

Calvert Bluebird Council Nest Monitoring 2020 Report

Project Leader: Andy Brown Andrew.Brown@CalvertCountyMD.gov 410-535-5327

Trail Lead: Mary Hollinger canoe2@comcast.net

The Calvert Bluebird Council, a volunteer research opportunity led by Calvert Nature Society and Calvert County Natural Resources Division, oversees the monitoring of 22 official trails with 414 boxes throughout the County. Trails have between 10-30 bluebird nest boxes, which are monitored weekly between late March/early April through August or September. The collected data are submitted at the end of the season. The data are then compiled and submitted to the MD Bluebird Society to aid in ongoing population studies across MD and the US.

Annual summaries are posted on the Calvert Nature Society web page:

https://www.calvertparks.org/bluebird_project.html

SKILLS NEEDED

- Ability to drive to assigned bluebird trail
- Ability to walk through fields, sometimes with high grasses
- Ability to carry and use a screwdriver and other small tools
- Ability to accurately record data on a standard form, primarily for nest starts, number of eggs laid, number of eggs hatched and the number of young fledged.
- Ability to use a cell phone camera
- Ability to clean out nesting materials after each successful fledging, or unsuccessful nesting. A paint scraper and old toothbrush are useful for this task
- Ability and willingness to submit the recorded data at the end of the season

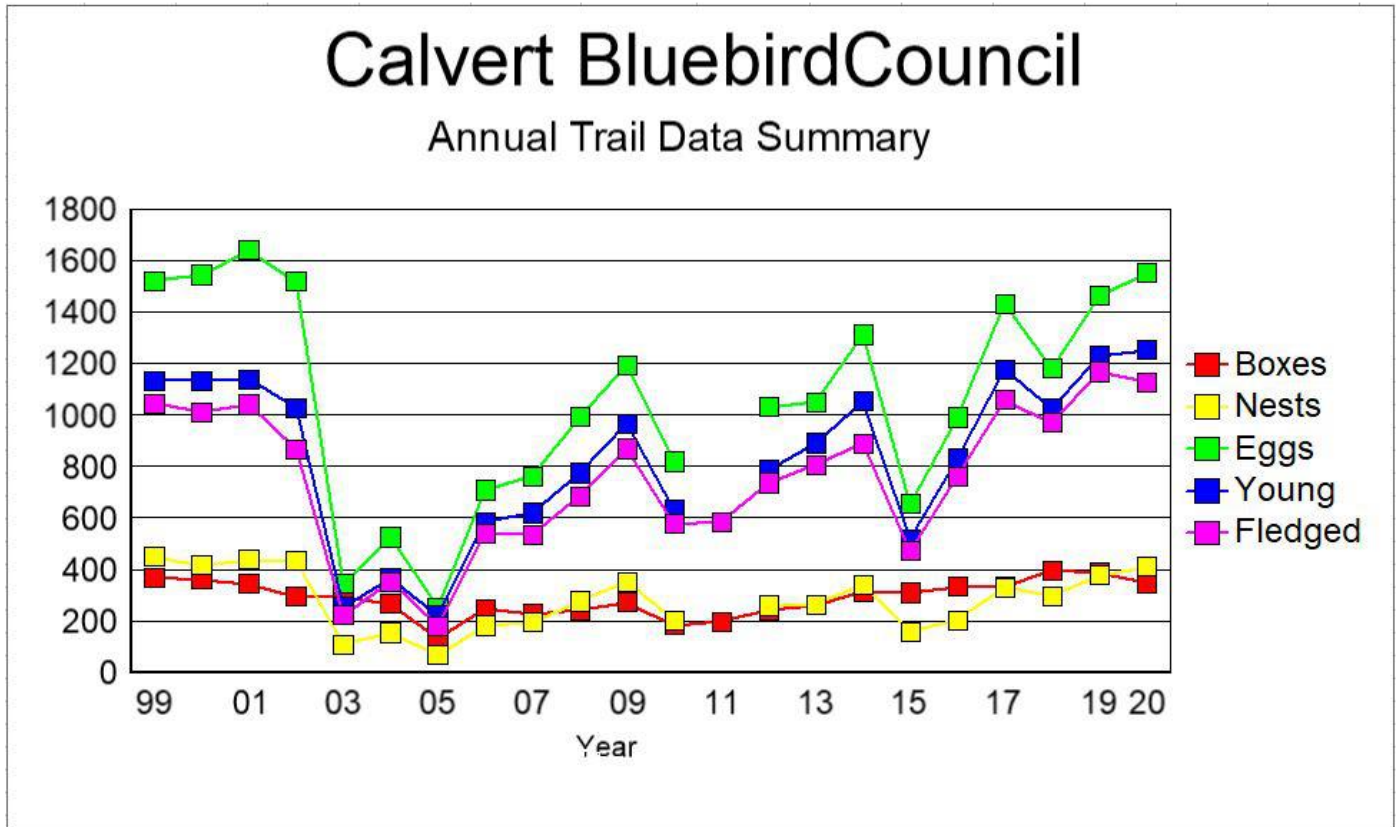
VOLUNTEER DUTIES AND EXPECTATIONS

- Most trails require walking, carrying a notebook and small toolkit
- Some trails may have high grass as the season wears on, exposing monitors to ticks, chiggers and other biting insects, poison ivy and thorny plants
- In the Spring, an initial check of the boxes should be made to assess any damages over winter, and clean out any late or winter nesting materials. Rubbing Ivory soap or a thin layer of Vaseline on the ceiling and top 1" of the interior walls will help deter wasps
- Boxes should be cleaned of any nesting materials at the end of the season. A paint scraper and old toothbrush are useful for this task
- Although most boxes have predator guards, snakes are occasionally found in or near a box. A small snake hook is useful to have in the toolkit
- Boxes and posts will wear out over time. Monitors may report any needs to the Trail Lead or Project Manager to obtain replacements as needed. Monitors may replace the items themselves or ask for assistance.
- While most species of birds are acceptable in bluebird houses, and indeed not allowed to be disturbed, House Sparrows are an exception. Monitors should learn to identify these nests and eggs and take appropriate steps to help reduce these populations.
- Besides monitoring, there is occasional need to install new trails. This includes digging post holes, setting 8' 4x4 posts, and attaching predator guards and the nest boxes to the posts.
- It can often be helpful to take a quick cell phone photo of eggs and hatchlings to confirm counts later (e.g., if an egg or brood disappears, or something doesn't look right later in the record. A couple of photos also helps in counting young.)
- Volunteers are expected to enter their monitoring hours into the Calvert Stewards Portal

TRAINING AND QUALIFICATIONS

- Volunteers are trained on site, provided with a map of the trail, blank CBC monitoring forms, and the NABS Factsheet “Monitoring Bluebird Nestboxes”
- Volunteers are provided with instructions for logging hours into the Calvert Galaxy Digital Portal

SUMMARY OF 2020 ACTIVITIES



- Two monitors retired at the end of 2019: Lisa Parren (Hellen Creek trail) and Lorianne Kerley (Biscoe-Gray)
- Kathy Tushaus joined the monitoring crew and took over the Biscoe-Gray trail.
- Near the end of the season, Jennifer Horsmon expressed interest in monitoring. Kathy Tushaus was, at the same time, finding the 32 boxes at Biscoe-Gray daunting. Jennifer is taking the 8 boxes located on the Horse Trail side and at the Dog Park.
- There are currently 24 official bluebird monitors. Many have spouses, friends or other family members who accompany them on their rounds
- COVID caused some upsets in the 2020 monitoring season. Randall Cliffs and Cove Point were not accessible for monitoring, and the monitors for Hance’s Farm decided against it. The four available boxes at the Hellen Creek trail were also not monitored
- Monitors for Barstow Elementary (Bev Izzy) and JPPM (name??) were working from home and not available, and James Tetlow was unable to do Keim. Charlie Anderson offered to take on the JPPM trail for the summer. Shelley Packard volunteered to do the Keim trail, and Mary Hollinger took over the Barstow Elementary boxes. When the grasses at Keim got too tall for comfort, Shelley and Mary switched trails.

- Barstow Elementary had a problem with the ground crew moving and knocking down boxes. All were reset, and a sign explaining the Bluebird Trail project was put on the last box reset. Problems stopped after that.
- Of the 22 trails, 19 were monitored, for a total of 366 boxes of the 414 available

Box counts down at:

- Calvert Industrial Park - Box 8A abandoned. Donated by a nearby businessman, it has been non-productive, old and had a persistent ant problem
- Calverton - down 1 box
- Hance's Farm - the trail is down to the 10 boxes in front since the rest of the area has been made inaccessible (-7 boxes)
- Hellen Creek - this 32 box trail closed at the end of the 2019 season, except the 4 boxes along the main road
- Ward Park - 7 boxes had to be removed mid-season due to the ball field work going on at the park. Boxes 3,13,15,16,17 & 20 mid-May, and box 18 on June 30.
- Gatewood - Box 4 disappeared. Will replace before the next season starts unless this was a management decision to remove
- Jefferson Patterson Park - replaced several missing or dilapidated boxes, but we located only 32 of the previous 34 monitored boxes
- *Total Loss: 47*

Box counts up at:

- Poplars Farm - added 3 boxes
- Buena Vista - added 3 boxes
- Biscoe-Gray - Box 19 has been inaccessible for years. A path was mowed to that location late summer and the box was replaced
- Fairgrounds - Replaced a fallen box
- Kings Landing Park - Added 1 box
- Barstow Elementary - Added the abandoned bluebird box at the St John Vianney campus to this total
- *Total Gain: 10*

2020 Analysis:

- Total number of chicks fledged was 1128, second to last year's record however, would have surpassed last year had Randle Cliffs and Dominion data been included.
- Number of nest boxes monitored was down by 41. This was a result of inaccessibility to Randle Cliffs and Dominion trails due to Covid restrictions.
- However, even in fewer boxers, the number of eggs was higher by 87 – 6% increase.
- Unfortunately, the Hatch Rate declined by 3.3% most likely due to the cold rainy May
- The Fledge Rate remained relatively stable at an exceptional 94.8% which is a reflection of effective predator protection.
- The ratio of fledged chicks per box reached 3.27 which is the highest recorded since the project began in 1988.
- Lastly, nests per box was the second highest on record since 2009. This is a reflection of boxes being placed in appropriate habitat.
- 2020 was an excellent year for Bluebirds in Calvert County.

FUTURE PLANS

- Joanne Simmons found a source for dummy House Sparrow eggs, but we would need to paint them. Eggs from the SparrowSwap project were distributed to the Industrial Park, Chesapeake Hill Golf Course and Freedom Hill Horse Rescue trails. There are HOSP problems at the Fairgrounds and Poplar Farms as well. In 2017 we removed over 100 HOSP eggs from nests at the Industrial Park. In 2020 the count was down to 49, so the egg replacement effort can be effective.
- Trentman's Farm is for sale. The Listing Agent and owner have been contacted, and asked to advise new owners of our involvement there and to contact us either way.
- Mallomar Golf Course is willing to allow a trail there, but COVID interfered with that effort in 2020. That option is still on the table.
- Efforts to build new houses and predator guards are ongoing.