Nestbox News

Newsletter of the South Carolina Bluebird Society

An affiliate of NABS

Southcarolinabluebirds.org

February 2026

Photo by Melinda Welker

In This Issue...

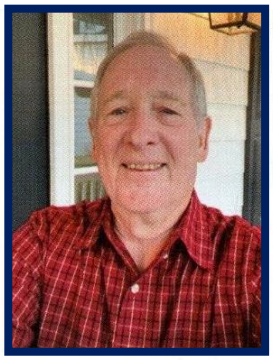
Please, peruse our website https://southcarolinabluebirds.org/to view upcoming public presentations and Bluebird Society meetings. You can also purchase a complete Nestbox setup (box, pole, predator guard) on our website.

Check out our Facebook group, South Carolina Blue Bird Society

Contact Steve Roschelle (presentations@southcarolinabluebirds.org) if you would like a Bluebird seminar presentation for another organization that you may belong to! Please use our website to register.

A Letter from the President

Southcarolinabluebirds.org



WELCOME TO 2026

Wishing everyone a Happy New Year and upcoming nesting season !!

Your Board of Directors hope that it is starting off well for each of you. With that in mind,

Let's take a look at a few highlights from 2025:

- ✓ **SCBS reached our 15th ANNIVERSARY! We were founded in October 2010 by Ron Brenneman, Jim Burke and Roger Brock ... and met in the "back room" of Ron's Birds & Butterflies shop on Laurens Street in Aiken**
- ✓ **Achieved major milestone .... exceeded 50,000 Bluebird fledges**
- ✓ **Established five new trails**
- ✓ **We now monitor / maintain about 125 trails** across SC and parts of NC and GA that are comprised of over 1,900 Nestboxes
- ✓ **Provided Monitors with SCBS Trail Monitor Tee Shirt or Hat**
- ✓ **Awarded $3,000 SCBS Bluebird Scholarships** to USC - Aiken Biology Department
- ✓ **Membership grew to over 430** .... and established a "student category"
- ✓ **First "Designated Bluebird Habitat" signs at Woodside and Hitchcock Woods .... qualified 2 more community designations and signs for 2026**
- ✓ **Built more than 440 new nestboxes** for use on trials and for sales
- ✓ **Presented 60 educational presentations** to garden clubs, civic organizations, nature and school groups .... **40+ already scheduled for 2026**
- ✓ **Achieved record sales** of nestboxes / mounting poles, and critter baffles
- ✓ **Received significant donation for Bluebird Scholarship Program**
- ✓ **Formed partnership with Hitchcock Woods for education programs**

And this is not everything. I hope that you agree that all this certainly contributes to /embodies our charter of Protection, Propagation and Education for the Eastern Bluebird

and other native cavity nesting birds

A special thanks to our monitors and volunteers whose dedicated work and contributions made this possible. **It is greatly appreciated.**

As we begin 2026, we will be looking to expand on 2025 **and keep SCBS active and**

FUN. We can always use some extra skills and hands (education presenters for

example) and ideas to keep us moving forward. So let us hear from you.

Our 2026 nesting season is just around the corner (February) so let's get those

nestboxes, trails, water features & feeders ready to go.

Thanks again ...and will soon

See You on the Trails!

Cheers ...

Mike

Mike DeBruhl, President, SCBS

SOUTH CAROLINA BLUEBIRD SOCIETY

Common Birds Are Declining the Fastest, and Habitat Loss Is to Blame, a New Study Finds

As humans have transformed the natural environment, abundant birds have suffered the most—while some rare species have increased.

The Rufous Hummingbird, a familiar backyard visitor, has seen its numbers drop in recent decades.
Photo: Brendan Murphy/Audubon Photography Awards

By Carrie Klein

Reporter, Audubon magazine

Published August 05, 2025

It's no secret that birds are struggling. North America has lost billions of them since the 1970s and today more than one-third of bird species are considered under threat. While efforts to stem the tide tend to target endangered and rare species, new research shows that the bulk of losses are coming from the most common birds, such as Rufous Hummingbirds that flit around home feeders and Barn Swallows that swoop over farm fields.

"We think of them as such staple species, like they'll always be there," says Gates Dupont, an ecologist at Princeton University. But when Dupont and biologist Andy Dobson looked at nearly six decades of data on 244 bird species, they found that abundant species saw the steepest drops in their numbers.

Their findings, published July 30 in *Science Advances*, show that just 5 percent of species make up 80 percent of the total declines in avian abundance, according to data from the U.S. Geological Survey's North American Breeding Bird Survey. At the same time, some rare species have been increasing their populations.

Crucially, the study also pinpoints the main driver for the declines: Human-caused destruction of habitat, including forests and grasslands. As development increases, there's less space for birds to live. Because common species are closer to their "carrying capacity"—meaning they're nearly maxing out the number of birds that their ecosystem can support—any reduction in available habitat means fewer birds can survive. Meanwhile, land-use changes don't affect rare species as dramatically because their populations are further from their carrying capacity, the study suggests.

"If the landscape is completely full of birds and you take away some of that natural landscape, you're going to lose birds," says Nicole Michel, director of quantitative science at Audubon, who was not part of the study.

Dupont and Dobson's findings are the latest in a growing body of research on common birds declining. A study in May found that bird populations fell the most in areas where they were most abundant, per eBird data. Similar trends have been observed in European birds.

Insects also show the same patterns: Species with the highest numbers have experienced the greatest losses in recent years, according to a 2023 study.

It's a phenomenon Michel has seen herself. Audubon's Christmas Bird Count, which has enlisted volunteers to gather data on North American bird populations since 1900, has recorded a collapse in the number of Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles, Mallards, and American Robins, among others. "If these declines continue, these formerly common birds may become rare," Michel says.

Losing common birds "impacts us all," Michel says, since they provide the bulk of benefits to ecosystems: They eat insects and small rodents, pollinate plants, disperse seeds, and help cycle nutrients in soil. Meanwhile, rare species tend to develop niche roles, like the Lucifer Hummingbird, with its beak curved perfectly to fit inside flowering agave plants. That makes it harder for rare birds to fill in for the services lost by common ones.

"If these declines continue, these formerly common birds may become rare."

The downward trend in common birds also raises broader concerns about the health of the environment. "Birds are excellent indicators," Michel says. "When there's trouble with birds,

it's an indicator that there's trouble in the larger ecosystem."

Knowing exactly which species are suffering the most—and why—is critical to figuring out how to take action. In this case, the findings suggest that helping common birds will require a bigger push to combat habitat loss, the authors say. "We need conservation efforts that meet the scale that humanity is changing the environment," says Dupont.

A great place to start, Dupont says, is by improving existing forests to accommodate more wildlife. "The quality of the forests is not what it needs to be," he says. Many forests in the United States today are homogenous—a consequence of reforestation efforts that followed massive clear-cutting for logging and agriculture. Planting more native species and managing forests to cultivate a wider range of tree ages could go a long way to help more birds find food and shelter.

The conversion of forests and grasslands to farmland is harder to tackle. But one solution is working with ranchers and other landowners to implement bird-friendly practices, since the majority of grassland birds live on privately owned land. Rotational grazing, for example, can help increase biodiversity and restore vital habitat.

History shows that policy action can help turn trends around for birds in trouble. Dupont points to the ban on the harmful pesticide DDT in 1972 that led to major comebacks for the Bald Eagle, Osprey, and other birds. "We identified a problem, we addressed it through policy, and the birds bounced back," he says. "That provides a lot of hope."

Habitat loss has driven declines among abundant birds like Barn Swallows, researchers found. **Photo: Claire Beiser/Audubon Photography Awards**

Audubon

When It’s Okay (or Not) to Feed Birds

Providing food—for photography or simple enjoyment—can be a thorny issue. For guidance, ask yourself these three questions.

Baltimore Oriole and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Photo: Melissa Groo

By Melissa Groo

Published May 24, 2018

Whether we identify as birders or photographers or both, we are always looking for ways to get closer to birds, or to bring them closer to us. Offering food—sating the hunger that is such a primal drive for all of us—is an easy way to do that. But knowing what kind of food is okay to supply, and when, and where, can be confusing. Over and over, in nature photography forums and on social media, I see the following questions: "Isn't all bird feeding harmful?" and "What's the difference between feeding birds at a feeder and feeding owls?" and "How can you be okay with handfeeding Gray Jays and opposed to feeding owls?"

These are false equivalences that, in the end, only hurt birds. To paint every species with one broad brush is to ignore or deny the varying needs and circumstances of every kind of bird and the realities of its particular life—realities that depend on population status, habitat, physiology, and the unique challenges it faces. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

So how do we make sense of it all?

The Three Questions

When I was younger, a mentor of mine gave me this advice: Before speaking, ask yourself the following three questions: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? I sometimes fall down on the job, but I aspire to follow these as best I can. When thinking through this issue, it occurred to me that, similarly, three questions could be applied to any bird-feeding situation. And that the answers could help guide decisions in a way that is best for both birds and people.

1. Is this species at risk?

Information on the status of a species is just a click away. Good sources include state and federal listings, the IUCN Red List, and Audubon's Guide to North American Birds. Using these, we can easily discover how a species is doing in our states, provinces, countries, or worldwide. We may even find that the status of a species varies greatly from one place to another.

Florida Scrub-Jay. Photo: Melissa Groo

If a bird is classified as "threatened," "endangered," or "of special concern," that means it is struggling to survive. We must exercise extreme caution when making decisions that might affect that bird. Even if we have the best intentions, what we think might benefit a bird might actually cause unintended negative consequences.

A case in point: Florida Scrub-Jays. If you were to do a simple google search like "scrub-jay status Florida," you would quickly find that this species is listed as vulnerable to extinction by the IUCN and as federally threatened. Fewer than 5,000 Florida Scrub-Jays remain. Their numbers have dropped by 90 percent over the past century, as the scrub and scrubby flatwoods they require have been fragmented and destroyed by development and agriculture.

Bird lovers quickly realized that Florida Scrub-Jays will come readily to the hand for peanuts.

Unfortunately, studies have shown that jays fed by humans reproduce earlier in the year than those that are not. As a result, their fledglings hatch before the caterpillars they rely on for nutrition are available, leading to malnourishment and starvation. People also feed jays near roads, and collision with vehicles is a major cause of their death. Thus, it's now illegal to feed Florida Scrub-Jays unless you have a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Snowy Owls are also in precipitous decline. Although there are a number of reasons why offering food, such as pet-store mice, to owls can be harmful, certainly the fact that this species is vulnerable to extinction, per the IUCN, makes feeding them particularly irresponsible and ill-advised.

In short, birds that have special population status due to their declining numbers should not be fed (unless, say, you're a researcher working with appropriate permits). This advice is in line with the American Birding Association's Code of Ethics.

2. Is the food appropriate and safely provided?

The most common place we offer food to birds is in our own backyards. Fortunately, there is a wealth of information on how to safely set up and maintain bird feeders. Providing feeders means taking on a responsibility, as in addition to food they can present a whole host of risks, including the spread of viruses and parasites, a greater chance of window strikes, and increased vulnerability to cats and raptors. But if best practices have been followed, research shows that feeders may actually help birds to survive and reproduce.

The healthiest, most natural food you can offer to attract birds to your yard are native trees and shrubs.

Of course, the healthiest, most natural food you can offer to attract birds to your yard are native trees and shrubs, such as serviceberry or crabapples, which are a longstanding food source for them. Plant species native to each part of the country can easily be looked up in Audubon's native plants database.

One of the least healthy foods is also one of the most popular, especially in parks with resident waterfowl. Bread has little nutritional value and may cause an unhealthy condition referred to as "angel wing." Opt instead for cracked corn or oats—in moderation, of course. Leftovers from overfeeding can contaminate water, spread diseases, and attract rodents.

3) Is feeding this bird likely to change its behavior in harmful ways?

Ask yourself: Might feeding this bird cause it to associate food with a particular place?

Snowy Owl Photo: Melissa Groo

Does it draw the bird closer to roads, for example, where it could be struck by a car? Feeding owls by the side of the road presents an obvious danger: Collisions with vehicles are a leading cause of death for owls, since they fly low over the ground and relatively slowly at times.

Feeding a bird might also lead it to trust people. Could that habituation eventually put it in danger? Does the bird migrate to a region where it's not well understood, or where it's hunted? The answer will be different for a bird of prey (possibly yes) than for a songbird at a feeder or for a chickadee hand-fed sunflower seeds in a preserve (probably no).

On the flip side, you should also ask whether feeding a bird might cause it to aggressively seek handouts from people. We've all seen gulls at the beach or swans in a park grab food out of someone's hand. Once these birds begin to associate people with easy food, they can become bold and pesky. This both creates a hassle for people and poses a danger to the birds, as they gain a bad reputation and eventually may be harmed. Local ordinances and regulations may not permit feeding expressly because of these issues. There are also laws regarding feeding that govern our national park system, where it's illegal to feed any wildlife.

You don't have to be a bird expert or conservationist to realize that birds today face a multitude of challenges. When thinking of offering food to birds, as nature photographers, birders, or nature lovers, each one of us can take a little time to do some research and to sensibly weigh the pros and cons of our choices. We can make informed decisions, and hopefully balance our desire to get the shot with what's best for the birds.

The Good Kind of Cavity

November 20, 2025

Peter Kleinhenz

Executive Director

Aiken Land Conservancy

The next time you walk among the longleaf pines of Hitchcock Woods or the Aiken Gopher Tortoise Heritage Preserve, keep an eye out for falling flakes of pine bark. Often this, or a sharp squeak heard intermittently, provides the only clue that a rare, white-cheeked bird known as the red-cockaded woodpecker occupies the area. Even if you never spot this surprisingly elusive species, satisfaction comes from knowing that it inhabits a particular natural area in this region. Few better measures for the health of our fire-adapted pine forests exist.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers are unique among North American woodpeckers in that they nest in living trees. Over the span of several years, the birds peck their way into mature pines that have been infected with heart rot, which makes the job of creating a nesting hole, known as a cavity, much easier. Typically, the woodpeckers do not construct cavities in trees younger than about 80 years old. These days, that's a problem.

Old pines in our area have become uncommon and so have the birds that depend upon them. Red-cockaded woodpeckers, in fact, were among the first birds listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The loss of mature pines, coupled with the loss of the open understories that red-cockaded woodpeckers prefer due to a lack of fire, led to their near-extirpation in Aiken County at one time.

Today, the situation has improved. Thanks to the restoration of prescribed fire to natural ecosystems and the protection of longleaf pine sandhills, red-cockaded woodpecker populations have grown in the areas where they hung on in the lean years. These populations have provided a source of birds to be reintroduced to other habitats that are again suitable for these important, if picky, birds. To aid efforts to reintroduce birds to new areas, biologists install artificial cavities into mature pines that save the birds from having to spend years making the cavities themselves. The effort has worked, and red-cockaded woodpeckers were downlisted from federally endangered to federally threatened last year.

ALC plans to do its part to help recover this "ecosystem engineer" on property it owns.

Boyd Pond Park, of which ALC owns 92 acres and leases to Aiken County, was burned for the first time this past January. The burn, and the work currently underway by ALC and Aiken County to expand the park by 25 acres, led us to discuss red-cockaded woodpecker recovery efforts with MPJ Wildlife Consulting, who works with the red-cockaded woodpeckers recovery efforts at Hitchcock Woods. Boyd Pond Park sits between several populations of red-cockaded woodpeckers and, because they don't like to fly over large areas of unsuitable habitat, could serve as a bridge for the birds between different blocks of occupied habitat.

Thanks to the incredible support of the community, ALC has begun to move forward with the project. MPJ Wildlife Consulting will conduct required baseline surveys and a timber assessment, make habitat improvements, install artificial cavities at Boyd Pond Park, and annually monitor those cavities for signs of the birds. ALC, in partnership with Aiken County, plans to continue to burn at Boyd Pond Park every 2-3 years. Hopefully, in a couple of years, red-cockaded woodpecker will call Boyd Pond Park home.

Augusta-Aiken Audubon Society awarded ALC $500 from their Doug and Alice Walker Conservation Grant, Dominion Energy granted $2,500 towards the work, and Savannah River Nuclear Solutions generously gave $5,000 towards this effort. This work would not be possible without this level of community support, and we hope you will consider joining these partners to support this project. We, and the red-cockaded woodpeckers of our area, thank you!

The Doctor Says by Dr. Michelle Vieyra

The Bird Feeder Dilemma: Benefits, Risks, and Responsible Action

I am sure that many of the bird enthusiasts that read our newsletter enjoy setting up feeders to allow for close observation of our feathered friends. There are many benefits to providing supplemental feeding to both the birds that visit us and to ourselves. However, there are also many risks associated with bird feeders, particularly disease exposure. In this article I will discuss some of the costs and benefits of maintaining bird feeders as well as some of the things we can do to minimize the risks.

Benefits to people: The benefits of observing birds at feeders have been well documented. Psychological benefits include feeling more relaxed, more joyful, and calmer. People with and without depression have been noted to have enhanced feelings of mental wellbeing and lower anxiety levels. Studies have also shown that people who routinely watch birds at feeders feel more connected to nature and are more likely to care about conservation. Our modern world is stressful, and mental health has increasingly become an area of great concern. Bird feeding seems like a proven way to exercise needed self-care.

Benefits to birds: Studies have shown that birds given access to feeders, compared to those without access, have better fat stores, better reproductive success, reduced signs of stress, better winter survival rates, better feather condition, stronger immune responses, and an increase in population size. In the Eastern US, populations of urban species with access to feeders have generally remained stable while populations of other bird species have fallen. Birds also benefit from the increased human concern for conservation derived from interacting with them at feeders. I am willing to bet that most of us involved in Bluebird conservation first became interested in the birds that visited our family feeders.

Risks to birds: Unfortunately, there are a number of risks associated with bird feeders. Wild birds may become reliant on handouts and suffer if the food source disappears. Predators, especially domesticated cats, may find visitors to feeders easy and reliable prey. Poor quality food, as a majority of the diet, may actually reduce body condition and immune function, nullifying many of the benefits the birds might have gotten from supplemental feeding. The biggest risk of the feeder, however, is from pathogens. Bird feeders put a lot of birds within close proximity of each other where saliva and feces borne pathogens can spread easily. For example, Finch trichomonosis in the UK has greatly reduced the population of several finch species, with the British Greenfinch now considered endangered. Passerine salmonellosis outbreaks have resulted in noticeable, although temporary, declines in bird populations in the US and Europe. In addition to infectious diseases, poor quality food, humidity, high temperatures, and dirty feeders can promote the growth of toxic molds. Studies that examine birds found dead in gardens often find signs of mold toxicity and one study that examined food

residues at feeders found mold toxins at 100% of the feeders.

What can we do?: There are many things that we can do to mitigate the risks associated with feeders. We need to make sure that we are providing a high quality food. Seed mixes should be nutritionally complete and highly digestible. Dried corn and peanuts are a common source of toxic molds and should be avoided. Food should be stored in a dry, temperature controlled environment and given in small amounts that will be completely consumed within two days. Providing several smaller feeders spaced farther apart can reduce crowding and regularly cleaning the feeders will go far in reducing pathogen contamination from saliva and feces. These efforts may prove to be more expensive and labor intensive than many people anticipated. In that case, a great alternative to feeders is to landscape your yard with native plants that provide natural food sources for birds. This would provide all of the benefits and few of the risks outlined in this article.

Check out these articles:

White ME, Hamlin I, Butler CW and Richardson M. 2023. The joy of birds: The effect of rating for joy or counting garden bird species on wellbeing, anxiety, and nature connection. Urban Ecosystems 26: 755-765.

Hammond R, Tognin S, Burgess L, Bergou N, Smyth M, Gibbons J, Davidson N, Afifi A, Bakolis I, and Mechelli A. 2022. Smartphone-based ecological momentary assessment reveals mental health benefits of birdlife. Nature Scientific Reports 12(1):1-9.

Dayer AA, Pototsky PC, Hall RJ, Hawley DM, Phillips TB, Bonter DN, Dietsch AM, Greig E and Hochanchka WM. 2023. Birds are not the only ones impacted by guidance to cease bird feeding. People and Nature 00:1-7.

Lawson B, Robinson RA, Toms MP, Risely K, MacDonald S, and Cummingham AA. 2018. Health hazards to wild birds and risk factors associated with anthropogenic food provisioning. Philosophical Transactions Royal Society B 373:20170091.

Wilcoxen TE, Horn DJ, Hogan BM, Hubble CN, Huber SJ, Flamm, J, Knott M, Lundstrom L, Salik F, Wassenhove SJ and Wrobel ER. 2015. Effects of bird-feeding activities on the health of wild birds. Conservation Physiology 3:58.

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.

Photo Credits: Chickadee by Dr. Michelle Vieyra

Cardinal by Jenice Godley, Coppell, TX

“Spotlight on The Trails”

Newly Designated Bluebird Habitat on the North Augusta Greeneway

By Janis Krauss

2026 is starting off with an honor to add to our Bluebird Trail on the Greeneway. We currently have 41 numbered nestboxes with predator guards. We have monitored the nestboxes for more than two years and have consistently sent our reporting data to the South Carolina Bluebird Society. All of those factors have made our trail eligible for the designation of being an official SCBS Bluebird habitat.

The North Augusta Greeneway (and that is not a mis-spelling) is named in honor of former North Augusta Mayor Thomas W. Greene who served from 1985-1997. He envisioned and advocated for its development. The Greeneway follows an abandoned railroad bed right of way that the City of North Augusta purchased in 1988. It has since been built and extended in phases resulting in a current paved “Rails to Trails” of nearly 13 miles.

In 2015, a happy collaborative effort began between the South Carolina Bluebird

Society (SCBS) and Friends of the Greeneway (FROG) to add a bluebird trail along the Greeneway. It was named after North Augusta's former first lady, Barbara S. Greene, who had a love for bluebirds. It was set up as a dedication trail with interested folks purchasing nestboxes, poles, baffles and plaques with their choice of wording.

This bluebird trail began with 10 nestboxes along the Greeneway for the March-August season with one person monitoring. That first year we had 8 bluebirds fledge. In 2016 the numbers went up to 30 new bluebirds flying in our skies. In 2017, 3 more boxes were added, and we increased our fledges that year to 41 bluebirds.

We don't "kick out" other secondary cavity dwelling birds like Carolina Chickadees, Carolina Wrens, or Tufted Titmouse, but the focus for this article is only on our bluebird friends' numbers. Certain variables can create changes in bird fledgling success from year to year, like adverse weather conditions and snake or other predation.

During the course of seasons 2018-2025, the trail expanded to 41 nestboxes and had 4 dedicated folks agree to assist with nestbox monitoring. A shout-out to all who have helped in the past and currently assist: Julie Bush, Michaela Canaday, Leslie Dickerson, Brooke Gentry, Jonathan Krauss, Ansley Marshall, and Jamie Riedy. In 2025, we saw 51 new bluebirds grace our trail.

The official name of "Barbara S. Greene Bluebird Trail" wouldn't fit on our new habitat signs, two of which were provided by SCBS, so certain parties needed to be consulted about the wording. Brick Pond Park Committee and FROG agreed to "Greeneway Trail" and the signs were printed and delivered. The installation was coordinated with North Augusta Park, Recreation and Tourism (NAPRT); a city department run by Rick Meyer that has been most helpful through the years with all our bluebird efforts.

After affixing 2x4's to our new signs, NAPRT crew members Jake Stevens and Craig Chavous helped to figure out their best placement. We chose to put one near Riverview Park Activities Center at an entrance to the Greeneway Trail with good visibility from most directions. The second sign was placed in front of the beginning entrance tunnel at Riverside Boulevard.

And hopefully our bluebird friends will read the signs and realize we're ready for more nests and babies for this upcoming season!

See photos below:

Photo Gallery

Dave Rodgers

Dave Rodgers

Melinda Welker

Ron Brenneman

Bill Bender

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Beidler Forest Audubon Center
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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

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.

My name is Quinn and I am excited to be the new editor for Nestbox News! I am a student at USC Aiken and I currently work under Professor Vieyra monitoring the USCA nestbox trail. I can be contacted at:

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SCBS Newsletter assembled with the assistance of Quinn Schreiber