

Bluebird Program Update April 15, 2023

Wasn't April 14th a lovely day to clean and repair bird boxes? I saw Pat on his route and Christine on hers. Further along Highway 20, Fred, Rodger, and I removed old nests from 32 houses between Race Track Road and the old Big B tire store. Each box contained a story, which we recorded for future reference.



Rodger and Fred discuss the location of nest boxes along Fred's route.

Stories of successful broods are the norm for Fred's route in 2022. Each old nest reveals a lot of information which, when used in conjunction with the data collected during breeding season, can tell us whether our efforts to maintain a route have been worthwhile. A Mountain Bluebird nest has probably been successful if it is flattened to some degree and empty. In my experience, Bluebirds are quite tidy, regularly removing fecal packets from the nest as the brood matures. Tree Swallows, on the other hand, appear to clean nothing. The fluffy feathers that once protected the eggs will be caked with dry feces. This is the hallmark of a successful Swallow nest. If my interpretations are accurate, it appears that Fred had 12 successful Bluebird nests and 13 successful Swallow nests. Five boxes were mostly empty, one contained a partial nest, and two boxes had been cleaned by a Good Samaritan!



Rodger removes a successful Bluebird nest from its box.

There was some mortality in 2022: three unhatched Bluebird eggs in one box, one in a second, and one dead Tree Swallow that was ready to fledge in a third. Rather minimal, really. It is also worth noting that three boxes contained two nests, one on top of the other. So, it is possible that those boxes produced more successful broods than I have recorded. Fortunately, these nests were easily identified as used. Some years, the newly arrived birds beat us to the boxes. If you see birds in, on, or near a specific box, please look closely at the nest before removing it. Freshly woven grass indicates a Mountain Bluebird, and the presence of clean, fluffy feathers suggests a Tree Swallow is at work. Rodger and I found one Tree Swallow nest under construction, so we made a note and closed the door. Egg-laying does not normally commence until May, so it is probably safe to clean boxes until late April. If your route is in a warmer valley--for example, Mission Road, Dog Creek Road, and the like--you may want to stop cleaning boxes a little earlier.

I wish you all a safe and happy season. Please tread gently on the land.

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