

Bluebird Box Monitoring Effort 2015 Cove Point LNG, Calvert County, Maryland

In 2001 Arlene and Doug Ripley were monitoring Cove Point for TNC. Their suggestion of establishing a bluebird box trail was accepted and implemented with the assistance of the owners of Cove Point LNG.



Box 31 in the rear of Lake Levy.



Hard to call these hatchlings cute.

The Ripleys continued this activity until they moved to Arizona in 2007. In 2010 monitoring of these boxes was re-established by Cove Point Natural Heritage Trust. Thanks to the assistance of the security staff, weekly access to these boxes has been established throughout the summer.

The bluebird trail at Cove Point consists of thirteen boxes. Two of these are within the industrial area. Box 35 is situated in the rip rap sized rocks near gate 6. Box 37 is located on the gravel parking area next to gate 8. Box 36 was located by a block-lined "pool" which periodically holds water. This site was taken in the expansion project. The other eleven boxes are located around lakes Levy and Osborne.



Lake Levy seen from box 25.

The initial visit to the trail at Cove Point for 2015 was done on April 8. Boxes were inspected for structural integrity and to see if the nesting season had begun. The arrival of spring again was bumpy with a major warm trend followed by a week plus of sub-freezing weather. Major construction efforts at the plant have made access more difficult and one of the two remaining boxes inside the fence (Box 37) has seen no activity at all this season.

There continues to be no evidence of house sparrows

This year three species utilized the boxes, Tree Swallow, Eastern Bluebird and Carolina Chickadees. The cold snap in early February and late March was hard on the local bluebird populations. Box 26 had a dead male in breeding plumage. A nearby trail at a golf course reported several such losses. Consequently on the initial visit only one box had any sign of bluebird activity. Several showed chickadee tenants and a couple of tree swallows set up house as well.

The rough start continued through the entire season. Three of four chickadee nests were abandoned. Tree swallows nesting attempts also had their issues. The same box (26) which had the dead bluebird in April had three dead nestlings tree swallows in June. Only three bluebird nests were attempted. Two were successful and produced 5 chicks all of which fledged.

Several boxes which normally had two or three broods had no nesting activity at all this year. Second attempts happened in only two boxes (26 and 24), while the three bluebird nests happened in three separate boxes (26,27,28).

Box 26 by Lake Levy once again hosted a family of tree swallows. This year though only two of the five hatchlings made it to fledgling status. Three desiccated well developed hatchling were found



when the nest was cleared out.

The Peterson box (30) has had



chickadees



and bluebirds in the past and this year the tree swallows made their bid. This nesting attempt started with a partial nest on April 14. A month later we finally see eggs and by June 3 five birds have hatched. Unfortunately the nest was infested with ants. Attempts to dislodge them were not ultimately successful and a week later the empty nest was removed and an ant trap placed on the box. The ants cleared out and a second nesting attempt resulted in four eggs by July 11. This nest was abandoned after July 25th although there was no return of the ants.

Box 26 on the dam face of Lake Levy and box 27 at the end of Lake Levy had the other nesting tree swallows. Box 26 produced two broods of four each. While the box on the hill produced two broods of five each. These nests did not experience any issues with ants.

Ultimately there were more successful wasp nests than bluebird nest in the boxes this year. Four boxes had wasp nest removed during the nesting season. One box had two occurrences.

This was without a doubt the worst nesting season on record for the Cove Point LNG nesting box trail. Similar lack of success was reported at three other local trails (Appeal Elementary, Asbury, and Three Shields Golf Course). No one saw the usual multiple nesting attempts and total number of attempts was extremely low.

Discussions with the monitoring group all pointed to the very cold early spring weather as the potential culprit. Dr. Ernest Willoughby speculated that the extreme cold made survival of adults more difficult and left those survivors with little energy to even attempt to nest much less be successful. Historically this has occurred with another multi-brood species during extended cold weather periods. In the early 1990's the Carolina Wren was so rare that none were located in the majority of St. Mary's County's May Count.

None of the three species utilizing the trail at Cove Point came near their historic numbers. Unsuccessful attempts were at an all-time high as well. It will be interesting to see what the 2016 season brings in the way of a comeback for our residential box nesters.

Birds of Cove Point's Nesting Season

Chipping Sparrow
Northern Cardinal

Field Sparrow
Eastern Towhee

Northern Junco
Indigo Bunting

White-throated Sparrow
Blue Grosbeak

American Goldfinch	House Finch	Tree Swallow	Barn Swallow
Eastern Pewee	Great-crested Flycatcher	Acadian Flycatcher	Red-eyed Vireo
White-eyed Vireo	Yellow-throated Vireo	Blue Jay	Fish Crow
American Crow	Turkey Vulture	Black Vulture	Bald Eagle
Red-shouldered Hawk	Red-tailed Hawk	Osprey	Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Scarlet Tanager	Summer Tanager	Orchard Oriole	Mallard
Canada Goose	Great Blue Heron	Spotted Sandpiper	Herring Gull
Ring-billed Gull	Laughing Gull	Tufted Titmouse	Carolina Chickadee
Carolina Wren	Belted Kingfisher	Downy Woodpecker	Northern Flicker
Hairy Woodpecker	Pileated Woodpecker	Red-bellied Woodpecker	

Cove Point Species along the beach and marsh available in separate document.

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