

FIELD NOTES



Photo: Bluebird nest

PEEKING INTO THE WORLD OF THE BLUEBIRD

by Brian Miller,
BFEC Volunteer & Bluebird Monitor

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MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH the eastern bluebird was when, as a newly-hired reporter for the Elyria Chronicle-Telegram in the early spring of 1984, a bluebird enthusiast alerted me to the significance of this time of the year for those who shared his passion.

Eastern bluebird populations had been declining in Ohio and elsewhere in the U.S. for decades due to loss of habitat. Bluebirds prefer to nest in dead tree cavities or in fence posts at the edge of open fields and meadows. With urban sprawl and the modernization of farms beginning in the first half of the 20th century, these specific elements were becoming rare.

With their attractive blue feathers and rust-colored breast (accentuated on the male), bluebirds developed a devoted following – including the gentleman who contacted me at the newspaper – who reacted to their decline by organizing national and state organizations to promote their preservation, in large part through the placement of man-made bluebird

boxes and the construction of Bluebird trails.

In the fall of 2013, as I was contemplating retirement, my mind instantly latched onto the possibility of assisting the Brown Family Environmental Center in some fashion. When I asked about being a volunteer, they told me about their bluebird trail. The trail was created around 2001, about the same time that the new resource center was completed. The inspiration, and many of the initial boxes, were provided by Dale Glass, who was the Knox County Coordinator of the Ohio Bluebird Society at the time.

The number of volunteers who monitor the BFEC bluebird trail ebbs and flows over time. These volunteers check each of the 34 boxes and note what's happening inside each box – from the building of nests, to the laying and hatching of eggs, to the fledging of birds. In 2013, I was thrilled when they told me that another bluebird volunteer would be useful. Hence, I joined a crew of three others.

Our objective is mainly to observe and

document the number of nests, eggs and fledglings in each box. Each volunteer checks the boxes on a particular day of the week and enters their observations in a log book. At the end of the summer, our data are collated and submitted to state and national bluebird societies who maintain national statistics.

Monitoring the BFEC bluebird trail is part gentle stroll and part invigorating hike. The trail is roughly split between property sections on both sides of Route 229. On the south side, the boxes are scattered in open areas near the resource center and through the prairies. On the north side, the trail follows the BFEC Corridor Trail which first traces the edges of upland farm fields and cattle grazing yards, and then plunges into a valley edged by swamp grasses. Near its beginning, it descends part way down a steep hill then levels off, yielding an exhilarating view of the Kokosing River valley and Route 229. After a fairly gentle descent, the path meets the floor of the valley through which Wolf Creek runs.

Much of the trail is open land – precisely what bluebirds birds prefer – and it can be hot under the mid-day sun. Mornings are best, but evenings have their own special charm. I have walked the trail with my wife at dusk, and used a flashlight to check boxes when the light was drawing dim.

Trail monitors observe a standard protocol, peeking in only after tapping a few times on the box to warn a parent bird sitting on the nest. Our rewards are the munificence of the abundant spring: seeing a clutch of sky-blue bluebird eggs or the outstretched mouths of week-old babies, or a nest of birds close to fledging, jammed wing-to-wing, drowsy to the point they barely look alive.

It's Not All Rainbows and Bluebirds!

Calling the boxes “bluebird boxes”, I found quickly, is a misnomer. The boxes attract not only bluebirds, but at least three other cavity dwellers: tree swallows, house wrens and house sparrows. The interrelationship between the species makes for a dynamic that I had barely fathomed before I started monitoring the trail.

All three species – and an occasional chickadee – converge on the boxes at roughly the same time of year, seeking the shelter, safety and warmth that a sturdy box set five feet above the ground provides. They bring their own bedding: for the bluebird, a soft grass; for the tree swallow, a combination of grasses, twigs and feathers of other species; for the wren, a mass of twigs.



Bluebirds are usually the first to arrive. By late April in 2017, they had established nests in half of the boxes. At that time, there were still about 10 boxes that were empty, and the remaining boxes contained tree swallow and wren nests.

Generally, squatters' rights are preserved: first come, first served. But a bluebird's ownership of its nest can be tenuous, and there are obstacles at every turn. Bluebirds are frequently challenged by house sparrows and tree swallows, with the end result being too gruesome to tell.

If a bluebird successfully defends its box, the female will lay a clutch of eggs. Approximately one month later, the baby bluebirds will fledge – if all goes well. Those first four weeks are subject to the vicissitudes of weather, the presence of insects and competition from other birds, particularly the house sparrow.

Introduced to the U.S. in the mid-1800s, the house sparrow has become the “bad egg” in the bluebird preservation saga. Despite its diminutive size, it is an aggressive bird and frequently drives other birds out of their nests, smashes their eggs or kills the adults. The house sparrow's deeds provide the kind of weekly drama that police crime blotters covered when I was a reporter. Witnessing their intrusions can be demoralizing, and never more was that the case than one day in early May 2017. In box 8, behind the Resource Center, four eggs were missing, the remnant of one all that remained from an apparent house sparrow raid. Another invasion hit box 21. There had been eggs and two young birds a few days earlier, but now all that remained was a single egg. A third plundering in box 27 was too gory to recount, but suffice to say there were no survivors among four birds well on their way to fledging.

Bluebird enemy number two, are the larvae of bloodsucking Protocalliphora flies, commonly known as blow flies, which can kill a nest of birds in a few days. If we are lucky, we will catch an infestation early, and if any birds are still alive, we provide a new, clean nest. It feels strange, acting as a surrogate parent bird, but if it's essential to the survival of the birds, I'll do it. First removing the birds and gently putting them in my hat, I then improvise a nest, making a circular shape (much less skillfully crafted than the real thing) out of dried grass. Replacing the fouled nest with the new one, I nestle the birds back in it, and hope for the best. To my knowledge, in most cases the birds have survived and fledged.

While the competition for shelter and breeding grounds can be intense, so is the persistence to survive. In late June 2017, after the house sparrow attacks, there were 10 nests with healthy bluebird activity. Three contained eggs and the rest contained young, with no signs of attacks or infestations.

The Ultimate Reward

Much of what goes on around us in the natural world we seldom notice, even though it is readily observable. Monitoring the BFEC bluebird trail allows me -- a virtual novice in biology -- to experience a wonder of nature at an intimate level. After about three years of monitoring the boxes, I had an epiphany: by learning to recognize birds by their nests, estimating their state of development and identifying threats to them, I was performing the work of a scientist. A sense of a newfound competency came over me. By becoming a specialist in one species, I deepened my curiosity about the hundreds of others, plant and animal, on the BFEC property and beyond. That – I believe – is the ultimate reward for walking the bluebird trail.

If you would like to be a bluebird monitor for the BFEC, please contact Noelle Jordan at 740-427-5052, or jordan2@kenyon.edu.

MUDPUPIES AND THE VALUE OF A DEDICATED VOLUNTEER

by Noelle Jordan

This summer, Zach Statler, a biology major at Wittenberg University and a resident of Mount Vernon, has been volunteering at the BFEC working on a survey of aquatic organisms. One morning, he came in from the field and said, “I found some mudpuppies in one of our streams!”

Well, I’m not going to tell you which stream they’re in, but I am going to tell you about this cool critter that the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) website says is “generally uncommon” in Ohio.

The mysterious mudpuppy (*Necturus maculosus maculosus*) has smooth brown skin with dark gray spots and commonly grows up to 12 inches long during its 20-year life span. Its most distinctive features are red external gills on either side of the head. Some think these gills make them look sinister. Some see these gills differently.

“They look like they’ve got feather dusters on the side of their head,” says biologist Greg Lipps. The program manager for amphibian and reptile conservation for the Ohio Biodiversity Conservation Partnership between the Ohio State University and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Lipps notes that mudpuppies and hellbenders are frequently misidentified. Both are rather large, and they are both permanently aquatic – the only two permanently aquatic salamanders in Ohio, in fact.

Mudpuppies can be found throughout Ohio in a variety of freshwater habitats - small streams, large rivers, ponds and lakes. They can live in cold, clear, highly oxygenated water as well as warm, muddy water. Mostly nocturnal, they feed on crayfish, insects, worms and snails.

How many of these creatures are in the waters around the BFEC? Our volunteer Zach is determined to find out. By the end of this summer, he will have spent over 300 hours – all volunteer time, mind you – surveying ponds, streams and stretches of the Kokosing River to identify as many fish, salamanders and macroinvertebrates as he can find. He hopes to work as an aquatic biologist after he graduates this December.



Photo: Mudpuppy



Photo: Hellbender

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

by Noelle Jordan



Estelle Parker has been a dedicated volunteer for the BFEC since spring 2017. She spends her time working with little kids leading school field trips. Since she started with us, Estelle has served over 56 hours connecting children to nature. This spring, in particular, she was instrumental in helping us expand our field trip season through the end of May.

I recently had an opportunity to chat with Estelle. Here's what she had to say....

What do you do as a volunteer at the BFEC?

I help out with field trips for local school kids by guiding the children through one of four of the activities that Noelle has designed for their visit.

Why did you get involved as a volunteer at the BFEC?

I moved to the Gambier area five years ago. I spent the first few years running back and forth to Cleveland to care for our house there. When our house sold, I found myself with free time. BFEC lets me fill that time while combining two things I like: being outside and working with children.

What new skills have you learned while volunteering at the BFEC?

I've learned to catch tadpoles in a net and can't wait to bring my grandchildren when they are in town so we can catch them together.

Do you have a favorite BFEC story?

This spring, I was co-teaching with a Kenyon student one day along the river trail. Together, we took the kids on a nature scavenger hunt. The kids had to find four or five objects that we had placed on the trail. One of the objects was a picture of a bluebird. When the Kenyon student referred to the picture, he said it was a blue jay. I told him that the photo was actually of a bluebird, and set out to show him a blue jay, so he would know the difference. While I saw three or four blue jays that morning, I was never able to show him one! In order to stay on schedule all morning, he and

I had to go in two different directions - he had to run back to the start of our walk to meet the next group of students, while I walked our current group to their next station. Every time he ran back, a blue jay would fly across my path. I never got to show him a jay!

What do you like to do when you're not at the BFEC?

When I'm not at BFEC I like to spend my time in my gardens, cooking, working on crossword puzzles and most of all spending time with my friends and family (including my fur babies).

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I'm the middle kid of a family of 12. I grew up in Toledo. I met my husband while attending OSU. I dropped out of school when we married and moved to New Orleans. My son and daughter were born there before we headed back north to Cleveland. While in Cleveland I finally finished my undergraduate degree at Cleveland State University. We lived in the Cleveland area for almost 30 years before moving to the Gambier area. For the most part I was a stay at home mom who worked part time as a substitute teacher in East Cleveland.

Are you reading anything right now? If so, what?

I am currently reading "Lusitania" by Diana Preston at a glacial pace.

What else would you like to share with everyone?

I would like to encourage others to volunteer somewhere.

A DREAM, A KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR, AND A LADY

by Noelle Jordan, Manager



Once upon a time, in a land far away from Kenyon's campus (.6 miles from the bookstore to be exact), the small staff of the BFEC had a dream: to find (hire) a Lord or Lady (a recent Kenyon graduate) who would save them (work full-time for a 12 month appointment).

It was a beautiful dream! This Lord or Lady would help them expand their reach into the surrounding kingdom (er, community), and in

their time of greatest need, the Lord or Lady would help them to conquer the horrible beast that lurks in the deep, dark forest (privet, multiflora rose, etc.).

Alas, this dream was not possible. And so the small staff of the BFEC carried on as best they could.

But then one day, a knight in shining armor pulled up on his steed (a Prius, I believe), and proclaimed, "I'll save you! My family is here to help!" And with that, members of the illustrious and munificent Brown Family bestowed a generous endowment on the BFEC. This endowment made their dream possible.

And so the small staff of the BFEC began the arduous journey (selection process) to find the Lord or Lady who would save them. After many intense battles (interviews) and much gnashing of teeth (too many qualified candidates!), the small staff of the BFEC found the answer to their dream: Lady Madeleine Morgan, a 2018 Kenyon grad!

Lady Madeleine (Maddie) hails from a kingdom in Massachusetts. Our heroine ventured to Kenyon to study anthropology and environmental studies. After four grueling (and also fun) years, her dauntless and valiant efforts resulted in a standing of magna cum laude, and seven semesters on the merit list.

Lady Madeleine swept in with a burst of glory on June 1 and will remain at the BFEC through May 2019. She will toil alongside the small staff of the BFEC while conquering challenges (gaining marketable skills) on every front. And the small staff of the BFEC, which is now one person larger, will live happily ever after.

This is not the end.

The generous endowment from the Brown Family will fund this position ad infinitum. When Madeleine leaves us at the end of her 12-month appointment, another Kenyon grad will take her place. And so, the dream will continue.

Maddie says, "I absolutely love to read (guilty pleasure is science fiction, but my favorite book has to be "The Nix" by Nathan Hill), hike, and get lost in new places. I'm an obsessed runner with hopes to run the Chicago marathon soon, and I've been trying to convince myself I like biking as well so I can pursue some triathlons. I love to horseback ride and spend time at barns and around animals when I get the opportunity. And I try to spend as much time as possible with my dog, Bailey."

BFEC MEMBERS February-May

BENEFACTOR

The Community Foundation of Mount Vernon & Knox County- grant for BFEC Field Trip Scholarship Fund
Margo de Camp and David M. Marietta
The George B. Storer Fund at the Miami Foundation, at the direction of Doug Givens
Margaret Newell
Jay Sears
Town and Country Garden Club

PATRON

Gene Bailey
Geoffrey and Lori Brown
Ted Callam
Bob Martin
Jennifer McMahon
Dennis O'Connell
Moyna Stanton

FRIEND

Mary Baer
Sam & Paula Barone
Chris Bickford & Karen Bagne
Joe Creamer & Lauren Smith
Kami & Eric Diehl
Jim Dunham & Ree Metcalf
Noelle Jordan
Michael Lisak & Monique Slater

BFEC *by the numbers*

9108

Total people served this year

894

Guests at BFEC for earth day

855

Elementary students, teachers and chaperones enjoyed field trips in April and May

850+

Hours served by volunteers from January 1 through June 30

297

Kenyon students and faculty at the BFEC this spring

177

Current members

113

Volunteers made our spring programs and events a success

4

Full-time staff

UPCOMING EVENTS

Plein Air Painting Tuesday evenings, 6-8 p.m.

Bring your chair easel and spend the evening hours painting in a peaceful setting. The wildlife garden, ponds and trails are all waiting to be painted.

Meet at the BFEC picnic pavilion. *Weather permitting*

Playing Outdoors: A Music Class for Families Tuesdays and Thursdays, July 10-Aug. 2

Dr. Rebecca Abbott leads families with children up to 9 years old in songs and music activities about playing outdoors. **Program fee is \$125 per family. Register by July 16.**

Workshop: Stream Quality Monitoring July 11, 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Join us and catch river critters including crayfish and young insects, and discover what they tell us about the river's health. Fish expert Brian Zimmerman will show participants how to net small fish, and participants can sign up to become a monitoring volunteer for ODNR.

Wear old clothes and closed-toe shoes for wading in the river. **Meet at the Canoe Access**

Parking Lot at 10115 Laymon Road in Gambier.

Nature Photography for Grades 4-6, with BFEC and Gund Gallery July 12, 1-5 p.m.

In this free program for students entering fourth through sixth grades, Gund Gallery staff will teach a few photography techniques and then help students practice their skills outdoors.

Cameras will be provided. **Register by July 10 by calling 740-427-5052.**

Nature Photography: Focus on Wildflowers July 21, 8 a.m.-noon

In this final program of the BFEC's nature photography series, participants will learn the challenges and rewards of macro photography and looking for the small details in nature.

Register by July 16. For information on registration and fees, contact 740-427-5052.

Meet at the BFEC Resource Center.

Ohio Wildlife: Their Rise and Fall July 28, 2-3:30 p.m.

Learn about the history of Ohio wildlife from before European settlement to today: bison, passenger pigeons, beaver, bear, wolves, pheasant, quail, and the success stories of the bald eagle and eastern bluebird. Following a presentation, participants will enjoy an easy walk through the prairie to explore activities that promote local wildlife. **Meet at the BFEC Resource Center.**

Nature's Keepers Outdoor Adventure Camp July 30-Aug. 3, 9 a.m.-noon

Children entering fourth through sixth grades are invited to join the BFEC in nature games, splashing in the river, building forts in the pine plantation and more.

For registration and fees, call 740-427-5052 or email jordan2@kenyon.edu.

Nature Prints for Grades 4-6, with BFEC and Gund Gallery Aug. 9, 1-5 p.m.

In this free program for students entering fourth through sixth grades, participants will explore what linoleum, gelatin and the sun have in common by using those tools to make prints of things found in nature. **Register by Aug. 7 by calling 740-427-5052.**

2018 River Rally Sept. 15, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

The Kokosing River is one of only 14 Ohio Scenic Rivers. Celebrate this community treasure with a river cleanup and free lunch. Participants can walk or canoe the river from Riverside Park to Mount Vernon Avenue. Bring your own canoe, or use one of a limited number of canoes available first-come, first-served. Wear closed-toe shoes. For more information, contact 740-393-6704 or randycanterbury@co.knox.co.us. **Meet at the CA&C Depot, 501 S. Main St. in Mount Vernon.**

Miller Observatory Open House Sept. 28, 9-11 p.m.

Enjoy telescopic views of celestial sites, including the moon, planets, and star clusters and nebulae. The program will be canceled if skies are cloudy.

Meet at the Miller Observatory at 19123 Gambier Road (Route 229), Gambier.



The Green Corner

WALKER'S POND TRAIL: THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

by Lisa Schott, Director, Philander Chase Conservancy

Have you experienced the beauty of a walk along the new Walker's Pond trail loop at the Brown Family Environmental Center (BFEC)? If not, I encourage you to make it a summer goal if you live locally, or a "next reunion" goal if you live far away. Park your car in the Observatory parking lot, and it's a short walk to the pond. You can also keep walking and access miles of BFEC trails! I appreciate the BFEC staff for creating the trail because it is a favorite walk for the beautiful green space and farmland views it provides and for the peace of being by the pond. Thank you, Noelle, Shane, Jill and Dave.

I'm also thankful for the Walker's Pond trail because it is a great example of the power of strong partnerships. In our work at Philander Chase Conservancy, we benefit from numerous partnerships with environmentally-minded people and organizations, and we are able to accomplish more by working closely together. The Walker's Pond Trail was the result of partnerships with the landowners, Carole and Hal Walker '57, who have a deep appreciation for the history and beauty of their property and worked with us to conserve the land in perpetuity with a conservation easement. Our most generous Conservancy partner and donor, John Woollam '61, H'08 purchased the property for the College and the Brown Family Environmental Center. Finally, the Philander Chase Conservancy board unanimously and enthusiastically granted BFEC the right to continue the trail through a section of property owned by the Conservancy.

At the Conservancy, we are grateful beyond measure for the good people with whom we partner to conserve the beauty of the farms, woodlands, waters and open spaces surrounding Kenyon College and to preserve the rural character of the region at large. Our special thanks to our colleagues at the BFEC who make our work more successful and much more enjoyable!

Thank you to our **volunteers.**

Thanks to these enthusiastic and energetic volunteers! They make our programs and conservation initiatives possible.

Abby Kauff	Dominique Roe (<i>MVNU student</i>)	Jacqueline Sanchez	Noelle O'Neal
Adam Brown	Dora Segall	Jess Kotnour	Peter Thompson
Alex Levy	Eli Baumann	Jessica Meza	Peyton Thomas
Ali Fox	Ellen Beller	Jim Hieronimus (<i>community volunteer</i>)	Phoebe Killea
Ally Merkel	Ellie Randolph	John "Fletcher" Hartman	Ronan Elliott
Angie Perkins	Emma Wender	Joshua Walmer	Sarah Dendy
Annamarie Morrison	Eric Baumeister	Julia Eckberg	Sarah McPeck
Austin Hulse	Erin Keleske	Kat Norton	Sarah Yeargin
Becca Foley	Erin LeVar	Katie Perrin	Seamus Claire
Ben Fuhr	Estelle Parker (<i>community volunteer</i>)	Kayla Alcaide	Shawn Dailey (<i>Kenyon staff</i>)
Ben Nutter	Franny Wiggins	Kaylin Allshouse	Sigal Felber
Bjorn Nilsson	Gabrielle Ivanier	Kendall Lloyd	Stephanie Walsh
Brennan Steele	Greg Boyer	Kendra Mosher	Suzanne Goldberg
Brian Miller (<i>community volunteer</i>)	Griffin Burrough	Laura David	Tanner Marsh
Carson Weisbord	Hannah Spector	Lily Stachowiak	Terri Hieronimus (<i>community volunteer</i>)
Cassady Neviska	Hannah Wedig	Lindsay Spitz	Thao Nguyen
Catherine Smith	Harris White	Lindy Wittenberg	Professor Tim Shutt (<i>Kenyon faculty</i>)
Chloe Berger	Heather Pacheco	Luke Hester	Tyler Raso
Claire Bradham	Henry Biedron	Mabel Jones	William Brewer
Claire Oxford	Henry Terhune	Maddie Lockyer	Xiaoxuan Hu
Claire Sears	Kenyon College Hillel	Madeleine Ruwitch	Zac LaRocca-Straville
Connor McEldowney	Hulda Geng	Maleah Miller	Zach Statler (<i>Witternberg University student</i>)
Dana Oakes	Isaac Susser	Michaela Brydon	
Daniel Kim	Isabel Formby	Nicolas Pulido	
Dianne Mack (<i>retired Kenyon staff</i>)	Jack Cheston	Nicolette Peters	

BFEC MEMBERS continued

FAMILY

Fred & Victoria Baumann
Elizabeth Gibbs
Sam McDonald
Pamela McMahon
Sarah Mitchell Buller
Joan Muellerleile & Dumont Jones
Adam Lucas
Chris & Arianna Smith
Lori & Terry Totman
Bege & Denny Wiegman

INDIVIDUAL

David Blackwell
Daniel Brochetti
Ruth Griffing
Ann Laudeman

MEMORIAL GIFTS

Joan Muellerleile & Dumont Jones in memory of Cleo Black Bear
Ada Jacobs in memory of Charlie Jacobs

IN-KIND DONATIONS

Daniel Brochetti donated several garden tools - thank you!



Brown Family Environmental Center

at Kenyon College

bfec.kenyon.edu | 740-427-5050

OUR MISSION

The Brown Family Environmental Center exists to support the academic goals of Kenyon College, to provide opportunities for education and research, to engage Central Ohioans of all ages with nature, and to conserve the natural diversity of the Kokosing River valley.

OUR STAFF

Jill Kerkhoff, *Facilities Coordinator and Office Administrator*

Shane McGuire, *Land Manager Naturalist*

Noelle Jordan, *Manager*

Madeleine Morgan, *Post Baccalaureate Fellow*

BROWN FAMILY ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER | 9781 LAYMON ROAD | GAMBIER, OH 43022-9623

CONSIDER MAKING A GIFT

TO MAKE A GIFT, PLEASE FILL OUT THE INFORMATION BELOW, DETACH THE SHEET AND SEE MAILING INSTRUCTIONS.

There are many reasons to give, including the satisfaction of knowing you're a part of critical environmental education and conservation programs. Receive preferred access to workshops, a hard copy of our newsletters, and a discount on bird seed. *Use the form below to send your contribution today.*

NAME (FIRST, MIDDLE, LAST)

ADDRESS

CITY STATE ZIP/POSTAL CODE COUNTRY

(_____) MOBILE PHONE

EMAIL ADDRESS

Membership level:

- Student \$20 Individual \$35 Family \$50
- Friend \$100 Patron \$250 Benefactor \$1000+

Amount enclosed: _____

- My check, payable to Kenyon College, is enclosed
- Please bill my ____ Visa or ____ Mastercard
Card number _____ Exp. date _____

Your donation is tax deductible as allowed by law. The Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon College is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization.

Mail to: BFEC, P.O. Box 508, Gambier, Ohio 43022