

It was a sunny bright day and on today's "to do" list was numbering and taking a peek into Bluestem's 12 bluebird boxes. The boxes were built and would be monitored using the information given by the North American Bluebird Society. Eastern Bluebirds typically nest from March till August. Their nests are 1-4 inches tall and made from neatly woven grasses or pine needles. They lay 4-6 powder blue eggs that are 1-4 inches tall. Egg incubation lasts 12-14 days. After hatching the chicks will remain in the nest for about 17-21 days.

Motivation for monitoring the boxes includes removal of sparrows, starlings, paper wasp nests, and mice. Identifying the species of nesting birds allows the Bluebird society to not only track bluebird populations but also other native bird species. Some of the other birds that nest in these boxes include Tree Swallows, titmice, chickadees, wrens, and nuthatches. Survey forms can be sent in at the end of the nesting season. Removal of the old nesting material and cleaning out the boxes once a clutch has fledged promotes re-nesting in boxes that are free from pests and diseases. Unused boxes can be placed in a more suitable site.

After tagging each box with a number I recorded the following box activity. Six boxes had empty nests in them with evidence of bird activity. Using the fact sheets I had from NABS I tentatively identified them as Bluebird nests. I was heartened by the fact that so far at least 1/2 of the boxes had provided a home for new families of bluebirds. One nest had 4 blue eggs, three nests had babies, and two boxes had no nest at all. One of the boxes held a surprise having eleven bluebird eggs including a scattering of eggs on the sides of the nest! Perhaps the first round of egg laying included infertile eggs, so they laid some more. I will go back to see what becomes of all these eggs. One nest close to the pond had one unusually large chick which perhaps was the result of a cowbird, a "brood parasite". The nest was large and seemed to have two layers so perhaps the bluebirds laid another nest over the one containing the cowbird eggs. There were three other well developed chicks in this nest. I had a moment of panic when in trying to observe the inside of this large nest one of the chicks tumbled out. Fortunately, I was able to put the chick back and I will go back to see how they all are doing.

Overall my first day of Bluebird monitoring was quite surprising. I am glad to be part of providing successful new habitat for these beautiful songbirds.

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July 19, 2023