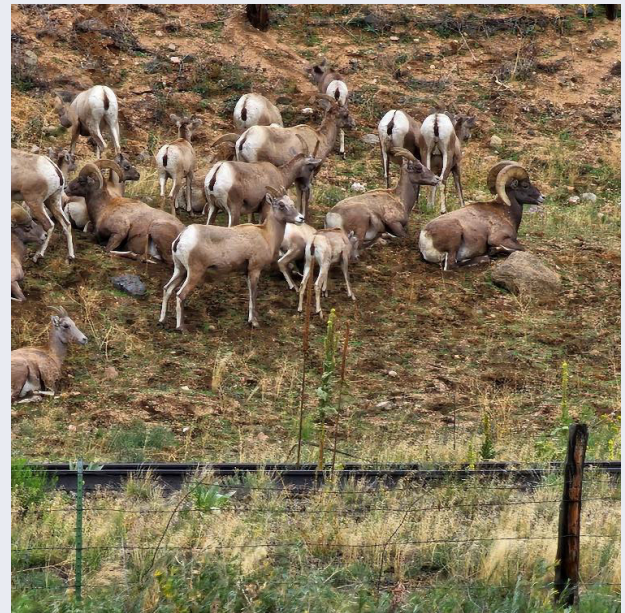
Colorado Nestboxes –
We Aren't in South Carolina Anymore Toto!

Gail & I took a vacation out West to Colorado near the town of Salida. We stayed in an RV park on the headwaters of the Arkansas River (yes, the same Arkansas River that flows through Arkansas). The park is in Bighorn Canyon & the park's name is Bighorn Park. The canyon and park are aptly named as it is fairly common to spot the bighorn sheep on the steep hillsides. During several day trips, we noticed many bluebird nestboxes that were installed on wooden fenceposts. This would be a severe NO-NO for us back home in South Carolina. We did not see a single nestbox on a pole with predator guard. I guess they don't have snake or raccoon issues like we do back East. The Western Bluebird is the bluebird species we see here and since it is post-breeding season, they were congregating in a flock of a dozen or more. They look like our Eastern Bluebird, but the red, rusty colored breast does not extend upwards under the chin like our Eastern Bluebird.

-Glen Hendry



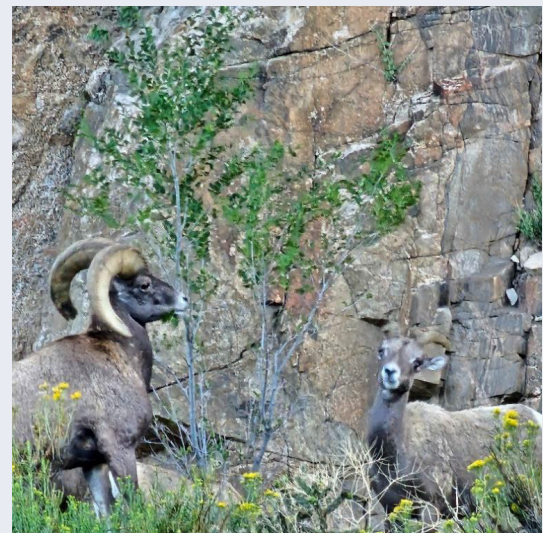
Colorado Bluebird Nestboxes –
Sans Predator Guards



Bighorn Sheep in Colorado



Western Bluebirds in Colorado





Time to celebrate!



September 24th

Happy "National Bluebird of Happiness Day"

Did you know that this day has been set aside to not only appreciate Bluebirds but also to bring attention to the natural world and the happiness it can bring.

"Bluebird of Happiness Day is celebrated every year on September 24th to recognize the bluebird as a symbol of joy, luck, and hope. The tradition stems from the phrase ...bluebird of happiness ... coined by Maurice Maeterlinck in his 1908 play, *The Blue Bird*. The day encourages people to find happiness in life, no matter how small, and to remain hopeful during challenging times"



Photo Credit: Bill Bender



PEANUT GALLERY

A Question from Elizabeth in Charleston, SC:

Should I remove the nest boxes from my yard for the fall & winter? I have two boxes, and each had two nests this summer. Each had 3-5 eggs and about half the eggs hatched and fledged. (about 2-4 fledged from each nest)

SCBS Response:

Thanks for your inquiry and congratulations on your nestings/fledgings. No need to remove the nestboxes now that the nesting season has ended. But do clean them out thoroughly and seal/caulk any cracks that may have appeared. As the nights turn cooler, two or three Bluebirds will often enter at dusk and “snuggle up” to keep warm. They typically leave at sunrise...so you may not see them depart. But do feed them and enjoy the activity!

Cheers

Mike DeBruhl
President, SCBS



PEANUT GALLERY

A Question from Marjorie in Aiken, SC:

A mother Cooper's hawk and her three babies had a nest near my backyard where my bluebird box is located. One of them killed my mother bluebird and the father raised the four babies all by himself with help from me with live mealy worms. They all fledged. The Cooper's hawks are still around. They're virtually grown but won't leave. I had taken down my songbird feeders when one of them killed the mother bluebird to disperse the songbirds so the hawks could not eat them. Is there any way to scare off the hawks and make them leave my yard permanently? We back up to Hitchcock Woods, so it's their territory too and I realize nature can be cruel and everyone has to eat! But is there any way to discourage the hawks from my yard?

SCBS Response:

There is no way I know of to scare the hawk from your yard. As you know, they are federally protected so you cannot kill them or harass them. Unfortunately, sometimes nature is cruel.

Ron

SPOTLIGHT ON THE TRAILS



The Bluebird Trails in Hitchcock Woods

“The Hitchcock Woods was originally part of a larger tract of land purchased by Thomas Hitchcock and William Whitney in the 1890s. Later, in the 1930s, the Hitchcock Foundation was formed to preserve, protect and maintain the remaining acres of the original tract for the benefit of the general public and future generations. The Hitchcock family established the Hitchcock Foundation in 1939 and donated 1,120 acres of the family’s land to be protected and preserved in perpetuity. In the years since, the Hitchcock Foundation (now the Hitchcock Woods Foundation) has overseen the purchase and donation of close to 900 additional acres that, added to the Hitchcock’s original donation of 1200 acres, comprise the Hitchcock Woods as we know it today.” (1)

“The Woods”, as it is called by locals, is a unique gem. It is surrounded by the city of Aiken and is accessible by hiking or equestrian means only on some 70 miles of sandy trails. The only vehicles allowed on the property are owned by the Hitchcock Woods Foundation and operated by Hitchcock Woods’ personnel. It is one of the largest privately owned urban forests in the country. Mary Katherine Philipp is the Executive Director and Bennett Tucker is the Superintendent.

The SCBS established the first bluebird trail in “The Woods” in 2011 with 16 bluebird nestbox setups. Mr. Bennett Tucker & his wife Lindsey monitor this initial trail. In 2014 SCBS installed 12 screech owl nestboxes throughout The Woods. In 2015, SCDNR donated an additional 50 nestboxes with poles and predator guards. In 2016, SCDNR donated another 25 nestbox setups. SCBS has installed several more Bluebird Nestbox setups for a combined 103 Bluebird Nestboxes and 12 Screech Owl Nestboxes. Due to the number of Nestboxes and large geographic area being monitored, we have been given special permission to operate a 4-wheel drive Gator to monitor the Nestboxes. Even with this, it takes Glen & his wife Gail, 4-5 hours to complete the trip (and YES I did get lost turned around a couple times).

In addition to the Bluebird Nestboxes that SCBS monitors, The Woods implemented a program to re-introduce the once endangered Red Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) from other areas in the state. (2) A Nestbox is inserted into a cutout in a very mature long leaf pine. As these birds congregate in a colony, several Nestboxes are installed in nearby trees throughout The Woods. This program has been a great success!

The Woods has an extremely diverse population of wild critters including white tail deer, turtles, quail, fox, coyote, raccoons, beavers, snakes and turkey. The SCBS Nestboxes play host to nesting Bluebirds, Nuthatches, Carolina Wrens, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, Wood Ducks, Screech Owls, and Great Crested Flycatchers. Much to our great surprise one day, we witnessed a female Wood Duck nesting in a Screech Owl Box. She laid nine eggs and all nine hatched and fledged. Even more interesting was the fact that she is ½ mile away from water.

One of the control measures used to maintain the beauty of The Woods is the use of fire with a controlled burn. During a burn in 2023, several active nestboxes were in the area to be burned. There were Nestboxes with both eggs and/or young birds present. To our relief, all nests survived, with eggs hatching and young fledging.

The nestboxes in The Woods are not immune to natural predators. The black rat snake is our #1 culprit and occasionally we will find a beautiful corn snake that evades our predator guards to raid a nest. Although raccoons are present, our predator guards seem to prevent their efforts.

(1) <https://www.hitchcockwoods.org/the-woods/history>

(2) The RCW is no longer on the endangered species list.

(Continued on next page)

SPOTLIGHT ON THE TRAILS



Glen Hendry with a nestbox after control burn



Long leaf pine that survived a control burn



Glen with a 7' black rat snake



Glen with a fat corn snake (ate my bluebird youngsters)

PHOTO GALLERY



Bill Bender



Glen Hendry

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Join the South Carolina Bluebird Society
southcarolinabluebirds.org

Gift a membership to a family member or friend.

We appreciate your support and will continue to spend your membership dues responsibly to ensure the continued viability of the Bluebird population in South Carolina and adjoining states.

Join the North American Bluebird Society
nabluebirdsociety.org



Become a Member!
www.nabluebirdsociety.org

Visit Us Online For

- Fact Sheets
- Events
- Nestbox Plans
- Speakers
- Tips/Guidance
- And more!

MISSION:
To engage in such educational, scientific and charitable pursuits as may be beneficial to the prosperity and well being of the three species of bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting bird species.

The South Carolina Bluebird Society is an affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS). NABS needs your support to continue their mission in Canada, Bermuda, and the USA.



Mandy Gubsch
ARTIST | INTERIOR DECORATOR
Cozy spaces & beautiful artwork

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