## **Eastern Bluebird Conservation in the Park**

Did you know that there are 96 bluebird boxes throughout Sky Meadows State Park? They are all part of the Sky Meadows Bluebird Trail - a project of the Shenandoah Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists. The overall trail is really made up of a series of smaller trails, each with a number of nest boxes designed and installed to provide habitat, shelter, and nesting opportunities for Eastern Bluebirds. The goal is to increase reproduction in the species, so that the population will recover.

Two things have seriously depleted the population of Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*). After World War II, development removed a lot of the nesting habitat. And, there has also been competition for nesting cavities by non-native birds, like the House Sparrow and the Starling. Both situations mean that Eastern Bluebirds do not have enough places to nest. The decline in bluebird populations became a serious issue by the 1950s and 1960s.

These nest boxes are not only helping Bluebirds. They are also being used by other native cavity-nesting species, including Tree Swallows, House Wrens, Tufted Titmice, and Carolina Chickadees.

It is very important that you DO NOT disturb these boxes! But from April to September, the Bluebird nesting season, you may find trained volunteers—citizen scientists—monitoring them. Once a week, taking special precautions, they open each box, observe the activity within, and record their findings in a log-book. Data such as the type of nest, the number and color of eggs, the species using the nest, the number of hatchlings, the first egg date, the critical nesting period, and the number of chicks fledged are all logged in to track the success of the box. At the end of the season, these data are compiled and sent to organizations such as The Virginia Bluebird Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology for scientists to use as they track the status and populations of the Eastern Bluebird and other bird species.

But this is not the only research being done. Monitoring also provides valuable information on nest box design and predator protection systems. It makes other research possible, such as studying the effects of the decline of insect populations on nesting success. Scientists are learning how stable populations of native species interact to maintain the balance of nature.

Since 2011, when Virginia Master Naturalists established the Sky Meadows Bluebird Trail, Eastern Bluebirds have more than doubled within the park. And thanks to a network of bluebird trails across the nation, the population of all species of bluebirds has risen to a better, more stable level. But to maintain that level, conservation programs must continue.

Enjoy these colorful birds as they make their nests and raise their young here in the park throughout Spring and summer. If you have time, visit the display on bluebirds in the Visitor’s Center.

If you would like to volunteer to be a bluebird monitor, please contact the park. Each year they send out information about volunteering for this project and inform prospective monitors about requirements and required training for the program.

 Submitted by Margaret Wester