



# BLUEBIRDS FLY!

California Bluebird Recovery Program Newsletter

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

## How to Keep Your Nest Box Trail Ready for Its Next Monitor

By Georgette Howington, Alameda & Contra Costa counties

Whether managing a single nest box in their backyard or multiple trails with a hundred of them, most monitors are passionate about their birds! I am surely one of those. After monitoring for 26 nesting seasons and being a County Coordinator, I am adamant about making sure my nest boxes are maintained and monitored during the season.

This is not always easy because, on occasion, monitors give up their trails. In Contra Costa County, thankfully, I am notified and take on the job until I can recruit someone to adopt the trail. In 2023, my nest-box partner, Tom Garry, and I had three extra trails to manage. Three monitors gave up their trails. Luckily, I recruited two new monitors, and we are training them in January 2024!

Then, in November, I was given notice by another monitor who had his trail for about 15 years. It is 7 miles long and he rode a mountain bike. It was a hard decision for him. Tom and I will be walking his 24-nest box trail in January to map out where they all are and manage it until we can recruit a new monitor.

As you can imagine, taking on extra nest box trails is very time-consuming as well as challenging. This has happened more than once to us, so we have experience. For several years we had eight trails to monitor!

The good news is, I am familiar with every trail in my county and in 26 years have not let an established trail become abandoned. The other benefit that I have is Contra Costa has a team of excellent, committed monitors led by Ian and Karin Deas, who make sure all the trails they manage

*continued page 2*



*For Kate Brennan, Nevada County Coordinator, reviving an abandoned trail in 2020 meant first getting the old boxes off trees and onto poles.*

Photo by Sylvia Wright

## 2023 Nesting Season Brought 8,900 More Western Bluebirds

By Dick Blaine, CBRP Director

In the California 2023 nesting season, the statistics for most productive trail monitors and counties were similar to previous years. Here is a partial breakdown. For more details, see the table of statewide results in this newsletter on page 3 and the links at the end of this story.

We received reports from 27 counties, 170 monitors, 290 trails and 4,972 nest boxes. Our boxes yielded 15,993 fledglings, of which 8,916 were Western Bluebirds. The remaining 7,077 fledglings belonged to seven other cavity-nesting species.

Orange County, as usual, was the top producing county for the number of trails, nest tries, total fledglings and Western Bluebird (WEBL) fledglings. The top counties (total fledglings / WEBL fledglings) were:

Orange	6,061 / 3,817
Santa Clara	2,779 / 916
Los Angeles	1,110 / 1,049
Contra Costa	1,020 / 604
Alameda	912 / 556
Yolo	911 / 311

The trail monitors with most fledglings were:

David McMichael (Orange)  
2,249/109

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*Trail Replacement... continued from page 1*

in Walnut Creek are adopted. If someone leaves, they find a replacement. Without the Deas, I am sure Tom and I would be in trouble.

Creating a nest-box trail requires planning, often permission, installation, and then, the weekly monitoring, plus maintenance and repairs, not to mention the collection of data. Once a trail is established and birds are coming back season after season, one can almost predict which species will use certain boxes, and while the data will vary year to year, one thing is almost certain. The birds know the boxes are there and will return the following season. Thus, an abandoned nest box trail is a sad legacy. Lost homes for birds that really need them.

The reasons why monitors must give up their trails varies widely. It could be a move, an illness, aging, going to college, etc. It could happen to you, or it could happen to me. In fact, I just turned 70 and am looking down the road.

We monitors love our birds and I have yet to meet a monitor who has had to give up their trail who is not concerned about what's going to happen after they are gone. With some planning and looking ahead your trail can go on providing homes for the birds you've been devoted to. Even after you've moved on.



**Here are some tips to make sure your trail has continuity for the sake of your birds and to confidently know the trail you poured your heart into will go on without you.**

- 1** Create an accurate map of your trail with numbered nest boxes. If you can collect GPS coordinates and make a Google Map, all the better. Even with a good map, finding all the boxes can be tricky. For instance, Tom and I took over a trail recently where the monitor listed 22 nest boxes and we only found 19. We must go back soon and find those three boxes! This is a very productive trail established since the mid-1990's. What a shame to let it go.
- 2** Consider having a nest-box partner rather than monitor alone. One of my trails became too time-consuming to monitor, due to how spread out the 45 boxes are on 925 acres. Tom and I split the trail into three trails, so we have two other monitors to count on.
- 3** Plan ahead if you suspect you will have to give up your trail. Recruit someone you know who will be committed to adopting your nest boxes. Train the person how to monitor, keep data and turn it in. Offer support for a while after they take it over. We have training resources on the website, and we offer coaching at CBRP, so are a resource as well.
- 4** If you have a problem recruiting a replacement monitor, ask your local Audubon Society chapter if you can write a newsletter article about your trail and its availability. You can also post flyers at the local library or stage a "Beginning with Bluebirds" workshop in a local nature shop or senior center. Contact a local reporter and ask to have an article written about the nest-box program and include your contact information. I have successfully recruited new monitors using all these methods.

*For Jean Matsuno of Nevada County, taking on another monitor's trail included installing sun shields on the most exposed boxes.*

*Photo by Sylvia Wright*

*Nesting Season... continued from page 1*

Lee Pauser (Santa Clara) 1,632 / 474  
 Amanda Kindel (Solano & Yolo) 1,035 / 365  
 Bill Ralph (Mariposa, Merced, Madera) 960 / 78  
 Irv Tiessen (Alameda) 871 / 534  
 Jerry Millett (Los Angeles) 574 / 539  
 Christine Tischer (Orange) 450 / 108

David McMichael and the Orange County team have been particularly successful with Tree Swallows (TRES). The team includes Houston Vassel, Ashley Anderson, Henry Feilen, Jenna Carpenter and Alec Mang.

The table of state results (below) shows CBRP results for the first and the most recent of the 28 years during which CBRP has been recording results (1996-2023). From 1996 through 2006, trail-by-trail data were collected from handwritten worksheets, summarized by county coordinators, and entered into a statewide spreadsheet. From 2007 thru 2011, box-by-box and trail-by-trail data were entered by monitors directly into a homegrown database. For

the past 12 years, trail-by-trail data have been entered by monitors directly into a shared, online spreadsheet using Google Drive.

If you are willing to enter additional detail (box-by-box) with dates and detailed results, I strongly encourage you to participate in Cornell University's eBird and/or NestWatch programs. Data on the NestWatch site is of great scientific value and provides information for researchers all over the world.

**More information:**

- All 28 years of CBRP nest-box data: [cbrp.org/results](http://cbrp.org/results)
- 2023 trail and species data: [cbrp.org/annual-reports](http://cbrp.org/annual-reports)
- eBird: [ebird.org/content/ebird](http://ebird.org/content/ebird)
- NestWatch: [nestwatch.org/](http://nestwatch.org/)
- Information and an easy-to-use spreadsheet on the CBRP web site -  
 NestWatch Bulk Upload Template Documentation: [goo.gl/yP9ZBV](http://goo.gl/yP9ZBV)  
 NestWatch Bulk Upload Template: [goo.gl/6eQA9f](http://goo.gl/6eQA9f)

California Bluebird Recovery Program – 28-Year Results – All Species															
	1996	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Average*	
Counties	21	20	20	20	24	21	20	20	24	24	26	22	27	25	Counties
Reporters	169	170	169	157	160	178	169	172	170	127	155	160	170	179	Reporters
Species	16	21	24	21	20	21	20	19	19	19	20	20	18	20	Species
Boxes (N)	2400	5293	5664	5067	5601	5793	5333	5358	5397	4218	4951	4309	4972	4609	Boxes (N)
Tries (T)	1526	5715	5715	5096	5526	5742	6007	6291	6826	4770	5371	4518	5707	4363	Tries (T)
T/N	0.6	1.1	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.1	1	T/N
Eggs (E)		28423	27876	24058	26262	27509	27395	27097	29012	21491	23767	20719	23265	24097	Eggs (E)
E/N		5.4	4.9	4.7	4.7	4.7	5.1	5.1	5.4	5.1	4.8	4.8	4.7	5	E/N
E/T		5.0	4.9	4.7	4.8	4.8	4.6	4.3	4.3	4.5	4.4	4.6	4.1	5	E/T
Chicks (H)		22747	22489	19481	21234	22872	22998	22840	24624	18122	19895	17821	20026	19721	Chicks (H)
H/N		4.3	4.0	3.8	3.8	3.9	4.3	4.3	4.6	4.3	4.0	4.1	4.0	4	H/N
H/T		4.0	3.9	3.8	3.8	4.0	3.8	3.6	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.5	4	H/T
H/E		0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.9	1	H/E
Fledged (F)	5077	20477	19754	17056	18144	19873	20246	19731	21164	16223	16323	15087	15993	16221	Fledged (F)
F/N	2.1	3.9	3.5	3.4	3.2	3.4	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.8	3.3	3.5	3.2	3	F/N
F/T	3.3	3.6	3.5	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.4	3.1	3.1	3.4	3.0	3.3	2.8	4	F/T
F/E		0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7	1	F/E
F/H		0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	1	F/H

\*Average: average of non-zero values for 28 years (1996-2023)

**Field Report**

By Cindy Lockhart,  
 Santa Clara County

It was a good nesting season at my nest-box trail at The Sequoias in Portola Valley. Bluebird eggs and bluebird babies are always wonderful to see. And I also had Violet-green Swallows successfully fledge from their unique white eggs and feather-lined nests.



Western Bluebird eggs  
 Photo by Cindy Lockhart



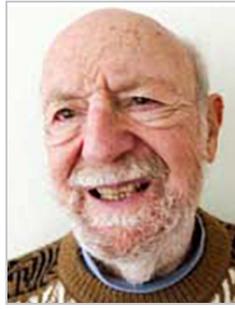
Violet-green Swallow eggs  
 Photo by Cindy Lockhart



Bluebird babies  
 Photo by Cindy Lockhart

## From the Director's Chair

The California Bluebird Recovery Project has had several major accomplishments this year. We continue to participate in garden club and Audubon Society events, as well as work with Boy and Girl Scouts. In addition, we have provided nesting training sessions for several groups.



Thanks to all of you who entered your 2023 results online. We used Google Drive again for online, shared data collection, and had few problems.

The 2023 Annual Report and this newsletter are available in full color for viewing and/or downloading on our web site.

[Annual Reports: cbrp.org/annual-reports/](http://cbrp.org/annual-reports/)

[Newsletters: cbrp.org/newsletters/](http://cbrp.org/newsletters/)

Several articles summarizing the 2023 breeding season results will be found in this issue of Bluebirds Fly! Note that this and previous newsletters and annual reports, as well as updated state results (28-year history, box-by-box and trail-by-trail data), are also available on our web site. 2023 Results: [cbrp.org/results/](http://cbrp.org/results/)

Special thanks to those of you who made donations to CBRP in 2023, amounting to \$414 in 2nd half of 2023 and \$3,610 for the year. (See the 2023 2nd-half donor list on page 5.) Donations can be made on our web site or by mail. These donations go toward assisting in the purchase of nest box material for new and updated trails.

I want to encourage monitors to contribute to and participate in Cornell University's NestWatch Program using their web site or the bulk upload template, to preserve the nesting data you collect and to make that data available to researchers around the world. It is not too late to contribute your data to NestWatch. Simply download the template, complete it, and send it to me. I will get your data to NestWatch.

[www.nestwatch.org](http://www.nestwatch.org)

Bulk upload documentation: [goo.gl/PqHXiX](https://goo.gl/PqHXiX)

Bulk upload template: [goo.gl/6eQA9f](https://goo.gl/6eQA9f)

And now, get ready for the 2024 nesting season by cleaning and repairing your nest boxes by the end of February. Hopefully you will be able to access all of your trails.

Happy New Year, Happy 2024 Birding and stay well.

Dick Blaine - [dick@theblaines.net](mailto:dick@theblaines.net)

California Bluebird Recovery Project

[www.cbrp.org](http://www.cbrp.org)

## 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](http://www.CBRP.org)

[www.nabluebirdsociety.org](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org)

[www.socalbluebirds.org](http://www.socalbluebirds.org)

[www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org)

If you are looking for a mentor, contact any board member at [info@cbrp.org](mailto:info@cbrp.org).

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

## From Zero to Six Eggs in One Day

By Michael & Marybeth Arago, Mendocino County  
& Lee Pauser, Santa Clara County

In our July 2023 newsletter, Marybeth wrote about an odd situation of finding no eggs in a particular box on one day but finding six eggs three days later. All six turned out to be Chestnut-backed Chickadees (with very diligent parents) and all fledged. (Hurray, no cowbirds!)

The Aragoes asked if there might have been more than one female Chestnut-backed Chickadee doing the egg-laying.

**Lee responds:** Interesting! I can't rule out multiple females laying eggs but suspect that is not the case. A more reasonable explanation is that on Marybeth's earlier visit, some of the eggs were buried or covered in the nest. Chestnut-backed Chickadees sometimes initially cover their eggs with a blanket, probably to hide and/or keep them from the cold.

When I find what I believe is a complete Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Oak Titmouse or White-breasted Nuthatch nest, I carefully insert a clean finger down into the nest to feel for eggs – just a light touch. If I feel one egg, I feel around a bit to get an egg count. I then re-cover the eggs.

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## Helpful Intervention Or Harmful Interference?

By Bet Zimmerman Smith

My criminal career began at the tender age of 5. I was excited to find an unbroken American Robin's egg on the lawn in our backyard. I got a shoebox, fashioned a nest from grass, and placed the beautiful blue egg inside. I put the shoebox underneath a desk lamp and eagerly waited for the egg to hatch. Of course, it never did, which was a good thing. I had neither the ability nor any idea how to raise a baby wild bird. Nestlings must be fed a specialized diet every 15 minutes or so, and then taught to fend for themselves by a member of their own species.

I also had no idea that I was committing a criminal offense. Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, it is illegal to have in your possession live or dead non-game native birds (adults or young), feathers, nests or eggs, or to keep nests or eggs even for "show and tell" educational purposes without a permit. And those permits are extremely hard to get.

But I really wanted a baby robin! Unfortunately, what humans want and what is best for wildlife do not always intersect. In fact, at times they are diametrically opposed. Sometimes, in an attempt to help, and despite our good intentions, we end up doing more harm than good.

An incident at Yellowstone National Park highlighted what can happen as a result of inappropriate interference. A pair of well-meaning tourists "rescued" a newborn bison shivering by the roadside. They put it in their SUV

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## California Bluebird Recovery Program Board Members

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Contact us at [info@cbrp.org](mailto:info@cbrp.org)

## CBRP Donors July – December 2023 (\$414.00)

Patrice Anderson	Alameda
Karen Benzel	Monterey
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Joan Doner	Los Angeles
Suzanne Jones	Contra Costa
Lee & Janna Pauser	Santa Clara

and drove it to a ranger station. Park rangers then spent two days trying to reintroduce the baby bison to the herd, but it was rejected, and would not eat. The calf also repeatedly returned to the roadway, apparently having become imprinted on cars and people. "The calf was either going to starve to death, get sick, get hit or cause an accident, so we had to make the difficult decision to put it down," said Charissa Reid of the park's public affairs office.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I hear questions like this all the time:

- I found a baby bird on the ground. Can I raise it?
- It's going to get really cold tonight. Should I bring the eggs/baby birds inside my house to keep them warm? Or can I put a heater inside the bird house?
- The baby nestlings are so cute. Is it okay to pet them? Can I put bands on them?
- The eggs were supposed to hatch yesterday and they didn't. Should I throw them out so the parents can try again?
- I haven't seen the parent birds lately, so I think the nest has been abandoned. Should I bring the babies inside the house and take care of them?
- There is a tree swallow nesting in my box, but I want bluebirds. Can I throw out the swallow nest?
- A bird built a nest in my gas grill. Can I move it so we can have a summer cookout?
- There are wasps inside the birdhouse. Can I use hornet spray inside the house?
- A male bluebird keeps hitting my window, and it's driving me crazy. Can I shoot it?

The answer to all the above questions is *NO*. Even if these actions were not outright illegal (most are), such meddling would still be bad for the birds. There

is a line between helpful intervention and harmful interference and micromanagement.

This doesn't mean you should do nothing. Inviting birds to nest in your birdhouse comes with responsibility. As a bluebird landlord, you can and should do what is reasonable and legal to increase the likelihood that a nesting will be successful.

***If an intervention has an obvious chance of harm but a less certain chance of benefit, let nature take its course. If you are unsure about whether to interfere - don't.***

Examples include:

- Using a properly designed, sturdy, weather-resistant nestbox that can be opened for monitoring and cleaning, and has the proper size entrance hole for the species you want to attract.
- Protecting the contents from predation, e.g., by mounting the box on a baffled pole ([sialis.org/baffle.htm](http://sialis.org/baffle.htm)), or by using a sparrow spooker if House Sparrows are in your area ([sialis.org/sparrow-spooker.htm](http://sialis.org/sparrow-spooker.htm)).
- Periodically monitoring a nestbox during active nesting season once a week (or twice a week at most). ([sialis.org/monitoring.htm](http://sialis.org/monitoring.htm))

We all know helicopter parents who hover over their children. Overcontrolling and overprotecting is not in the best interest of children, nor is it good for wildlife. The reality is that nature can be harsh. Losses are a part of the ecosystem. As much as you might like to, you cannot control the weather or eliminate predators or disease. So, even though you may love wild birds, you need to avoid being a helicopter bluebirder.

The bottom line: If an intervention has an obvious chance of harm but a less certain chance of benefit, let nature take its course. If you are unsure about whether to interfere – don't.

*Article reprinted with permission of the North American Bluebird Society from the Bluebird newsletter, Vol. 45 No. 2*

*Bet Zimmerman Smith is a NABS Board member, committee member, and frequent contributor to Bluebird. She is also the driving force behind the bluebird website [www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org).*

## Beyond Bluebirds: Adding Owls, Kestrels & More to Nest-Box Studies

By Bill Ralph, Madera County

This year, a new collaboration in bird conservation arose from my volunteer work monitoring Western Bluebird boxes in Madera and Merced counties. I was asked by Raptors Are the Solution (RATS) to help study Barn Owls for anticoagulant rodenticide poisoning.

RATS is a Berkeley-based volunteer organization that educates the public about the dangers of rat and rodent poisons in the food web.

With a grant from the Strong Foundation for Environmental Values, two RATS volunteers — myself (a Federal Bird Banding Laboratory master bander) and volunteer Jeanette Hanneman — monitored Barn Owls in 196 boxes in 20 locations in Merced and Madera counties, including vineyards, orchards and parks.

Just as we bluebirders monitor WEBL nesting success, Jeanette and I counted owl nests, eggs, hatchlings and fledglings. We also continued monitoring American Kestrel nests, Wood Ducks, Western Screech-Owls, and song birds.

RATS checked for anticoagulants in three owlets we found dead in the boxes and 16 owl pellets.

The results were encouraging, despite the crazy weather year we had, with many atmospheric rivers flooding the orchards and continuing to rain well past when the owls had started nesting.

We had a record 406 Barn Owls fledge. We had 156 American Kestrels fledge – our third-highest year.



*Our new study looked for rat poison in Barn Owls and owlets.*

Photo by Bill Ralph

None of the owl samples contained anticoagulant rodenticides.

We're hoping RATS' extensive public education efforts over the past 10 years played some part in this positive result.

As RATS raises awareness of the dangers of rat and rodent poisons in the food web, we educate people about the ecological role of wild birds of prey, and work to eliminate toxic rodenticides to prevent further poisonings of wildlife, children, and pets.

Want to expand your own conservation efforts beyond bluebirds? We need nest box monitors for Barn Owls, kestrels, Wood Ducks and songbirds in California!

### **More information:**

Monitoring boxes for species other than

Bluebirds: Email [bill@dryadranch.com](mailto:bill@dryadranch.com)

RATS organization: [raptorsarethesolution.org](http://raptorsarethesolution.org)

# Helping Bluebirds in an Urban Neighborhood

By Georgette Howington  
CBRP Coordinator, Alameda & Contra Costa Counties

Little did Marilyn Petch know that when she attached a bluebird nest box, under an eave, just outside her kitchen window, an adventure would begin.

Almost all literature one reads about location of nest boxes is ignored by the bluebirds in this case. First, it is set in a high-density neighborhood in the quaint, old town of El Cerrito. Second, predators of bluebirds are numerous: crows, House Sparrows, outdoor cats... to name a few. Third, an urban setting is not commonly thought of as ideal habitat for bluebirds.

Well? Apparently, the birds did not read the books, and Marilyn Petch took a hunch that has produced two broods every year for six years.

What is it about that neighborhood that has made a nesting pair successful for six years in a row? Marilyn's yard is left a bit wild with varying heights of grasses and this is also true of quite a few of the other yards. In fact, many of her neighbors have planted California natives.

There are fruit trees in a small backyard orchard a few doors down. Both her next-door neighbor and she have clean birdbaths all the time. And the location of the box on her house makes the birds feel safe because they are under an eave!

That's lucky, right? Maybe. Her ongoing support and watchful eye are no less than remarkable. Every time there is a potential problem, she finds solutions. She observes the birds so closely that, after they fledge, she recognizes each one!

She has documented bluebird behavior and observed how fledges help their parents, and how older siblings in one brood teach younger siblings and take care of one another. Marilyn has kept me posted on the birds' activities over the six years, and to my delight we have become close friends.

In 2022, when the drought caused a drop in insect populations in some areas in the Bay Area, she was watching. By the end of the summer, the bluebird parents in her nest box had resorted to feeding the second brood small stone fruit like plums. Before she cleaned out their box, she sent me a photo of how gooey and thick the fecal matter was since they were eating so much fruit.

The next year, she decided to supplement the parents and fledged broods with mealworms. The key here is "supplement" – not feed them too many or too few. This has paid off because the birds are all healthy, energetic, and beautiful. They are larger and stronger than the second-brood birds she fledged in 2022.

One male in 2023 had suffered what might have been a pelvic injury and slowly recovered. Because she is happy with the outcome, she decided to continue supplementing them through this winter as well.



Two Bluebird broods enjoy mealworms.

Photo by Marilyn Petch



## TIPS

- 1 Dust the mealworms with the calcium shown in the photo, Rep-Cal Calcium Without Vitamin D3, before setting them out for the birds. This prevents certain nutritional deficiencies that can occur from their consuming too many mealworms.
- 2 Ration how much you give them. Her birds hunt all day and, while they do come back for a portion of mealworms, she is confident they are getting a variety of foods and not living on just mealworms!

# YOU Can Help California Bluebirds!

Yes, I want to help support Bluebirds in California.  
Please enroll me in the California Bluebird Recovery Program.

Here is my donation of:

**\$10 Subscriber**   **\$15 Supporter**   **\$25 Contributor**   **\$35 Sponsor**   \$ \_\_\_\_\_ **Other**

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Please make your tax-deductible contribution payable to MDAS BLUEBIRDS and mail to:

California Bluebird Recovery Program

23800 Amapolo Court V03, Cupertino, CA 95014

Donations can also be made through our website, [www.CBRP.org](http://www.CBRP.org)

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