



BLUEBIRDS FLY!

California Bluebird Recovery Program Newsletter

—Assisted by Mount Diablo Audubon Society —
An affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society

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www.cbrp.org

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

Remembering Steve Simmons

September 14, 1941 – June 1, 2020

Lee Pauser San Jose, CA

Some of you may recognize the name **Steve Simmons**. I became aware of him when in March 2009 I found an e-mail from him in my website’s inbox. I had recently posted a video of a working bottom-opening Barn Owl nest box. This sounds unusual, but at the time I had wanted to install nest boxes on a property where I was told I couldn’t use a ladder. It seemed reasonable then to have the bottom of the box open for clean out. I later called it the “*pull-the-latch-and run-upwind*” design.

Steve’s e-mail never mentioned this bottom-opening design, but this stranger mentioned that at one time he monitored 650 nest boxes in four counties from Merced down to Tulare, and that he was also a master bander who had banded his 10,000th Barn Owl in 2006.

He was then a retired teacher, but while teaching, his students had built and sold over 10,000 Barn Owl boxes over nine years with most of them being installed in the Central Valley. The monies raised from the sale of the boxes provided over \$168,000 in scholarship money for his students over a nine-year period.

I came to know this stranger named **Steve Simmons** over the years as we regularly exchanged e-mails, and less often visits. Needless to say I switched to using his Barn Owl nest box design.

Steve was a gracious man who was always willing to help others. He invited my good friend **Chuck Wade** and me to visit him in Merced. At the time one of his trails was on the 12,000 acre *Flying M* ranch. Steve had an ATV for each of us, and we followed him around while he showed us some of his nest boxes. For the first time I saw nesting Barn Owls, and kestrels. He also had several underground artificial burrows for Burrowing Owls which we were also able to see. For me it was like a Class A ride at Disneyland.

Steve credits me with bringing Western Bluebirds to the ranch as that was the first year they nested there. Somehow a pair of bluebirds who had heard of this powerhouse of a man wanted to meet him, and slipped themselves into my gear.



In April of 2010 Steve agreed to give a presentation on his activities at the IBM Almaden Research Center (ARC) in San Jose. Steve and his wife Margaret drove to San Jose with plans to spend the night in a local hotel. I met them after their arrival, and took them to Santa Teresa County Park to show him Barn Owl and

kestrel nest boxes I had installed. I remember Steve pointing to a Barn Owl nest box mounted in a tree high on a hill, and asking “why did you put the box way up there?” I asked myself that question many times since, but Steve’s mentality was that his nest boxes were often mounted along a fence line on which he drove his ATV from box to box.

On the day of the presentation Steve received help to cart all of his nest boxes, bird carvings, and displays into the auditorium. The slideshow, display materials, his knowledge, and recollections of his experiences were impressive. The presentation was huge success. Steve had been warned that some of the audience members may slip out early to resume their research activities, but no one did—they all were enthralled with his 2 hour presentation and Q&A session.

After the presentation I took Steve around the property to show him where I had mounted some Wood Duck boxes. Steve noticed a plastic Wood Duck box mounted high in a tree (IBM installed nest boxes on the property after the center opened). Pointing to the nest box Steve said “I know the man who designed the box and I had told him that the squirrels will chew the entrance hole larger.”

I looked closely at the box, and, yes, the squirrels had chewed the entrance hole larger. (The box’s design was changed to add a metal collar around the entrance hole to prevent this.) I thought to myself “this man knows everything”.

Steve monitored nest boxes for over 45 years beginning with Wood Duck nest boxes. In 1974 he initiated the Merced River Wood Duck Research Project, and in 1991 he helped found the California Wood Duck Program.



For all of those years Steve penciled in his nesting data into log books—Steve was a paper and pencil guy. I kidded him that he was keeping the pencil companies in business. I once showed him how I enter nest box visit records into a Palm handheld device. He asked if it ever failed, and I said that I had to reset it three times. He said "aha, aha, see" which to him justified the use of paper and pencil. I didn't lose any data--I just had to reset the Palm.

I could ramble on, but it would take many others and volumes to describe the accomplishments of this giant named Steve Simmons who fledged over 100,000 birds. Margaret wrote “I like to think that he climbed the ladder of life and when he got to the top, he just stepped off and flew away with the birds”. I truly hope so.

P.S. You can see Steve in action in the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9vHwGF6VXw>



The Director's Chair

THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

I am sad to let you know of the passing of Steve Simmons, a giant in the world of Cavity Nesting. Lee Pauser has written a tribute to him which is elsewhere in this article. Steve will be missed!

Special thanks to those of you who made donations to CBRP in 1H20 (amounting to \$1180 - see the donor list elsewhere in this issue. Following your name on the mailing label for this issue of *Bluebirds Fly!* are two numbers. The first is the date of your most recent contribution in the form yyyymm and the second is the amount in the form \$\$\$\$. If these fields are blank or zero then you have not made a contribution in the past three years.



As a result of the pandemic many trails were closed or opened too late in the season, so results will be sparse this year. Please enter your data into the CBRP data entry spreadsheet by December 1 to give me time to prepare the annual report. If you are willing, participate in the Cornell University NestWatch program as well. The link to the NestWatch web site is: <http://www.nestwatch.org>.

Web Site: <http://www.cbrp.org>

Data Entry: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1haZZCx2HM_n8zg_yKJrMlnAbsLulCRQorvFi1vi3WiI/edit

Data Entry Instructions: <http://cbrp.org/EndOfSeasonReport.htm>

NestWatch Documentation: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=14Irq7cS02GrClgj-q5ENVZ6Q14M3LpkWFR4Fh24YcM>

NestWatch Bulk Upload Template: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8OLjlvu4wKIZm5NcDhHUFNKX2s/view?usp=sharing>

Dick Blaine - dick@theblaines.net

California Bluebird Recovery Program (CBRP) Board Members

Dick Blaine, Program Director — dick@theblaines.net

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Jim Semelroth, Editor, — jimsemweed@cox.net

Dick Purvis, Recruiting — dickersly@aol.com

(Continued from page 3) If you would like to enter additional detail (box-by-box) with dates and detailed results, I strongly encourage you to participate in Cornell University's e-bird and/or Nestwatch programs. Data on the NestWatch site is of great scientific value and provides information for researchers all over the world. See the following links:

General information about the eBird program at Cornell : <http://ebird.org/content/ebird/> Nestwatch web site: <http://nestwatch.org/>

BLUEBIRDS OVER ENGLAND

On June 18 Vera Lynn, famous British singer died at the age of 103. Lynn was a famous singer during WWII and recorded several hit songs that boosted British morale as they were dying and being bombed. What does this have to do with bluebirds? Two of her hit songs were *We'll Meet Again* and *There'll Be Bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover*. As we know there are no bluebirds over Dover or anywhere else in England. It is another example of song writers using Bluebirds as metaphors in song, film, commercials and stories. Nevertheless, the bluebirds could have meant the RAF flyers who had blue uniforms and they flew over the Dover cliffs returning from missions over Germany. Written by American Nat Burton, the song was also covered by Kate Smith, Bing Crosby and numerous other artists.



White Cliffs of Dover.MP3

About the California Bluebird Recovery Program Founder - Don Yoder; Emeritus - Hatch Graham

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 in solving problems encountered in the field.

Learn More

To learn more about the California Bluebird Recovery Program and other cavity nester conservation programs, visit the below web sites:

<http://www.cbrp.org>

<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org>

<http://www.socalbluebirds.org>

sdbluebirds@cox.net

<http://www.sialis.org>

If you are looking for a mentor, start by contacting the county coordinator in your county listed on page 12. You can also contact **Dick Blaine** (dick@theblaines.net) or **Dick Purvis** (dickersly@aol.com).

Please consider supporting our efforts. There is a donation form on the back page of this newsletter. Your contribution is tax-deductible and goes a long way in helping us conserve the bluebird population in California.

By now you probably thought bluebird eggs were blue. Normally, color (pigment) is added to the eggshell from cells/glands in the wall of the female's oviduct (the passage along which eggs travel). This does not happen with white eggs.

For 7 consecutive years I found white bluebird eggs in the same nest box totaling 11 clutches and 51 eggs. This is a good indication that the female may return to the same nest box although banding the birds offers indisputable proof.

Sadly the last 2 years for this pair of bluebirds were not successful with most of the eggs being abandoned possibly due to the eggs being infertile. A female may incubate her eggs much longer than normal, but will eventually give up. Bluebird eggs normally hatch around 14 days once incubation begins. This female was on the eggs for about 30 days.

This season the nest box has blue bluebird eggs signaling a different female has laid them, and possibly the demise of the original female. Cornell states the oldest known Western Bluebird was a male, and at least 8 years, 8 months old when he was found in California in 2008. He had been banded in the same state in 2001.

The attached photo was taken in a different nest box 0.4 mile distant from the above nest box, and shows a clutch of white Western Bluebird eggs. The female that laid these eggs may be an offspring from the original female, and has the same genetic defect. **Lee Pauser**

White eggs. White Birds? Nope, Blue.



Brown Cow. Chocolate Milk? Nope, white.

Blue eggs. Blue Birds? Nope, White Leucistic.



We are enjoying the bluebirds in our one active box in my back yard. We have had a successful nesting in the same box for 10 years. We had 3 nestlings in the box that fledged. Only one must have survived after leaving the box. He or she is now bigger than the mother. We feed them live and freeze-dried meal worms twice a day in a feeding box and on the ledge under the box. It is nice to see the parents picking out the live mealworms and taking them back to the nest. The parents then eat the freeze-dried ones for themselves. The one surviving youngster from the first nesting is eating alongside the parents. Does not fly well enough to be able to get into the feeder box. The parents have already built a new nest (I cleaned out the old one) and have four new kids. What a wonderful experience. **Kathleen Tilley**

We've had some successful bluebird nests and some failures in the past. The most recent past two years WEBL's have shown little interest in our boxes. This year maybe March (?) we had nice visitations, seeming to be interested nest building. Then we had one of our infrequent fly-bys of two orioles, concurrent with blue birds visiting. Then a lack of bluebird visits and serious interest from wrens, bringing in nest materials...the nest box filled to capacity then no more wrens. Yesterday Donna suggested we remove and cleanout bluebird box...surprise: we found a dead male at bottom of the box. When we emptied the box it appeared that bluebird may have twisted neck upon entering, then died. After cleaning the nestbox the wrens built a new nest which nearly filled the box. **Donna & Carl Nelson**

I just checked my nest box and found all 5 eggs had hatched. Tiny beaks all open for a feeding. The mother was very concerned while I checked on things. The father flew up with a bug for the new babies followed by a young "son" of his, trying to help. I am on the golf course (in Rancho Santa Margarita), the 6th hole. Wonderful news during these times. **Joyce Donnelly**

Lara Tseng, a 13-year old of the Southern California Bluebird Club member is conducting a research project for her science class and has encouraged many members of the SCBC to monitor and record egg shell consumption by the bluebirds during the nesting season. A description of the project will be published in the July issue of *Bluebird*, the journal of NABS. In my case, the research was hampered by the rainy season, the late egg-laying cycle and the disappearance of the parents and consequent death of the four remaining nestlings. We are anxiously awaiting the results of Lara's study and are hopeful that the findings will not be impaired by the closure of many trails because of the pandemic-related precautions. **Jim Semelroth**



We have installed a second bluebird box this month. Last year our box bore 5 eggs and all survived. We have kept them around by feeding them daily. Apparently word of beak has spread because now we have many bluebirds hanging out here. We decided that we couldn't just have homeless birds so we sought out **JoAnn Collar** and got 2 more boxes. We have hung one and put out more food nearby and there seems to be some interest. We have seen twigs in our original box so we assume they will nest there. We're keeping our fingers crossed for our second box. As for our third, we'll see how much interest we get and act accordingly.

Karen Miller and Steve Cibull

Anaheim Hills

A heartwarming tale on the trail" It was our first time out this year and we came to one site and the nestbox was missing. As Bob was getting ready to install a new nestbox, we saw two bluebirds (male and female) flitting excitedly nearby . After the new nestbox was installed on a tree branch, within 30 seconds or so, both adults flew to the nestbox, looking inside, and sitting on top. We watched in awe, wondering how long they had been waiting for this year's home. This is one of the great joys of bluebirding. **Bev Franz**

I have a tiny bit of good news. I've had a nest box at home for many years. But over the last two years there were no nest attempts. I'm assuming the squirrels and neighbors' cats were too bothersome.

But I just checked this evening and I have two eggs! It's nice to have them around when I'm spending more time at home. Hopefully I can get my neighbors to keep their cats inside when they are ready to fledge.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-vcRu-AIQs/?igshid=1jwp9e1e99afc>

Karla

We've had some successful bluebird nests and some failures in the past. The most recent past two years WEBL's have shown little interest in our boxes. This year maybe March (?) we had nice visitations, seeming to be interested nest building. Then we had one of our infrequent fly-byes of two orioles, concurrent with blue birds visiting. Then a lack of bluebird visits and serious interest from wrens, bringing in nest materials...the nest box filled to capacity then no more wrens. Yesterday Donna suggested we remove and cleanout bluebird box...surprise: we found a dead male at bottom of the box. When we emptied the box it appeared that bluebird may have twisted neck upon entering, then died. After cleaning the nestbox the wrens built a new nest which nearly filled the box. **Donna & Carl Nelson**

Jim

Thank you SO much for sharing this website on injured hummers. I read it, forwarded it with a friend, and filed it away. On Tuesday I was out for my daily walk and found an female Anna's fluttering in circles in a residential street. She looked like she had a problem with her left wing. Looked cold and hungry. I scooped her up in my hands and placed her on top of a Raphiolepis shrub nearby, thinking that nature would take its course. About a block away I remembered your article. I pulled it up on my phone, read and re-read it. I determined that this was indeed a bird that needed the help of a rehabilitator so I emailed Anne. While waiting for her reply I walked the hummer home, held her to my feeder, and she drank thirstily. Anne called me eight minutes after my email! She confirmed that I should bring the bird to her and that I was OK with driving from my home in Brea to hers in Huntington Beach. The rescue operation was on!

After another feeding, my husband Steve and I hopped in the car and drove to Anne's. She gave her some drops of pain killer/antibiotic and placed her in a heated container. She patiently answered all my questions, despite the fact that we were ignoring the six-foot personal space Coronavirus rule. Anne explained that given that I'd found the hummer in the street that she was probably hit by a car. She also told me that all female hummers are nesting right now, and that if I was willing I should go back to the scene of the crime and listen for nestlings chirping to be fed. Alas or thank goodness, we heard none. I can only hope that this bird hadn't yet lay eggs. I just found out from Anne that unfortunately her shoulder was dislocated. Anne had to euthanize her. A sad but not unexpected outcome.

Amy Kearnes**Orange County, Brea Country Hills West WEBL Trail Monitor**

Some time ago we had bluebirds return to our yard every spring to nest in the same box, often raising more than one brood. The last pair were lousy parents as they would lay eggs then abandon the nest so no babies fledged that year. That was 10 years ago and we have not seen a bluebird since. . . until this year. One morning last week there was a tap-taping on my bedroom window and there on the sill was a male bluebird. He comes back to the windows that overlook the yard a few times a day. He flutters against them and hangs on the screens then perches in a hanging pot and waits. It's as if he is begging for food. Turns out he has a girlfriend, and they seem to be nesting. What a joy they have been to me in this dreary uncertain time! There is nothing like nature, and especially a bluebird, to lift one's spirit.

Thanks for what you all do for these beautiful creatures and thanks for listening. I just had to share with someone who would understand my delight. **Joan Doner**

Bev Meinbress and I were thrown off guard this week when we approached a nest box which contained a VG Swallow and eggs. Our first clue that something was amiss was that Mom was sitting in the box with her head poking out. She didn't fly off, and kept retreating into the box and then sticking her head out. She eventually flew off and we removed the lid so we could make our observation. As I am sure you know, VG Swallow nests are constructed with many bird feathers and often it is difficult to see the nest cup. That was the case with this box. But when I was gently pushing feathers out of the way with a paint brush to see if I could count the eggs, I noticed a "something" that didn't look right. I then saw a long skinny tail wiggle and realized there was an unwelcome visitor in the box. In addition, there was one egg resting outside of the box in the wire cage leading to the entry hole. We took the box down so we could get the lizard out and not disturb the remaining eggs. We were conflicted about what to do--nothing, remove the lizard and leave it on the ground by the box, remove and kill the lizard, or remove and transport the lizard to a distance away in the surrounding open space. We finally decided on the latter decision. We replaced the box on the tree and drove some distance to open space and left the lizard there. Attached is a picture of the lizard. It was 6 - 8 inches long.

Our experience with known predators here at Rossmoor mainly has involved raccoons who were able to sit on top of the nest box, crawl out to the end of the wire cage, reach in and pull out nest, eggs, chicks, adults. This doesn't happen anymore because we realized that in these cases the lids extended too far out over the wire cage and it was easy for the raccoons to reach in grab the nest and its contents. We have eliminated that danger by replacing lids and/or lengthening the wire cage. We also have found one or two boxes each year which had eggs the previous week and then no eggs the next week. The only predator possibility we considered was a snake and you don't see many, or any, snakes around here. Now we have knowledge of another culprit which appears to have easy access to a nest box.

I'm sending you this information in case you can provide us with any knowledge about lizards as predators that anyone, or you personally, have experienced when monitoring nest boxes. If you can direct us to information on more examples of known predators that would be very helpful. Please feel free to make comments or observations about our decision-making process. We struggled between removing and killing the lizard or releasing it far away from any nest boxes. **Frances Elvin**

Aggressive house wren responsible for failures of bluebird, ashthroated flycatchers, and violet gree swallows. Aggressive wren box relocated. **Joan Loney**

Replaced all nest boxes on trees to metal pipe. Greased pipe, and no rodents, snakes or 'Coons gained access. **Bill Ralph**

A mother bird refused to exit on one nest. I could not tell how many eggs, hatchlings, or fledges were in that nest. Later when empty it the nest did contain feces. **Lee Ann Moffatt**

House sparrows forced our Bluebirds to nest in a decorative bird house down the street -they are very resourceful. **Mark Havens**

Donations in 1H2020 - \$1180 thru 6/15/2020

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To donate to the CBRP, please use the form or information on the last page of this newsletter.

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Sonoma	Mike	Crumly	Sonoma	707 996-7256	mikec@freixenetusa.com



Bluebird County Coordinators Meeting

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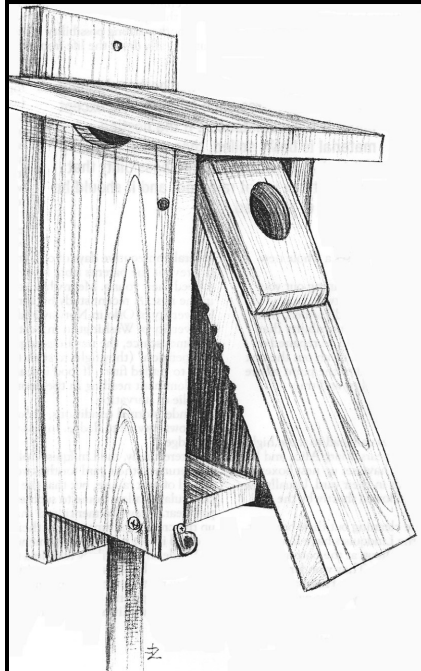
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--Sponsored by National Audubon Society – California

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