BLUEBIRDS FLY!

California Bluebird Recovery Program Newsletter

For the encouragement and conservation of cavity-nesters — especially bluebirds — anywhere in the West

Volume 31 No 1 Winter 2025

Bluebird Program Will Begin 2025 With New Leaders

By Georgette Howington & Mike Azevedo

Starting in January, the California Bluebird Recovery Program will have new leaders: Georgette Howington and Mike Azevedo will be program co-directors.

Before we start this new chapter, though, we want to acknowledge our longtime director, Dick Blaine, and the tremendous work he has done since 2006 to keep our organization strong and successful. Happily, Dick will stay on as a CBRP board member.

The California Bluebird Recovery Program was started by Don Yoder, who was inspired to help cavity-nesting birds when construction of his new home inadvertently brought down a tree that had an active bluebird nest. Don became proficient at nest-box design, installation and monitoring, and then formed this group in 1994 to share his expertise and passion with other bluebird conservationists across California.

One of Don's students was Georgette Howington, who will be taking on the role of CBRP co-director. Georgette has been a county coordinator for CBRP, serving Contra Costa and Alameda counties for 26 years. Together with her longtime assistant, Tom Garry, she's been training and supporting nest-box monitors around her area, as well as checking nest boxes when monitors were unavailable.

She also sponsors Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and students as they work to earn badges and reach educational goals. She represents CBRP with exhibits at community events such as the annual Beaver Festival, Safari West Earth Day, Safari West Migratory Day and Pleasant Hill Earth Day. She also gives workshops at schools and senior centers, and training sessions for Audubon and Bird Alliance chapters.

Georgette's co-director will be Mike Azevedo, the CBRP county coordinator for Santa Clara

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Borescopes Offer a Less Stressful Look Into Nest Boxes

Story and photos by Polly & Gordon Krauter, Alameda County

Borescopes, also known as inspection cameras, endoscopes or snake scopes, can be useful and relatively inexpensive tools for checking bird nests without disturbing the occupants.

Here is a short report on our use of borescopes on a nest-box trail in Alameda County.

First, the basics: A borescope is an optical device consisting of a rigid or flexible tube. It has an eyepiece on one end, and an objective lens on the other end, linked together by a relay optical system in between. The optical system is surrounded by optical fibers that shine a bright light on the contents of the nest box. The borescope sends images to a handheld monitor or smart phone through a cable or via Wi-Fi.

Prices range from about $25 for a lightweight version that plugs into a mobile device, up to $250 for a handheld, battery-operated unit (no mobile device required).

Before using a borescope to look in any nest box, we tap the box to encourage the adult birds to leave. Then we insert the scope through the box opening and adjust the light intensity for optimal viewing. Looking at our monitor screen as we move the scope view around the four corners of the box, we count the number of eggs or nestlings. If the parent birds did not leave the box and we can't get an accurate count, we return later and try again.

If desired, we can capture screenshots of the borescope view. We usually record an image for each box every week for the record.

When choosing a borescope, consider the purpose, ease of use, and price. Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's NestWatch recommends choosing a model with a dimmable LED light. Consider the length of the cable: The longer the cable, the more you will need additional stabilizers and possibly the weaker the image. Also, remember to take extra batteries

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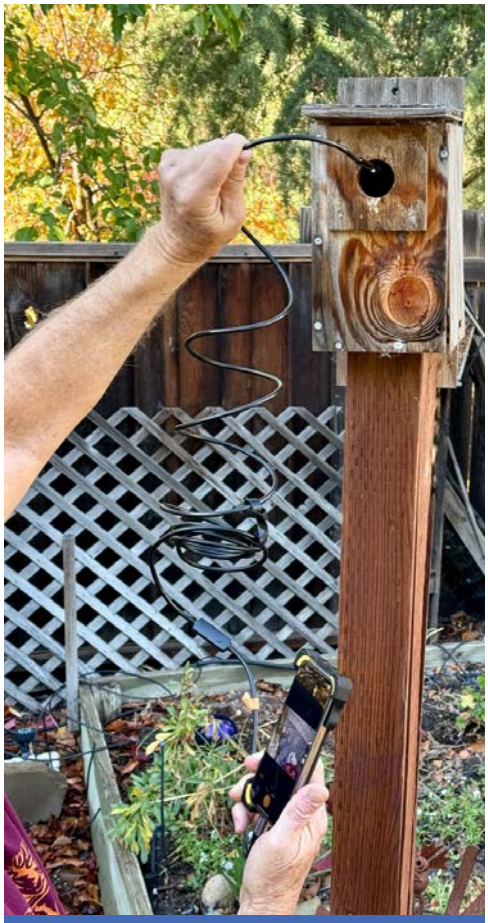


Using the Teslong and a smart phone.

Western Bluebird on nest viewed with a Teslong

Borescopes... continued from page 1
with you (or a portable phone charger) for checking multiple boxes.

Cornell also suggests:
• Follow the usual nest check rules, keeping nest checks under a minute.
• Similarly, don't check nests that are near their fledge date, or if you suspect incubation has just begun (particularly for owls). See the NestWatch Code of Conduct for a refresher on appropriate nest check behavior.
• Practice on an inanimate object first, as it can take some time to figure out what you're seeing. Images sometimes appear sideways or upside down from what you're expecting. You'll get the hang of it after a few tries. More from Cornell: nestwatch.org/blog/inspection-cams-bring-nests-into-view

We have tried two borescopes and will be using a third in 2025. Our first borescope was a DeWalt Inspection Camera, model DCT410. It is very rugged and somewhat heavy and bulky. The cost was about $250.

We also tested the Teslong Dual Lens Endoscope With Light. The connector from the cable to the smart phone was problematic. The light-source control and image quality were good. It had two lenses for viewing ahead and from the side. The cable was 10 feet long. The cost was $31.

This year we will purchase a DEPSTECH Borescope, model DS360DL. It can communicate with the smart phone via Wi-Fi, which will be convenient in areas where Wi-Fi is available. It appears to be more rugged than the Teslong. The cable is 11.5 feet long. The cost is about $60.

DEWALT Inspection Camera Model DCT410

Teslong Dual Lens Endoscope with light and phone

Bluebird Program... continued from page 1
County. Serving Santa Clara County and Santa Clara Valley Bird Alliance (formerly Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society) since 2009, Mike has made it his mission to increase the diversity of bird species that are using his nest boxes.

One of Mike's projects has been supporting Purple Martins, a bird species of special concern. The western Purple Martin *(Progne subis arboricola)* is a subspecies found from California up the coast into British Columbia. Its population is falling, for several reasons: competition with the European Starling; loss of natural nesting cavities; and pesticides that kill its prey species, which include dragonflies, moths, butterflies, flies, beetles and wasps.

In the eastern U.S., Purple Martins have been helped significantly by people erecting martin houses and hanging nesting gourds. In California, wooden utility poles have given martins some artificial habitat, but those poles are being eliminated in many places to reduce wildfire risk. Our martins need more human support, just as bluebirds did in the 1990's.

Our CBRP executive board includes Lesley Handa, the lead ornithologist for the San Diego Bird Alliance (formerly San Diego Audubon Society) and our CBRP county coordinator for San Diego County. She is starting a nest box program in San Diego.

Lesley joined the board in 2024 and has been a wonderful addition, giving voice to our Southern California monitors. We hope to get more board members from both Southern California and Northern California as well as more from the Bay Area and central California to fill out a diverse board that can see more progress across the state for bluebirds and other cavity nesters.

The Western Bluebird is an indicator species, showing the problems faced by many cavity-nesting birds. We all look forward to making a difference for a variety of bird species, both in terms of places to nest and of complete, healthy habitat.

9,443 New Bluebirds in 2024 Nesting Season

By Lee Pauser, Santa Clara County

It was a good year for Western Bluebirds in our California nesting boxes: The 2024 season produced 6% more Western Bluebirds than last year. Here is a partial breakdown.

This year, 204 monitors on 283 trails in 23 counties reported their nesting results. Their 4,485 nest boxes yielded 17,874 fledglings, of which 9,443 were Western Bluebirds.

The remaining 8,431 fledglings were of 20 other cavity-nesting species. Of special interest, because they do not normally nest in nest boxes, were three broods of House Finch, one brood of Nuttall's Woodpecker, and one brood of Dark-eyed Junco. (The species of three more "Other" broods were not reported.)

Orange County, with its 112 trails and 68 monitors, was again the top-producing county, with a total of 6,466 fledglings, of which 4,509 were Western Bluebird.

The second-highest numbers came from Santa Clara County (26 trails, 20 monitors), with a total of 3,385 fledglings, of which 1,030 were Western Bluebirds. The third highest was Alameda County (3 trails, 1 monitor), with 1,165 fledglings, of which 683 were Western Bluebirds.

The trail monitors with most fledglings were:
1. David McMichael and team (Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties) 2,270 total / 77 WEBL
2. Lee Pauser (Santa Clara County) 1,615 / 315
3. Irv Tiessen (Alameda) 1,126 / 648
4. Amanda Kindel (Solano and Yolo Counties) 744 / 197
5. Jerry Millett (Los Angeles and Orange Counties) 498 / 485

David's team included Alec Mang, Luke Willett, Martha Gonzalez, Henry Feilen and Jenna Carpenter. They fledged an astounding 2,012 Tree Swallows.

We look forward to the 2025 nesting season and wish all of you a Happy New Year.

California Bluebird Recovery Program – 29-Year Results – All Species

	1996	2006	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Average*
Counties	21	19	21	20	20	24	24	26	22	27	23	22.5
Reporters	169	152	178	169	172	170	127	155	160	171	204	166.1
Species	16	20	21	20	19	19	19	20	20	18	23	19.5
Boxes (N)	2400	3942	5793	5333	5358	5397	4218	4951	4309	4972	4485	4650.7
Tries (T)	1526	4142	5742	6007	6291	6826	4770	5371	4518	5707	4946	5076.9
T/N	0.6	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1
Eggs (E)		24093	27509	27395	27097	29012	21491	23767	20719	23265	22876	24722.4
E/N		6.1	4.7	5.1	5.1	5.4	5.1	4.8	4.8	4.7	5.1	5.1
E/T		5.8	4.8	4.6	4.3	4.3	4.5	4.4	4.6	4.1	4.6	4.6
Chicks (H)		18707	22872	22998	22840	24624	18122	19895	17821	20026	19918	20782.3
H/N		4.7	3.9	4.3	4.3	4.6	4.3	4.0	4.1	4.0	4.4	4.3
H/T		4.5	4.0	3.8	3.6	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.5	4.0	3.9
H/E		0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8
Fledged (F)	5077	17330	19873	20246	19731	21164	16223	16323	15087	16973	17874	16900.1
F/N	2.1	4.4	3.4	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.8	3.3	3.5	3.4	4.0	3.6
F/T	3.3	4.2	3.5	3.4	3.1	3.1	3.4	3.0	3.3	3.0	3.6	3.4
F/E		0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.7
F/H		0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.9
***Average: average of non-zero values for 29 years**												

CBRP Donors July-December 2024 ($1,445)

Patricia Clark, Nevada County

Redbud Audubon Society, Lake County

Joan Doner, Los Angeles County

Safari West, Sonoma County

Mark Sever & Corey Wood, Contra Costa County

Lee & Janna Pauser, Santa Clara County

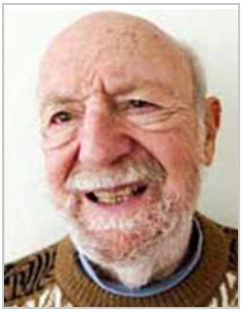
Cynthia Lockhart, San Mateo County

thank you

Photo: Becky Matsubara

From the Director's Chair

By Dick Blaine



After almost 20 years as Director of the California Bluebird Recovery Program, I have resigned effective December, 2024. Georgette Howington and Mike Azevedo, who are current board members, will take over my duties. I can't think of two more capable people to assume this role.

I plan to remain on the board for the immediate future. I want to thank Lee Pauser, Santa Clara County, who will be taking over some of my data-processing tasks; Sylvia Wright and Cat Raymond, our newsletter editors; and board members Tricia Jordan and Lesley Honda.

"Being director of this organization and working with these people has been one of the great pleasures of my life."

Being director of this organization and working with these people has been one of the great pleasures of my life, and I will greatly miss working with all the wonderful birding friends I have made over the years.

This great adventure began in 1996. I was walking past the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society headquarters in Cupertino (now Santa Clara Valley Bird Alliance, SCVBA), and thought I'd duck in to see what was going on. I had retired a couple of years earlier and was looking for things to do. I have had a lifelong interest in birds, with a Boy Scout merit badge to prove it. But I hadn't had much time for birding in my working years.

On the Alliance counter, I saw a blue flier created by Don Yoder promoting the California Bluebird Recovery Program. Don had started the program 2 years earlier. I wondered what the heck that was all about and asked. Looked like something I might be interested in, and as it turned out, it was.

Soon I met David "Tex" Houston, who was the bluebird program's county co-ordinator for Santa Clara County and was active with the related SCVBA Cavity Nesters Recovery Program. Tex helped me find ways to contribute.

At that time, all data collection and reporting were done with paper and pencil. My first CBRP projects were developing spreadsheets and computerized reporting for Santa Clara County, and then for the whole state the following year.

In 2006, I developed a homegrown, online, interactive database for the program with a friend. In 2012, we switched over to Google Drive and Google Sheets, which we still use today.

In 2003, along with a buddy, I took over from Gus Constant as trail monitor for McClellan Ranch Park in Cupertino. We monitored McClellan for more than 10 years before turning the task over to the Santa Clara Valley Bird Alliance staff. We also installed boxes and monitored trails at nearby Deep Cliff Golf Course and Blackberry Farm Golf Course.

In the summer of 2006, I took over as Director of the California Bluebird Recovery Program, as Don Yoder was not able to continue in that role. It has been a great experience for me, and I want to wish all of you season's greetings and a wonderful new year. I am sure that CBRP will prosper under the new leadership, and I wish us well.

About the California Bluebird Recovery Program

Our Mission

Enlist current bluebirders and recruit others who will help reestablish bluebirds to their normal habitat.

- Locate preferred habitat for the placement of nestboxes suitable for bluebirds.
- Secure monitors to care for the boxes and keep systematic records of the development of young birds during the nesting season.
- Record and analyze all annual summaries of nestbox records.
- Provide a forum (newsletter) through which fellow trail monitors can exchange information and secure help with problems.

Learn More

To learn more about the California Bluebird Recovery Program and other cavity-nester conservation programs, visit these websites:

www.CBRP.org
www.nabluebirdsociety.org
www.socalbluebirds.org
www.sialis.org

If you are looking for a mentor, contact any board member at info@cbrp.org.

Please consider supporting our efforts. Donate via newsletter form or visit www.cbrp.org. Your contribution is tax-deductible and goes a long way in helping us conserve the bluebird population in California.

Help a Bloom, Help a Bird: Grow Native Plants

Story and photos by Georgette Howington, Alameda & Contra Costa Counties

On November 26, 2024, Mike Azevedo and I attended an exciting, educational and inspirational conference at the Oakland Museum – "Nature's Best Hope, a Celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour." The program featured Doug Tallamy, leader of a nationwide movement to unleash the wild by cultivating native plants in our backyards, common spaces, parks – really, just about anywhere you can get permission to.

The anniversary event was hosted by Kathy Kramer, the founder of the original Bringing Back the Natives tour. Kathy's goal in 2004 was to help gardeners grow California native plants in our own yards. Today, the event showcases 60 Alameda County and Contra Costa County gardens and homes, through both in-person and online tours.

(In 2025, the virtual tours will be held April 5 and 6, with the in-person tours on May 3 and 4. Information: bringingbackthenatives.net)

At the anniversary celebration, Mike was the videographer, and while I did help him video one of the featured events, I mostly listened and watched in awe of Doug Tallamy, the keynote speaker, as he gave his inspiring presentation.

Many of you know of Doug, but for those of you who don't, he is a professor of entomology and wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware. When not teaching, he writes and lectures widely, extolling gardeners to become habitat builders.

His message is prominent on his website, HomegrownNationalPark.org: "In the past, we have asked one thing of our gardens: that they be pretty. Now they have to support life, sequester carbon, feed pollinators and manage water."

His books "Nature's Best Hope," "Bringing Nature Home," "The Nature of Oaks" and "How Can I Help?"are well worth adding to your library. I have all but "How Can I Help?" but it is on my wish list! (www.homegrownnationalpark.org)

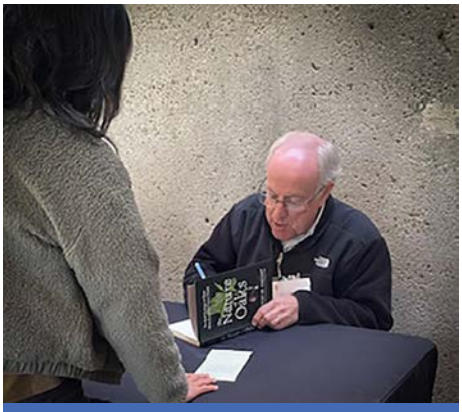
In his remarks at the November conference, one of the first concepts Doug brought to our attention is one that noted Harvard entomologist E.O. Wilson emphasized: Insects are "the little things that run the world." He was referring to how invertebrates are essential players in the food webs, in ecosystem services and biodiversity.

"In 1929, our nation went so far as to celebrate National Insect Killing Week," Doug said. "Now almost 100 years later, we are celebrating National Pollinator Week. It's about time."

We have all read and heard the deafening bad news. The Monarch Butterfly may be designated as a threatened species soon. Bees and other pollinators are in severe declines globally. 75% of all insects on earth are declining, as are 432 bird species in North America. Ninety-six percent of those species depend on insects to feed their young, and about 1 million species face extinction.

And the other reality is, we cannot live without them! Pollinators support 1/3 of our food crops, 80% of all plants and 90% of earth's flowering plants.

Georgette Howington and Kathy Kramer



Doug Tallamy

Mike Azevedo on stage

The species that run the world are dying. The bleak reality can make us feel helpless and want to hide.

What can one person do to change any of this? How can we, as bird-nest-box monitors, believe that our efforts in the field to conserve and save the cavity nesters can make any difference in the future, if all that's going to happen is they won't have enough food to survive?

Here's the good news. We can improve and even possibly change the tide by planting California natives in our gardens, common areas, and parks, just to name a few.

Many of you already are. Mike and I have both observed that more and more conservationists and naturalists like us have become native-plant enthusiasts. We've joined our local native plant societies and studied butterflies, moths and bees to have a deeper understanding of our world and how to provide habitats for them.

And we encourage you to do the same. We know firsthand how a small group of people can make a difference – because that's exactly what we have been and are doing with the nest-box program!

Hot, Hot, Hot Summer: How Bad Was It, Really?

By Kate Brennan, Nevada and Placer counties

In the fall of 2024, after all the nest boxes had been cleaned and all the bluebird monitors had sufficiently recovered from the summer heat, we held an end-of-season wrap-up gathering. The monitors' assignment was to think of something to share about their trail – good, bad, or ugly.

My assignment, as project coordinator for Nevada and Placer counties in Northern California, was to pull together my thoughts about what I perceived to be the worst season for breeding Western Bluebirds since 2014, when I took over as coordinator.

So, I decided to do a thorough review of all the results we had submitted to the California Bluebird Recovery Program since 2014. I even ran across an article that I had written in 2017, in which I concluded that that was the worst season ever, due to *that* hot summer. Well, seven years later, I could have just copied that 2017 article word for word – including the surprising fact that the total number of fledglings for the season in 2024 was almost exactly the same as in 2017.

How could that be? I personally found four complete nests of almost-fledged baby birds dead, dehydrated during the second nesting period, on the same day. Devastating to me! How could that *not* indicate a horrible disaster for the birds?

The next data dive I did was focused on the 2024 season and was about the number of eggs laid per trail vs. successful fledges. I used our oldest established eight trails. I discovered seven trails where the losses (total eggs laid minus total birds fledged) were greater than 33%. Of course, these results included the normal predation problems, but to me, that result seemed to indicate huge losses. And yet, the final numbers for fledged birds were very similar to 2021 through 2023.

In fact, on my own two trails that had made me so despondent this year, the numbers were quite similar:

2024 – 102 total fledges
2023 – 84
2022 – 96
2021 – 88

In reality, I had more fledges this year on my two trails than I did in the past three years. So, were the birds laying more eggs, making up for that 33% figure for unsuccessful eggs? That question I cannot answer – I couldn't dig deep enough into the data. A study for the future perhaps?

My takeaway from studying this brief historical data is to question both my emotional response to finding nests full of dead babies, and the birds' natural response to such failures. They just keep doing it – laying eggs, raising young, doing the best they can, moving on.

They're on their mission, and I'm on mine. Perhaps I need to try to be more like the birds – not so much emotion, just let nature take its course and keep movin' on.

One of our bluebird monitors put up a special sun shelter.
Photo by Kathleen Kershaw

Bluebirds and Eggshells

I found this information interesting, and thought other bluebirders might, too.

This is the abstract of a paper published in The Journal of Emerging Investigators a few years ago. The researchers offered eggshells to nesting Western Bluebirds and measured the birds' consumption at various points in the season.

We've added paragraph breaks for easier reading. Author names and affiliations are at the end.

– Georgette Howington

Eggshell consumption in different reproductive stages and broods of the Western Bluebird, *Sialia mexicana*

Calcium is an essential micronutrient to egg production and reproductive success in birds. Its availability at the start of the reproductive cycle is especially important to passerines (perching birds, namely songbirds) since they do not store calcium when not reproducing.

To date, no data has been published to illustrate whether Western Bluebirds would consume provisioned eggshells, during which phases and to what degree in the reproductive cycle consumption might occur, and whether the amount consumed would vary between broods in a single season.

We hypothesized that Western Bluebirds would consume the highest amount of eggshells during nest-building and egg-laying and that consumption would be greater during the first brood.

Western Bluebirds breeding in nest boxes hanging in trees were provided eggshells in small containers attached to the roof of the box. Differences in average consumption between reproductive stages were significant.

The greatest consumption was seen during the Pre-hatch phase (nest-building, egg-laying, and incubation), and less during the Post-hatch phase (nestling and fledgling). This was likely in preparation for and to replenish calcium needed during egg-laying in both broods.

Average consumption between two broods produced by a single breeding pair was not significantly different. However, there was significant variation in the amount of consumption between breeding pairs. This high variation suggests that birds may have different strategies for obtaining and consuming calcium.

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FIELD REPORTS

A Year of Seconds, And a First for Us

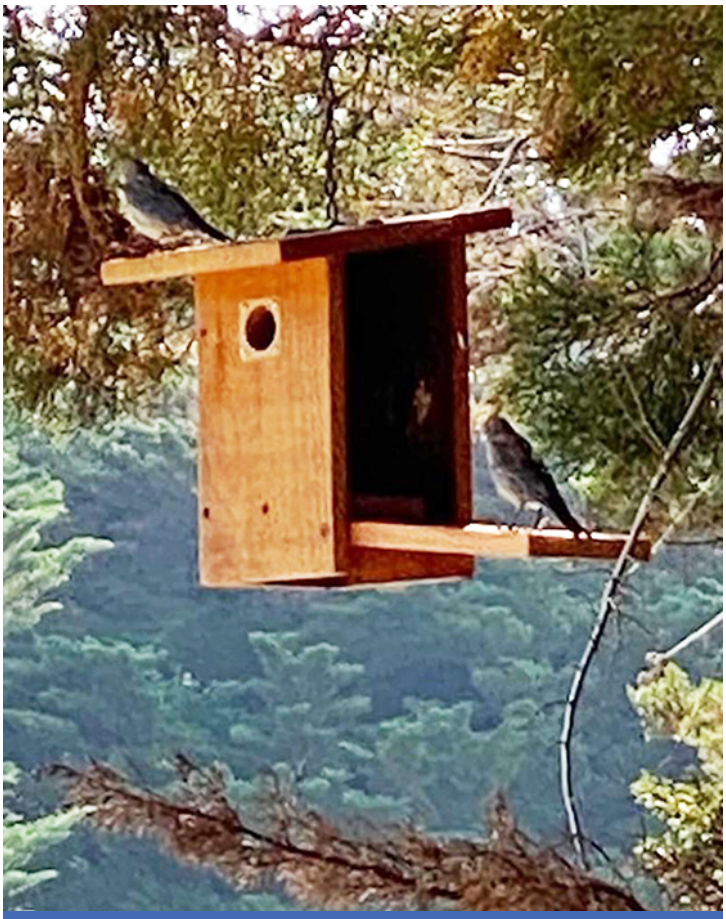
Story and photo by Ronnie Eaton, San Mateo County

Veteran trail monitors know that each nesting season may be different than the one before and may in fact stand out from any other previous season. Such was our experience with the 2024 nesting season at Crystal Springs Golf Course in San Mateo County, located on the Burlingame/Hillsborough border and overlooking Crystal Springs Reservoir.

I and my monitoring partner at this site, Marsha Mekisich, are volunteers with the Cavity Nesters Recovery Program of the San Mateo County Bird Alliance (formerly Sequoia Audubon Society) and the California Bluebird Recovery Program.

We have 31 boxes at Crystal Springs; 29 are standard-size bluebird boxes and two are Barn Owl boxes. Since 2019, when we rees-tablished this trail with nine boxes after it had been untended for many years, we've seen a remarkable change in the number of Western Bluebirds at the site. We frequently hear the same from golfers who are delighted to see the birds. Unfortunately, the Barn Owls have yet to make an appearance.

This spring was the second year in a row of exceptional rainfall. At this golf course, the management has been recognized by Audubon International and the Wildlife Habitat Council for their environmental stewardship and for maintaining the course and grounds in as natural a state as possible. Consequently, there are large areas between the greens that are not mowed, with tall grasses and native shrubs that provide food and shelter for birds and animals. Several species of large trees are located throughout the course and both Western Bluebird (WEBL) and Tree Swallow (TRES) pairs have their favorites that they return to each spring.



Crystal Springs box 7

This year started off with nesting activity about three weeks earlier than last spring, which was very cold and wet. The vegetation throughout the course was lush, and early on we saw a number of bluebirds on the course. As we went through the first months of the season, 50% of the boxes were occupied by WEBL and TRES, as well as an additional few nest boxes with complete nests that were never occupied.

As the season moved into late May and early June, we began to see second-nest activity very shortly after the fledging of the first brood. Although birds often build their second nests quickly, we were surprised by a couple of industrious pairs completing their second nest before we could even record the first fledge and clean out the box! We were also surprised and quite delighted to end up with a total of six WEBL second broods, and, for the first time in our experience, second broods for TRES, of which there were three! Woohoo!

As a result of the 2024 nesting season's ample food supply, mild late spring weather and industrious pairs of experienced birds, we saw the number of Western Bluebird fledglings increase 44% and Tree Swallows increase an astonishing 208% from 2023! Let's hope we can keep the numbers climbing!

Life and Death on the North Coast

Story and photos by Marybeth & Michael Arago, Mendocino County

In early April, when checking one of the four boxes at our Fort Bragg home, we were surprised to find a deceased Violet-green Swallow (VGSW) inside. This box has consistently been used by swallows over the past couple of decades. Apparently, the poor thing had made the migration back, but didn't have enough life left to keep going after that. The bird seemed to know where it was going, though. The good news is that this and another box did end up with at least nine VGSWs fledging from the two of them this year. And a third box gave us seven Chestnut-backed Chickadee fledglings.

Things were also looking great for a while for the fourth box. For the third year in a row, Western Bluebirds (WEBL) had taken up residence in it. All

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Life and death... continued from page 8

five bluebird eggs hatched, and for over a week, both parents were constantly tending to the nest. After that, we noticed that the male parent seemed to be trying to feed the young on his own, going inside the box with food, or dropping food inside. Mama WEBL was nowhere to be found. The male soon began singing –from the top of nest boxes, from tops of nearby trees, fenceposts… This began around mid-May and went on almost every day – fairly constantly at first, and very gradually getting softer and less frequent—until the end of June. But his songs and calls for a mate seemed to go unanswered. There were no WEBL females (or any WEBLs at all, from what we could tell) around to answer his call. We removed the deceased WEBL youngsters from the box.

A brood of five Western Bluebirds was lost after the mother bird disappeared.

From July through the first part of October, we didn't see any bluebirds in our area. Then, on October 12, Michael looked outside and saw a male and a female WEBL, with a spotted bird between them, which looked very much like a juvenile WEBL. (Although, according to Sibley, juvenile WEBLs have the spotted look only from May-Aug.) Could it be that our male WEBL was successful this year after all?

I try not to get too emotionally caught up in the nesting-season drama going on outside our windows, but it was hard this year with this beautiful and persistent male bluebird. At one point after he'd lost his mate and offspring, he got into a territorial dispute with a nearby Violet-green Swallow parent. This happened on the VGSW's box that had eggs inside. The fight was intense, with the two birds spinning around with each other down to the ground. And then there was the male bluebird's singing and calling, to no avail, for almost a month and a half after he lost his family.

I've loved having Western Bluebirds around the past few years (nesting and just hanging around). I miss them when they're not here, and I hope they're able to return and try again next year for a successful nesting season here on the North Coast.

Habitat Restoration Helps Native Birds

Story and photos by Maya Nagaraj,
San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties

Grassroots Ecology is a non-profit group working to restore habitat at open spaces across San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. We manage nesting boxes at multiple sites, including nine boxes at Byrne Preserve in Los Altos Hills.

In the 2024 season at Byrne, we saw six Western Bluebird and one Violet-green Swallow nesting attempts. Our first Western Bluebird egg was laid in mid-April, and our last bird fledged in early August. We had 22 WEBL and five VGSW fledglings this season – more than in 2023. We recorded two unhatched WEBL eggs and four dead nestlings.

Cavity-nesting bird enthusiasts are encouraged to join us at Grassroots Ecology volunteer events to learn how native plant restoration can improve bird habitat! Information: grassrootsecology.org

One nest box sheltered two Western Bluebird nests and two broods.

A Community of Cavity-Nesters

Story and photos by Amanda Newlove, Santa Clara County

In 2024, my first season as a nest-box trail monitor, I cared for 26 boxes that Lee Pauser has established in Santa Clara County – 20 Western Bluebird boxes, four Barn Owl boxes, and two American Kestrel boxes. Our numbers were up overall this year, perhaps because of the wet spring.

A young kestrel near fledging gets a meal

Kestrel mom with chicks

Barn Owl mother with fluffy owlets

One bluebird box had a Tree Swallow family

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CBRP is a nonprofit project of the North American Bluebird Society, National Audubon Society - California, and Mount Diablo Bird Alliance