

# FIELD NOTES



## Counting Bluebirds Over the Years

BY MIRIAM DEAN-OTTING, BFEC VOLUNTEER AND  
PROFESSOR EMERITA OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES



Photo: Don Faulkner, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eastern\_Bluebird\_(17703040037).jpg. Licensed under Creative Commons.

Across a ravine in Gambier, we have neighbors whom we have known for over 30 years, Marilyn and Geoff Stokes. Both were early volunteers at the beginnings of the BFEC in the late '90s. During the long COVID-19 spring, summer, fall and winter, we stayed in touch mainly through exchanging emails about the birds and other shared fauna. For instance, a nearby nest had produced red-headed woodpeckers who soon began to visit their feeders. Occasionally, we would sit together at a good social distance, but mostly it was the emails that kept us connected. Although we reported on all kinds of birds, significantly, it was our shared love of bluebirds that was the primary focus. Both Marilyn and Geoff had been involved in establishing the BFEC bluebird trail and monitoring the bluebirds from the beginning.

Marilyn and Geoff are transplants from England. Their love of nature started when they were young children, encouraged by their parents. Marilyn describes how walks with her father and brother were a regular feature of Sundays in their small rural community 20 miles or so north of London. Her father would share his vast knowledge of birds, flowers and trees as they walked. Marilyn remembers those walks as the “greatest foundation for her love of the natural world.” Geoff similarly had early childhood exposure to nature. Living on the edge of a mining village in the middle of England, Geoff raised a homing pigeon and absorbed a lot from his father’s passion for environmental issues and history. It was the 22 nests that he observed as a boy that sparked his interest as well. The shell of an abandoned and gutted bomb shelter caught his eye when he noticed a nightingale in the area. His patient observation led to his discovering the nightingale nest in a crevice of the old building where the birds were raising a family. He became quite an avid nest watcher, climbing trees to get a better glimpse.

In their early volunteering days at the BFEC, Marilyn and Geoff performed various roles. For about five years, after her retirement from off-campus studies at Kenyon, Marilyn had a 10 hour per week job with a small office on the second floor of the farm house. At

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first she coordinated the school trips and the student volunteers, beginning in spring 1999. Eventually, about 20 nest boxes were set up. They checked bluebird boxes together and independently. Some of their notes and photographs are still in the binder that we use today when monitoring. Marilyn mentioned Dale Glass, the Knox County coordinator of the Ohio Bluebird Society, who enthusiastically taught children how to make nest boxes. Geoff laid out a lot of the trails alongside others, mowed in the garden, and took his chainsaw along the trails on Route 229. Ray Heithaus, professor emeritus of environmental studies and biology, reported that “at the time of her (Marilyn’s) retirement from the BFEC office, none of us thought she could be replaced.” (Of course, the job eventually developed into full-time, and Jill Kerkhoff has had that role for many years, overseeing the garden with great skill and imagination.)

**In early May 2020**, Marilyn reported that the bluebirds had nested in one of their boxes, but soon their hopes were dashed as the house sparrows pushed them out. At the end of the month, a bluebird pair discovered a nest box on their deck and started to bring nesting materials into it. At the same time, a male and female began to appear near our porch, feasting on the mealworms. I began to notice that the path they flew led directly to Marilyn and Geoff’s deck. This was the beginning of a months-long partnership in backyard bluebird monitoring. First, four eggs appeared, then five. The male

carefully guarded the female as she fed at our feeder. By the third week of June, there were five hatchlings in the nest, and the male adult feistily fended off a blue jay. The young fledged about two weeks later. After several days the male fed a fledgling on the magnolia branch above our feeder, and three lined up high on a tulip poplar branch while their father dashed back and forth with mealworms. This activity continued until, soon after, the whole family was perched on the edge of the feeder, sometimes being fed and other times fending for themselves. Once a brave fledgling even withstood a threatening house sparrow. About a month later, the young, paler versions of their parents had achieved a good bit of independence, still hanging out with one or both parents, but often appearing by themselves. For a good part of the fall, and then again in early winter, we had bluebirds living nearby, often feeding on the mealworms.

Last spring, we put up our first bluebird nest box. It seemed an ideal location, facing east in an open area with plenty of nearby coverage. Chickadees have beaten the bluebirds to it for two springs in a row. We have observed a bluebird peering into the box, so we remain hopeful. But we can hardly complain that the pair chose to nest on Marilyn and Geoff’s deck, for we had wonderful viewing of them all summer in 2020, and hope for the same this summer.

Meanwhile, the BFEC birds have been quite busy this summer. By April 19, we already had 30 bluebird eggs and a few Carolina chickadee eggs as well. Over the winter, we moved the boxes away from heavily shaded areas with a view to giving bluebirds more of a chance to nest before the house wrens. Renumbering is keeping the monitors on their toes as we grow accustomed to a slightly new route this year and observe whether the nest box shuffling is possibly leading to more fledged bluebirds. The nest box volunteers, under the direction of Shane Maguire, land manager and naturalist, monitor the nest boxes annually from April to August. They are walking in the footsteps of those who helped launch the bluebird trail, among them Ray Heithaus, Dale Glass and, of course Marilyn and Geoff Stokes, who will be the first to point out that there were many other volunteers, both Kenyon students and local people not affiliated with Kenyon.

An article in the spring 2013 issue of Field Notes reported that 650 bluebirds had been raised in the nest boxes since 1996. The article expressed the hope that the goal of 2,000 chicks by 2020 would be met. We did not meet that goal with the bluebirds, for our estimate through 2020 is 1,208 fledglings. It should be noted that a cold snap in April of 2020 was devastating for the nesting birds. Nevertheless, the total count of bluebirds, tree swallows and house wrens fledged at the BFEC since the nest boxes were set up is 2,000, a terrific number from a relatively short period in the BFEC’s history.



**Geoff and Marilyn Stokes,**  
longtime BFEC volunteers



# Summer Begins with Swallows

BY CECILY KING '22, BFEC STUDENT MANAGER

**I'm from the U.K.** When I was growing up, the arrival of the swallows each spring brought with it joy, excitement and the promise of summer. When I moved to Gambier, I was delighted to find the same swallows that still herald the same sense of anticipation.

Eight species of swallows migrate from South America, with the most common being the barn swallow, the tree swallow and the cliff swallow. Swallows are special because they migrate to warmer climates during the cold months and return in the early summer months, announcing the start of brighter, warmer days. From the U.K, they migrate to Africa; from the U.S, they migrate to Mexico and South America.

Barn swallows have formed a close association with humans and are usually found in rural areas, like Gambier. As their name suggests, they prefer to build mud nests in barns while foraging for insects over open fields. Swallows have, historically, also nested in caves. These swallows can be extremely common and are identified by their rusty forehead and throat and buffy undersides. Like most swallows, they have the signature forked tail. However, a unique quality that separates them from alternative species is their habit of getting help from other birds to feed their young. These “helpers” are usually older siblings from a previous nest, but unrelated young swallows may help as well. Barn swallows are known as the most abundant and widely distributed swallow species in the world.

The tree swallow differs from other swallows, as it does not have a forked tail. These beautiful birds have iridescent blue-green feathers and white fronts and can be seen zipping acrobatically through the air, feathers flashing as they nab insects in the sunlight. They prefer lakes, ponds, and wetlands and

nest in boxes and tree cavities, and they are extremely vocal with their sweet, chirping calls. Researchers have found this species to be especially helpful in making major advances in several branches of ecology. They are among the best studied bird species in North America. Tree swallows are also the first species of swallows to return from migration. When arriving, they form enormous, shimmering flocks, swirling above a potential roosting sight like a tornado, before dropping down to nest — quite a flamboyant, beautiful spectacle to celebrate the start of summer.

The cliff swallow can be seen swarming around bridges and overpasses in the summer, which makes them easy to spot and admire. Like barn swallows, they build mud nests, and their bright, rusty faces can be seen glowing from the entrance. This species of swallow is extremely sociable, always appearing in large groups. In poor lighting, cliff swallows appear a murky brown color, with dark throats and white underparts. However, in the sunlight, their metallic, dark blue backs and pale pumpkin colored rumps are revealed. They tend to fly higher in the air than other species of swallows, making them more recognizable. They gain their name from their tendency to build their homes on vertical cliff faces, nesting in colonies that can sometimes be as large as 3,700 birds. Cliff swallows prefer to feed in areas near and over water, mixing with other species of swallows, and communicate with each other and work as a team when searching for food. If a single cliff swallow finds an insect swarm away from its colony, it gives a specific call to alert the others that food is nearby.

Whatever the species, the swallow is an extremely versatile and beautiful animal and brings with it the promise of hope and warmer days ahead.

# When Slugs Get More Sluggish

BY KENDALL LLOYD '21, BFEC STUDENT MANAGER

**You might not think slugs can live life more slowly,** but this is the time of year when they do just that. Despite their name, slugs begin life with a voracious appetite, only slowing when late spring turns to early summer.

Slugs begin hatching in early spring, surrounded by the sweet moisture from new rain. Emerging from their eggs with an insatiable hunger, the newborn slug, or neonate, prefers a diet of algae and fungi. As slugs enter their juvenile period, they become all the more ravenous and can eat up to two and a half times their weight in a single day. Juvenile slugs expand their palate, enabling them to consume more of the luscious plants that surround them. They have arrived on the scene at the right time, as vegetation is fresh and rapidly growing alongside the slugs in the early summer.

Within the vast array of slug species there are a variety of dietary practices, some of which include scavenger tendencies. These slugs may also consume dead leaves or other dead insects. Given their need to maintain moisture, slugs prefer

nocturnal feasts, when the cover of darkness will shield them from daytime predators and keep them from drying out.

Summer brings a more strenuous time for these creatures. As the days grow warmer and drier, the slugs must retreat into the ground in order to preserve the moisture essential to their survival. During the hottest parts of the summer, slugs enter a period of aestivation, a process similar to the low metabolic period of hibernation, but induced to preserve water. Encapsulated in a fortress of mucus, the frugal slug can actually survive for months without consuming any food. On some of the hottest days they can lose 50 percent of their body weight, but still many slugs prevail. Resilient as ever, after only two hours of rehydration, slugs can return to their regular size. Wisely waiting until the harshest heat of the summer is behind them, the slugs begin to reemerge. The moistening soil of the late summer entices slugs to leave their shelter and once more seek out adventure, exploring the many delicacies that surround them.

# Egg-cellent Beginnings

AVA-ROSE BEECH '21, BFEC POST-BACCALAUREATE FELLOW, 2021-22

**The sound of summer** is a symphony and celebration of life — the buzzing and humming of insects, warm wind rustling tree leaves and grasses, and the evening chirping of crickets. But perhaps some of the most prevalent and beautiful of summer's sounds are the bird songs and chirps that fill the air. Upon returning to Gambier from my hometown of Santa Monica, CA, to begin my position as the 2021-2022 BFEC post-baccalaureate fellow, I was immediately struck by how much I had missed the sound of birds while I was away. But where do all these birds come from? If we turn back the seasons from summer to spring, many of the swallows, swifts, cuckoos, hummingbirds and finches we see flying through the sky were only small sacks of albumen (egg white) and yolk filled with vital nutrients, antioxidants and antimicrobials, encased by a semi-porous layer of calcium carbonate, and covered with pigment. That is to say, these birds were eggs.

One bird that you are likely to see when exploring the BFEC is the barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica erythrogaster*). (For more information about the barn swallow, see Cecily King's article, Summer Begins with Swallows.) After spending this past year researching barn swallow eggs with Iris Levin, assistant professor of biology and environmental studies, I discovered just how astounding and complex swallow eggs are. Bird eggs are formed in the female's shell gland and then covered by a layer of calcium carbonate. Once the shell is formed, pigment patterns known as maculation are deposited on the shell. Barn swallows lay cream colored eggs with reddish-brown maculation patterns (see photo at right). You

might find barn swallow eggs around the BFEC, or you might also find the distinctive bright blue of a robin's egg or the pure white of belted kingfisher eggs.

Bird eggs are not only beautiful but also incredible in their ability to provide a perfect, almost completely self-sufficient micro-habitat to protect and nourish the developing embryos. Egg yolks are filled with nutrients, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants for the developing chick, while the egg white has antimicrobial properties to protect the embryo and keep it healthy. Egg shells are a structural wonder — strong enough to support a mother's weight during incubation, yet thin enough for the baby chick to break free when it is time to hatch and porous enough to allow gas exchange during incubation. The speckling and spotting patterns on many eggshells are not only stunning to observe but may actually provide structural reinforcement for thin or weak spots on the eggshell. Bird eggs are amazingly complex, visually striking and biologically elegant.

Having spent so much of my past year thinking about eggs, I can't help but think of the beauty of new beginnings. I am reminded that so many of the birds filling the mid-July air with bright flashes of color and beautiful songs were just tiny eggs only a few months before. As I begin my new position as the BFEC post-baccalaureate fellow, I am excited to embark on my new beginning, and I'm looking forward to many adventures during what I know will be an egg-cellent year.

# Not a Lost Year

BY LUKE HESTER '20, BFEC POST BACCALAUREATE FELLOW, 2020-21

**When talking to just about anyone** these days, I find that people are quick to declare this past year as a lost year of their lives. For sure, difficulties arose for enormous amounts of people — difficulties of which I have little place to speak, being largely unaffected by tragedy as a result of the pandemic. I write not to diminish the struggles of many, but to offer the hope of a few, intending to add a positive reflection of the past year which, for me, became anything but a lost year.

Where did I find hope in these past 12 months? Midsummer mornings and afternoons found camaraderie and connections built around the removal of non-native invasive species on the property. Roots removed mechanically from the earth formed piles that provided homes for foraging fauna, while

making way for the sun to soak into the cleared ground. Native wildflowers, ready to make their break for the surface, now germinate and provide swaths of unique natural artworks as I walk these same trails with old friends. Garden plots that we edged and weeded fostered magical butterflies and pollinators, and let me parent over the lives of flowers I came to love and protect.

I have found hope in the inspiration that was kindled in the minds and hearts of young, curious souls, myself included, while rediscovering the simple beauty of an outdoor adventure. In the summer, we built stick shelters and got a fright from a gentleman troll — well, the kids assured us they were not scared. Even looking for butterflies gave us a reason to think about nature in unnatural ways (unnatural to us, I should say).

Making nature natural has been both the most unexpected benefit of this year and a newly invigorated lifelong goal. What before to my eyes was just a bunch of different shapes of green now greet me as unique personalities, layers of species working in harmony, which I can only begin to understand. I walk in a place and yearn to know every plant, insect and animal I see. I hope this curiosity was shared by the families I took out leaf-hunting in the fall or galavanting around the river in the summer.

A boy, the son of one of my professors, recently asked me to name every wildflower he could find on a walk. Then he proceeded to share them as a gift to his grandmother. Ignoring the blatant issue of removing flowers,



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Cathy Youtkus: Vintage bird banding supplies and tools, vintage field guides; historical bird books.  
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## CORRECTIONS FROM THE WINER ISSUE

The following donors made gifts in memory of loved ones. Please accept our sincerest apologies that these were not mentioned in the Winter 2021 issue of Field Notes.

Katherine Leggett, in memory of James T. Kyle '59

Mark Leggett, in memory of James T. Kyle '59

John Moffitt, in memory of John D. Sutcliffe '68



my heart nearly melted. This magnanimous boy will remember that nature is a gift meant to be shared.

A gift shared by college students in sculpture classes solving how to integrate nature with their man-made objects. Shared by volunteers who realize the incredible weight of their efforts and revitalizing benefits of being outdoors, working toward a common goal. Shared by children making fairy homes for imaginary little friends living deep in the forest. Each small wonder is shared and appreciated by someone, and my time here turned me into a watchman who wants to hold a lantern up to each beautiful feature for others to notice.

This is not to say the year was lacking in challenges. The sight of me scrambling to pull off my first major program and emitting sounds only the trees around Bishop's

Backbone have heard can attest to that. But watching those who loved that same program return at its end, and hearing praise from a participant months later, brought more than enough joy to know the struggles were well worth it.

I have become aware of more people this year appreciating, loving, protecting, administering, tending and sharing this environment than I ever have before. In the face of adversity, scores of dedicated locals, students and community members have put in hours of effort to continue addressing their shared interest in preserving the natural experience. This year gave me hope:

Hope that every positive experience with nature will have an impact that lasts longer than a pandemic. Hope that these memories, perhaps as small as bonding with a professor about the pleasure of reading poetry to some cows, will impact the very way that each of these individ-

uals posture themselves toward nature.

My own posture has shifted immensely. From casual hiker and removed observer to citizen naturalist, I know there is power in the shared experience of natural curiosity. Will my future neighbors be ecstatic about the formation of an invasive plant removal league and planting of a native wildflower garden to encourage bees and other pollinators? Hopefully, because it will happen either way.

I could go on for days about every experience, but readers will already know the good that happens here at the Brown Family Environmental Center. If I was left with one lesson to share, it is this: whatever the adversity, we can remind each other of the good standing right outside the door, in nature, and continue to fight the good fight. For nature. For ourselves.



## GREEN CORNER

# The Kenyon Farm

RYAN HOTTLE, KENYON FARM MANAGER

**Ah, spring!** I know it's here when I see the bright yellow flowers of winter aconite, perhaps the first bulbs to appear in many places. Aconite was followed by snowdrops, another early emerging perennial, with delicate single hanging bell-like flowers. Then, crocuses — mostly in purple and white, but also some orange specimens.

But enough about wildflowers. In spring, things at the farm really start popping up. Our hard-neck garlic, planted in fall, was up in late April and grew at an incredible pace. We mulched the garlic with straw to prevent weeds and hold in moisture against the drying action of the wind and sun. The straw will be tilled in after the garlic harvest in late July or early August, when the stems yellow and all the energy from the leaves have been stored in the deliciously pungent bulbs.

The tilled-in straw, combined with compost produced on site, will slowly enrich and enliven the soil with the carbon-rich nutrients. These nutrients provide necessary food for mycorrhizal fungi, including actinomyces and rhizobia. But earthworms, nematodes and, indeed, the entire web of wee-beasties also benefit from these nutrients.

Also in late April, we weeded and mulched onions and asparagus. Radishes and lettuce mixes were planted, and the high tunnels started filling with heat-loving crops like eggplant, peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers.

This summer, six Kenyon student workers will keep up with all the farm tasks while ensuring the animals stay healthy and happy. If you'd like to get involved as well, feel free to visit any time. To enjoy the fruits of our labor, be sure to stop at our self-serve farm stand, or come by to pick your own produce, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.



# PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

For more information about upcoming events, check [bfec.kenyon.edu](http://bfec.kenyon.edu), or join our email list to receive notifications.

## PAINT OUTSIDE

**Every Tuesday through mid-October  
4 – 7:30 p.m.**

Plein Air Painters are invited to the BFEC to paint outdoors every Tuesday this summer. These are informal gatherings with no instruction. Bring your own supplies and meet other like-minded painters. Restrooms available in the Resource Center. Please practice social distancing and wear a mask when you cannot maintain a distance of 6 feet. These opportunities will be cancelled in the event of inclement weather. *Meet at the picnic shelter.*

## OUTDOOR OM: YOGA AT THE BFEC

**Tuesdays and Thursdays through August 19  
12:10 – 12:55 p.m.**

Breathe. Use your lunch break on Tuesdays and Thursdays (starting May 25) to de-stress with an outdoor yoga class. Open to all ages and free of charge. Please bring your own mat. We will practice social distancing. Restrooms available. Class will be cancelled in the event of inclement weather. *Meet in the garden (behind the farmhouse).*

## NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY: THE ART OF TREES

*For students entering grades 4, 5 and 6*

**July 1, 8, 15  
1 – 5 p.m.**

During these programs, students will spend time outside at the BFEC, and they will spend time at the Gund Gallery on Kenyon's campus. All materials and equipment will be provided, as well as snacks and water. Students will learn how to use a digital camera and spend time taking photos of trees. We will take photos outside, and then print those photos after exploring the Gund Gallery exhibit "The Art of Trees." Register for one session only. *To register, email Noelle Jordan at [jordan2@kenyon.edu](mailto:jordan2@kenyon.edu).*

## NATURE PRINTS: THE ART OF TREES

*For students entering grades 4, 5 and 6*

**July 22, 29 and Aug 5, 12  
1 – 5 p.m.**

During these programs, students will spend time outside at the BFEC, and they will spend time at the Gund Gallery on Kenyon's campus. All materials and equipment will be provided, as well as snacks and water. Students will create solar prints and collect tree-related items. We will take these items to the Gund Gallery, where we will create several prints to take home. *Register for one session only.*

## JUST PAINT!

**August 3  
6 – 7:30 p.m.**

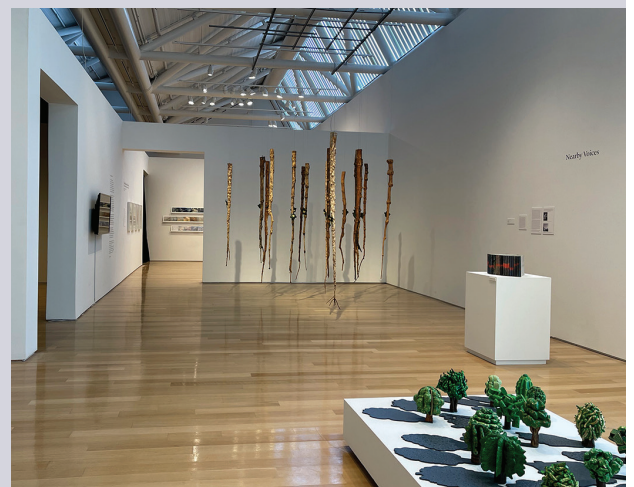
Adults are invited to spend an evening at the BFEC learning how to paint outside. Space is limited to 14 adults. Two adults will share a picnic table (which will all be arranged six feet apart) outdoors. There will not be any shared materials or supplies. Restrooms in the Resource Center will be available. *This program will be moved into the Resource Center in the event of inclement weather.*

## HISTORY OF OHIO ANIMALS

**August 19  
6:30 – 8 p.m.**

Adults are invited to spend an evening at the BFEC learning about Ohio animals. Space is limited to 24 guests, and pre-registration is required. Restrooms will be available. This is an indoor program. *Meet in the Resource Center.*

**Students entering grades 4, 5 and 6 can explore outdoor photography and printmaking, in conjunction with "The Art of Trees," on view at the Gund Gallery.**



Brown Family  
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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

Luke Hester '20, *Post Baccalaureate Fellow, 2020-21*  
Ava-Rose Beech '21, *Post Baccalaureate Fellow, 2021-22*  
Mabel Jones '21, *Student Newsletter Editor*  
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