

Shenandoah Audubon/Blandy Bluebird Trail - 2017

By Kaycee Lichliter, Trail Manager

The Blandy Bluebird trail includes 132 nestboxes which were monitored for 24 weeks during the 2017 season, March 24 through September 2, by 30 trained trail technicians. There were eight new trainees, Angela Schwarzkopf, Beth Sitton, Cheryl and Ed Ferguson, Deb and Tim Teates, Jeff Woods, and Zita Zduoba who joined our returning technicians, Andy and Margie Miller, Ann Hirschy, Chris Lewis, Dana Crone, Dennis and Mary Carolynn McLoughlin, Diane Sheehey, Glenny Comer, Janet Rigoni, Jill Butler, John Hickerson, Judy and Roger Aaron, Leah DeLong, Marie and Milan Majorov, Mary Keith Ruffner, Pam Luttrell, Richard Hampton, Tanya Godfrey, and myself.

Nesting attempts, defined as 'at least one egg laid,' remained stable at 72 for bluebirds (14-yr average 68), with survivorship improved at 87.2% (14-yr average 70.1%), producing 226 fledglings. We had our first reported bluebird nest cup lined with horse tail hair.

Tree Swallows dominated the trail system with 132 nesting attempts, the highest in our 14-yr recorded history, which produced 410 fledglings. Tree Swallows like to add a bit of interest to their nests; one nest was constructed out of corn husk while another added a white fabric clothing tag to its nest in 2016, and this past season we saw our first nest cup lined with white deer fur.

House Wren population continues to decline, which was first noticed in 2012 when the fledgling numbers dropped from 204 in 2011, to 102 in 2012. 2013 had an increase to 149 but has dropped each year since: 2014 produced **84**; 2015 dropped to **66**; 2016 saw **34** and 2017 produced only **22** House Wrens fledged (22 is a huge drop considering our most successful year, 2008, fledged 286 chicks. As the Tree Swallow population has increased, the House Wren population has decreased. It may be that in the competition for suitable nesting sites, Tree Swallows are simply out-competing the House Wren. We will continue to watch our numbers closely, as both species are native birds and have their importance in our ecosystem.

House Sparrows, on the other hand, are a different story. They are not native to North American and can be quite destructive when competing with our native species. They first presented to our trail system in 2009 when they laid 8 eggs in one nestbox. They were not documented again until 2014 and have been present each year since. They tend to utilize box sites near the field lab (newly constructed in 2012) and the greenhouse (newly constructed in early 2017). Two research cottages were built in early 2017 and house sparrows occupied one box site in that area for the first time. In 2017 we documented a total 43 house sparrow eggs laid in four nestboxes. Nestboxes on average are monitored by technicians six times during their active nesting cycle; however in comparison, techs monitored house sparrow nests an average of 22 times each. By keeping a very close eye on the house sparrows, we were able to replace their viable eggs with wooden eggs, resulting in ZERO house sparrows hatched. The adults continue to incubate the wooden eggs, which keeps them busy while our native birds can continue their nesting activity. Placement of slot boxes may be considered in house sparrow active areas in the future however consideration is being taken into account that that may cause them to spread to

other areas of the farm creating an even bigger problem. We are also watching carefully at the Purple Martin Colony near Lake Arnold as house sparrows are known to take over Purple Martin colonies.

As we continue our agenda of creating and preserving suitable habitat, educating folks and contributing to research, we encourage you join us, to get involved with other local conservation organizations, and to work to create your own backyard habitat that invites our beautiful birds and other wildlife species.