

Habitat works

The newsletter about designing, restoring and managing wildlife habitat.
Fall 2019

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Habitat Works is published by Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to designing, restoring and managing wildlife habitat and establishing a more sustainable agriculture through direct action, education and research in partnership with public and private landowners. We welcome your comments and contributions.



Osprey Build Nests Even When They Don't Need To

By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director

Male Osprey may start building a nest before they are paired with a female. Once they have found a mate or reestablished a bond with their mate, the males collect much of the nesting material and the female arranges it. While sticks comprise most of the nest, nesting material can also include mud, sod, vines and other items, including trash. A CWH staff member even found a dog leash incorporated into a nest! Thankfully, there was no dog!

After the female has laid eggs and begins to brood them, the male will continue to carry sticks and build a new nest. The male also hunts fish to feed the brooding female and will guard the nest when the female takes a break from brooding. This, however, is not enough to keep him fully occupied.

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Often, the new nest is in a spot that is very inconvenient to someone or something else. We often get calls from Purple Martin landlords, as the Osprey love to try to place sticks on the martin houses. This will not stop the martins from using their house or their young from successfully fledging. Wind will remove most of the sticks, or they will fall off the martin house when it is

lowered for its weekly evaluation. The Purple Martins will maneuver through the sticks to the entrance of their nesting cavity.

The male Osprey will most likely stop building a new nest once he has hungry chicks to feed. In the meantime, be patient with the Osprey as he occupies his time placing sticks exactly where you do not want them. ●



Time Your Mowing to HELP and FEED WILDLIFE

Poorly timed mowing actually kills wildlife like Box Turtles and destroys pollinator habitat as well. Remember that native bees and butterflies (including Monarchs on their migration) need nectar and/or pollen throughout the growing season. If you mow a meadow or grass buffer during the growing season (April–November), you are robbing them of vital nutrition.

Ask Andi: What bird lays white eggs in my Bluebird box?



By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director

ANSWER: From your photo, this looks like white Bluebird eggs.

Normally when you find white eggs in a Bluebird box, you would immediately think of Tree Swallows. Tree Swallow eggs are pure white, are smaller than bluebird eggs, and are more pointed in shape. The nest of the Tree Swallow is constructed differently than the Bluebird nest and also contains different nesting material.

White eggs occur in up to 4–5% of Bluebirds. The eggs look pure white or

have a slightly pink hue or blue tinge. This is not a form of albinism. Normally, pigment is added to the eggshell from cells/glands in the wall of the female's oviduct. The female that lays white eggs could have a blockage of the duct that carries the blue color or an infection that has damaged the duct.

The entire clutch of eggs will be white, and the female that lays white eggs in her first clutch will always lay white eggs. These eggs are as fertile as blue eggs and produce normally colored offspring.

This past nesting season, I discovered two different nests with all white Bluebird eggs in two different counties. It was the first time in my many years of monitoring Bluebird houses that I have had this happen, and it happened twice! This just proves that you can always find something interesting in the natural world if you only take the time to notice.

CWH installs nesting structures in appropriate habitat, with a predator guard to help prevent the loss of chicks or eggs to snakes, raccoons or other predators. •

ELECTRIC FENCING WORKS!

We often talk with landowners who have given up on growing pollinator meadows, trees/shrubs for birds, sunflowers, etc. due to the damage caused by the abnormally high deer population here on the Shore. There are a variety of electric fencing systems out there that are cost-effective and easy to install and manage. We use several of them on lands that we own. Please give us a call, and we can show you how to use them effectively.

Changing Water Levels

By Ned Gerber, Wildlife Habitat Ecologist/Director

CWH has built and managed many acres of wetlands over the years and has hopefully learned a few things about caring for them along the way.

The first question of managing a wetland should be “What are you managing for?” Our answer would be “A diversity of wetland wildlife, including wild waterfowl.”

Why mention wild waterfowl specifically? For most landowners, they are the most spectacular and charismatic wetland denizens. I can get most folks interested in wild ducks wheeling around a marsh, but that task becomes more difficult if I show them aquatic invertebrates. Wetlands and their restoration need showy ambassadors, and wild waterfowl fit the bill.

CWH is fortunate to have many acres of wetlands at Barnstable Hill Farm, Bailey’s Neck and Canterbury

Farm that afford us the luxury of being able to drawdown (remove some water) at different wetlands on different schedules—or not manipulate them at all. For example, we might leave 25 acres of wetlands at full pool in one section of Canterbury while performing an early drawdown of other sections. This could provide nice shorebird mudflats (appreciated by butterflies and barn swallows as well) in the early drawdown marsh in May while maintaining nice shallow emergent wetlands that remain available to Wood Duck mothers and their broods in the full-pool wetland. Once the broods are fledged in July, we might perform a late drawdown there. Or, in a dry summer, nature will do that for us.

Very few plants grow well in standing water, and even fewer can germinate and thrive while constantly flooded. You may see oaks and gum trees in pond-like water in February and March (vernal pools), but if the water does not recede during the growing season, those trees will be

damaged and eventually perish. One of the hallmarks of newer beaver ponds is standing dead trees that are killed by being constantly immersed in water that the beavers have impounded (others are killed and felled by beaver chewing). Bald cypress and buttonbush are two woody species that can thrive under constantly flooded conditions. We use a lot of buttonbush in our wetland restoration work due to its water tolerance and benefit to pollinators, Wood Duck broods and other wildlife.

Drawdowns that expose mudflats enable us to produce moist soil plants (smartweed, wild millet, etc.) that feed waterfowl and butterflies during the fall and winter. Once flooded, these plants slowly decompose, and this produces a rich organic substrate favored by the aquatic invertebrates that are preferred by waterfowl, shorebirds and dragonfly larvae. While many folks love to see marshes at full pool, it is the fluctuating water levels that provide much of the biological “magic” of wetlands. ●



While it's always sad to see the Purple Martins leave at the end of the nesting season, their departure gives us time to count our totals for the 2019 martin season. We monitored two new sites this season—one site had one traditional house, while the other had five larger martin houses with 12 small nesting cavities each. Three sites that we have been monitoring for years each added one additional martin house.

For the 2019 nesting season, we monitored houses in Talbot, Queen Anne's and Kent counties, with a majority of the monitoring sites in Queen Anne's County.

2019 Purple Martin Survey

By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director



*Top: Day-old Purple Martin chicks.
Bottom: Nine-day-old chicks beg for food to continue their rapid growth.*

In addition to checking on the welfare of the eggs and chicks in each nest, we control English House Sparrows that try to take over the cavities. If left unmonitored, these birds will peck holes in the martin eggs and kill the chicks.

This season, 765 chicks fledged from the houses that CWH monitors—a good increase from last year's 474 chicks.

This year also saw more houses and more sites monitored. Most importantly, there was an increase in the average

number of chicks fledged from each house this year. The average jumped from 18.1 chicks per house in 2018 to 21.8 chicks per house in 2019.

In late July and early August, the area experienced extremely hot temperatures for an extended period of time. Sadly, this caused the death of some of the chicks that had not yet fledged. In addition to the weather, insecticide use and other factors can affect chick production each year.

If you have an interest in learning more about our Purple Martin program, please contact our office at 410-822-5100. ●

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Nelson Wetland *Takes Shape*



After last year's extraordinary rains and a wet spring in 2019, CWH was finally able to build a long-planned wetland on the Nelson property adjacent to Miles Creek in Talbot County. We had to ditch portions of the field to keep it

dry enough to shape the soil effectively into berms and pools. This 6-acre wetland is nicely buffered by a large area of woodland to the west, which should make it attractive to wintering wildfowl sheltering during storms.

Shorebirds were using the area before we were finished, as will many other creatures in the future. The project will also benefit water quality in Miles Creek and the Bay.