

TEXAS Blues



Texas Bluebird Society Newsletter March 2015 • Volume 14. Issue 1

2015 State Of The Organization

Let me share with you a bit of how we operate and what we have accomplished.

- ◆ (12/31/14) Membership #4,866. 980 current memberships. 526 new memberships.
- ◆ Most members accept an email notification when “Texas Blues” is posted, so 100% of your “dues” qualify with the IRS as a tax-deductible donation.
- ◆ Many of you give an additional \$5.00 - \$100.00 donation each year. In 2014, these donations totaled \$2,671. Members get bang for buck as the Board manages finances in an exemplary manner. We earned the GuideStar.org Exchange Gold logo by demonstrating commitment to transparency.
- ◆ 98.75% of our expenses qualify as “program service expenses”, directly related to our “charitable organization” purpose.
- ◆ \$0.00 fundraising.
- ◆ \$0.00 travel and entertainment. Board Members pay their own way to events and even donate the door prizes. Every donated item raises funds to purchase cedar for nestboxes.
- ◆ 23 Nestbox Distributors sell memberships and nestboxes.
- ◆ 12,000+ nestboxes distributed. 10,000’s more installed through our influence.
- ◆ Numerous booths at festivals producing members who walk away with a nestbox.
- ◆ 8 events in four years - planned, prepared, and presented. Starting 2015, it’s one event per year, to lessen the load on volunteers.
- ◆ Substantially all work is done by volunteers. We pay a webmaster, web editor, and book-keeper for few hours of work each month.
- ◆ NestWatch received observations from over 500 Eastern Bluebird nestings in Texas. Many of those reporting were recruited through TBS.

9 Board Members (currently) faithfully attend 2-hour board meetings at 5-week intervals through

GoToMeeting conference calls. Most Board Members serve on one or more “teams”, with additional hours of joint and individual work. And, every Board Member covers an area of responsibility.

In 2014, when our longtime nestbox builders (The Hetheringtons) moved to Australia, the Board developed a **plan to continue construction of our standard “Texas Nestbox” (branded)**. With a \$10,000 line of credit from McCoy’s, we shipped enough cedar boards for 250 nestboxes to the four certified nestbox builders. They are completing construction within a short window of time. These builders will restock our stored inventory in quantities of 250, as needed.

We are, indeed, **spreading “bluebirds (and other native cavity-nesting birds) across Texas...one nestbox at a time.”**

Our nestboxes result in the production of **countless bluebirds**, many in vicinities where bluebirds had not previously been observed. In fact, Dr. Patricia A. Gowaty, bluebird researcher, must redo her Eastern Bluebird distribution maps because Breeding Bird Surveys in recent years show the population of Eastern Bluebirds in Texas spreading westward. She speculates “this could be from the installation of nestboxes, and even the impact of Texas Bluebird Society.”

Bluebirds add quality to the of humans. As bluebirds are now a “species of least concern” (according to ornithologists), our species needs them more than their species needs us. What a difference our efforts make in the lives of humans.

Each of us has a bluebird story and a sphere of influence. Even if you have no bluebirds, your support of Texas Bluebird Society through your membership. You are making a difference in bluebird conservation and in the lives of those who see and experience bluebirds because of Texas Bluebird Society.

Let’s keep on keeping on – one nestbox at a time

Pauline Tom, TBS President

Texas Wildlife Management Use Programs Embrace Bluebird Conservation Activities

By Debbie Bradshaw Park, photos by Don Lawrence

Texas allows certain wildlife management activities to qualify for inclusion in property tax appraisals. We are happy to report that many of our members who qualify for these tax exemptions include bluebird conservation in their land management strategies. Member **Don Lawrence** shares some of his own land management strategies with us. The following information was collected from Don's 2015 Land Management Use Report required by his county tax assessor. (Each county has its own specific regulations/qualifications.)

Don owns approximately 15 acres encompassing savannah type rolling prairie, areas of medium tree density, and areas of very heavy tree density providing a bird friendly habitat. One objective is to increase the insect population to support and subsidize food for the bird population. "We are creating a habitat for insects to flourish as a natural food for many bird species" stated Don. The predominant tree on the property is the Eastern Red Cedar, preferred for both shelter and food. Other trees include American Elm, Sumac, Net Leaf Hackberry, varieties of Oak and Pecan, Bois D'arc, and Mexican Plum. Grasses include Little Bluestem, Silver Bluestem, Big Bluestem, Indian Grass, King Ranch Bluestem, Side Oats Gamma, Drop Seed Gamma, Love Grass, Switch Grass, White Tridens, and Bermuda. The Weeds and Forbes category include Croton, Careless Weeds, Panic Grass, Polk Weed, Smart Weed, Foxtail, Wild Millet, Ragweed, Gay Feather, Iron Weed, and Lespedeza. This property sits in the ecological north central section, Zone 5: Cross Timbers and Prairies.



Perch Feeders are located in the open grassland where trees are sparse.

Cracked corn, black oil sunflower seeds, thistle, and Pennington bird seed is distributed in designated areas to attract seed eating birds. Don identifies this feeding station as Restaurant Row. Other areas where he mows to encourage insects as the main food source include Fence Feeding and Power Line Feeding stations. In the savannah areas he has built perches to aid birds in their search for insects. Hummingbirds and butterflies enjoy a recently added nectar station.

A year long natural food supply for all wildlife common in this area is maintained by implementing a carefully planned planting strategy, ensuring sequentially flowering and seed/berry producing vegetation will be available in all seasons. "Attracting insects which in turn attract birds to a generous supply of their favorite bugs is the goal."

Don also employs specific strategies to assist in providing water and shelter. There are five water locations on the property ranging from shallow pans to a gravity water container all positioned at different heights to accommodate the widest variety of birds to drink and bathe. Don's tip: placing a short piece of copper wire (insulation stripped off) in the water to almost totally eliminate mosquito larvae.

Of course, Don only installs NBA/TBS approved nestboxes. Heatshields are added on all of his nestboxes to help combat the excessive summer temperatures. Dr. Pat Gowaty (UCLA), 2014 symposium speaker, is supportive of Don's efforts to test a variety of heatshield materials, especially Hardy Board, to find the most effective material to lower the interior ambient temperatures. In addition to standard predator controls such as the Kingston baffle, Don builds the roof with a 5" overhang in front and a 3½" overhang in back. These features make it more difficult for a feral cat or raccoon to access the interior. Don monitors 16 nestboxes on his own property and helps monitor 60 nestboxes at Hagerman Wildlife Refuge.



Heatshields to lower internal temps

Another very important criteria in Don's wildlife management use plan is monitoring and recording wildlife behavior. He has devised an elegant solution allowing him to monitor bird nesting activity with minimal impact on the birds. "All of the nestboxes have two roofs. (Continued on page 3.)

(...continued from page 2 [Texas Wildlife Management Use Programs Embrace Bluebird Conservation Activities](#))

The uppermost has a continuous hinge from side to side (edge to edge) and is located 5" from the front of the box. The second box has two 1" diameter holes. When the uppermost roof is raised the two holes are exposed. One of the holes serves as a camera port and the other is used to focus a flashlight. Even though it decreases the color in the photo, I cover the flashlight with a transparent plastic bag to help diffuse the light and reduce unnecessary stimuli for the bird. Photos of the nesting activity is a great way to collect data. I then enter in to Cornell Labs NestWatch program. In the winter time I place a piece of cardboard on the floor of the nestbox to cover the corner vent holes transforming it into a roosting box for birds, squirrels and other critters seeking warm lodging for the night."

Even if you do not qualify for this special land management provision, remember your own backyard can be a great location to practice bluebird conservation strategies.



Make Room Reservations Now!

Due to other events being held Aug 8th, Best Western is unable to "hold rooms" for us.

However, YOU are guaranteed the special TBS rate of \$109 (Wed - Sat) if you reserve your room by July 25th.
(based on availability)

Call Best Western **979-731-5300**
Group Name: **Texas Bluebird Society**
Group Code: **TBS**

Limited # of rooms available Reserve now!

Help TBS In 3 Easy Steps With AmazonSmile



1. Logon to AmazonSmile ([amazonsmile.com](https://www.amazon.com/amazonsmile))
2. Logon to your Amazon account.
3. Select Texas Bluebird Society from charity list.

Now each time you make a purchase Amazon donates a small percentage to TBS! Definitely a win-win situation. All we can say is ...

"Shop 'til You Drop!"

thanks and appreciation to our

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- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
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| Ainsley Lewis | Highland Shores Garden Club |
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VISIT TBS ON FACEBOOK!

Members share great photos and stories.



POKEWEED

Bluebirds Love The Delicious Berries!

By **Linda Crum**, Master Naturalist

Native to the eastern United States and Canada, American pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is a herbaceous, branching plant reaching an average height of four to six feet. It can reach heights of 10 feet. Pokeweed grows well in sun or partial shade, preferring edge habitats. The plant has large leaves with reddish stems with long clusters of small white flowers that mature into dark purple berries relished by birds, especially robins, towhees, mockingbirds, mourning doves, catbirds, and bluebirds. Mature leaves give off an unpleasant odor when crushed.

Pokeweed has a large perennial taproot and will survive cold and fire. It can host flowers, immature green berries and mature, shiny purple berries all on the same plant. The plant dies back to the ground in the winter but quickly regrows in spring. It also reseeds and is spread by birds which eat the berries without adverse reaction. The seeds can remain viable in the soil for many years. The whitish-green flowers are produced in summer in long, narrow nodding clusters four to eight inches long. The flowers are good for attracting pollinating insects to gardens. Each flower develops into a small, shiny berry, initially green, becoming black-purple at maturity. As the berries ripen, the heavy clusters droop on bright red-purple stems.

The entire plant is poisonous (the root being the most toxic part) and potentially lethal to many animals and



These flowers become beautiful purple berries providing a great food source for berry eating birds and other wildlife.



Photo by David Kinneer

humans; therefore consumption should be avoided. Since the juice of pokeweed can be absorbed through the skin, avoid contact of plant parts with bare skin. Although emerging shoots and leaves are sometimes gathered before the red color appears while the plant is under six inches tall, boiled three times to reduce the toxin, to make what is called "poke salad" or "poke salet," extreme caution and good judgment should prevail. The taste is like asparagus. I say play it safe and just eat asparagus.

It has a long history of medicinal use by Native Americans. Sometimes called inkberry, juice from the berries was used by the early colonists to make a red dye and improve the color of cheap wine. The juice of the berries was made safe by boiling. Research has shown that pokeweed contains a compound that enhances the immune system and has some anti-cancer properties. One of the newest uses of the berry juice is to coat fiber-based solar cells, increasing their efficiency in converting sunlight into electricity.

Although pokeweed is a beneficial plant for songbirds and is highly ornamental, it should be kept away from pets and children. Pokeweed did inspire a song called *Poke Salad Annie* and can be heard at this [tube link](#). It is a fun song that will put a smile on your face and set your toes to tapping.

Why not give the birds what they need while making your yard beautiful at the same time? Native plants will do both!



Should I Help Nestlings? *The nestlings' mother has disappeared. Should I take the nestlings and put them in another nest, or try to raise them myself?*

The practice of placing nestlings from one nest into the nest of another female of the same species is referred to as wild-fostering, and is a tactic that should only be used by wildlife rehabilitators to raise abandoned nestlings. Unless you are a licensed and permitted wildlife rehabilitator, you should not attempt to initiate wild-fostering yourself for the following reasons.

If one or both parents are dead, there may be infection, disease, or parasites in the family, and it's possible the nestlings and nest are contaminated. Moving nestlings from one nest to another can spread the disease and leave all the birds worse off than before.

The addition of hungry mouths to feed can also put undue stress on the foster parents. Eastern Bluebird nestlings, for example, require insects every 20 minutes, and even with both parents helping out, the effort can be exhausting. Too many nestlings leaves adults susceptible to illness and predation. In addition, for wild-fostering to be successful, the orphaned nestlings must be placed with a foster family of the same age. More than a single day's difference in either direction, and the foster parents may reject the new nestlings. Trained rehabilitators are better able to match the nestlings in need with a foster family that will accept them and that can handle the added stress, or to raise the nestlings in a captive facility until they can be released.

The most important thing to remember is that the nestlings may not need their mother. In most altricial bird species, both the male and female care for their young (except hummingbirds). If one parent dies the other parent will often continue to care for the nestlings. If your nestlings are at least a week old, they have enough feathers to keep themselves warm at night, and no longer require their mother's brood patch to survive. Bluebird males help in the raising of nestlings, and members of previous broods may give some assistance too (particularly in Western Bluebirds), so it's quite probable the nestlings are being fed even without the female.

Before you take any action:

Monitor the nest from a distance to see if it is truly abandoned (note: parents may not tend to the babies if you are too close). Watch the nest for at least a full hour, or, if that's not possible for you, wedge a very small stick or weed stem in the entrance hole and return later to see if it remains. If one parent shows up during that time, you may choose to put out food (e.g., waxworms, mealworms) to help the remaining parent, but no further action is required.

If no adults have shown up during that time, the nest itself will need to be checked. Are the nestlings still alive? Are they feathered? Are they begging loudly, or are they listless? Take mental notes on their condition. Remember that it is illegal under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act for anyone to touch or handle the eggs, nests, or nestlings of any native bird without a proper permit.



Photo by John Park

Contact your local wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. The rehabilitator will come pick the nestlings up themselves or give you careful instructions on how to properly bring them in (remember, baby birds can die from the stress of being handled, so do not handle them unless instructed to do so). Once in the care of the wildlife rehabilitator, the nestlings will be examined, warmed, and fed. If the rehabilitator does choose to wild-foster your nestlings, rest assured they are in the hands of trained professionals, and every step will be taken to ensure both nestlings and foster family are safe. If you cannot find a wildlife rehabilitator in your area, call your state wildlife agency for guidance. Do not try to raise the nestlings yourself. Remember, while it's natural to want to lend a hand, it is also extremely important for baby birds that they do not socialize with humans at a young age, as this can interfere with their normal learning and make it impossible for them to survive in the wild.

*Please Note: NestWatch seeks data on natural nesting success. If you are working with a wildlife rehabilitator to assist wild-fostered nestlings, do not continue to report those nests for NestWatch, to avoid potentially biasing the data. The NestWatch system is not designed to track nestlings that are moved from one site to another, or to handle artificially-increased brood sizes. However, you can continue reporting nests for which only supplemental food was provided. We appreciate your cooperation. **Reprint from Cornell Labs, NestWatch/Learn/FAQ***

Musings from the Master...

Eastern Bluebirds Nesting In Pine Trees and Cactus

I gave a bluebird program on Thursday night (Oct 2014) at the annual meeting of the Native Plant Society of Texas. They have approximately 180 people attending this year in Texarkana.

One of the couples from south Texas have bluebirds that nest in the old blooms stalks of Century Cactus on their ranch. It seems that woodpeckers hammer out a cavity in these massive blooms stalks, after the blooms die, then the bluebirds move into these and nest. Bloom stalks have to be supported and staked the second year as they are dead and begin to rot and fall over. The couple also have bluebirds nesting in hollowed out wood fence posts on their property, they have up some nesting boxes in their yard that are occupied by bluebirds.



Keith is a popular speaker at events

Greg Grant, extraordinary plants man, gave an incredible after dinner program last night. Fourth generation Texan, is restoring some pine plantations on their family farm, maintaining the pines with annual fires and is beginning to find Eastern Bluebirds once again nesting in cavities in his "open pine" forest in woodpecker cavities. Greg has been monitoring around 120 Eastern Bluebird nesting boxes around his family land and along roadsides now for many years. Greg promotes returning and or managing the land in wildlife friendly ways. Promotes encouraging cavity nesting species with habitat, food, water and mixtures of plant species.

Historically "Eastern Bluebirds" were nesting in Saguaro Cactus in Arizona and across the various deserts in the Southwestern states where these Giant Cactus once were common. Woodpeckers would hammer out a cavity in a living cactus and then the secondary cavity nesters would live in these for many years. Supposedly the thorns were a pretty good predator guard for many of the four legged predators that live in the desert southwest. Even the smaller species of owls would end up nesting inside of these living cactus. If you watch some of the Cowboy Western movies from the 1930's you can see hundreds of thousands of Saguaro Cactus in the background shots in these movies. By the 1970's millions of these cactus had been dug up and transplanted into people landscape projects as back hoes became more common.

In the 1830's there were more than 93 million acres of Long Leaf Pine forests across the southern states. Massive logs on these pine trees that lived to be 350 years old or older. Very open woodlands under these trees as forest fires burned through pine forests every couple of years maintaining the open floors of the forest, by reducing competition from "smaller" seedlings. Today we have less than 3 million acres of "second growth" Long leaf pines in the entire USA. Native Indians wove rugs, baskets, plates, mats and other "products" out of the needles of these pine trees. The pine needles from a "long leaf" pine are often 24 inches long. Just as "bluebirds" weave a nest out of the pine needles from Loblolly and "short leaf" pine species, we humans at one time relied on those pliable "leaves" from the Long Leaf pines woven into baskets and bowls to hold items. By the 1930's nearly every "virgin timber" pine and hardwood forest had been cut down, from the Atlantic Seacoast to the Mississippi river. We had so much timber in the USA that it was not until the 1930's that railroads began to commonly use any "creosote treated" railroad ties. It was easier and cheaper back then to just cut down new trees and replace the millions of untreated ties as they rotted.

Beautiful pictures of "Native Indian Pine Needle Baskets" on Bing or Google. These are so much nicer to look at than those "Wal-Mart" plastic bags that folks use to carry and hold items. Once upon a time we humans would use and re-use items and the packaging that the items were shipped in. Pretty much every item of clothes that we wore or tool that we used could be picked up "locally" off of a tree, plant or from the animals and birds that we killed for food, then reused their skin, feathers and bones.

Keith Kridler, everyone's resident expert, our favorite speaker, and cofounder of TBS, participates in several List-Serve groups focusing on bluebirds and their behavior. Keith has given us permission to publish his contributions.

Bluebirds Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time

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All cavity-nesting birds are protected by federal law.
 Do not disturb birds or nest. Monitor and report to NestWatch.



Ready?

Nesting season is here again! Check your nestboxes regularly, be on the lookout for predators and take the appropriate actions to protect the cavity nesters, and don't forget the mealworms.

How many fledglings will you report to NestWatch this year? Record activity at www.nestwatch.org.

Are you adding native plants and trees to your yard? Food and shelter are basic necessities every bird needs. Attracting insects helps create a plentiful food source for the non-seeding eating birds.

*Photo courtesy of **Greg Lavity**.*

Planning Your Summer Activities?

- ✓ Summer Symposium is August 8th at Brazos County Expo in Bryan, TX. Details at txblues.org/2015event
- ✓ Check txblues.org for local TBS presentations and fair booth events
- ✓ State parks are great for outdoor activities including birdwatching.



Need Nestboxes?

Go to www.txblues.org
 click *Nestbox Distributor*
 tab for nearest location.



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 Debbie Bradshaw Park, Editor

Send street or email address changes to John Park at:
records@txblues.org
 or send to our P.O. Box.