

Volunteer to Monitor Bird Boxes!



From left to right: AJ Mueller, Brandon Hartz, Noor White, Peter Kilmarx, Ann Fitzpatrick, and Richard Clark

The NIH Bluebird Box program consists of nearly two dozen NIH staff volunteers. These volunteers are critical to the success of the program and to the proliferation of the local bluebird population. Many volunteers have been active for years and have played a significant role in the resurgence of bluebirds on the Bethesda campus. Two of the longest-tenured volunteers on the Bethesda campus are Michael Bopf (13 years) and Mary Herron (12 years), both of NLM. Over time, Michael has noticed increased numbers of other species too, such as tree swallows. He notes that the campus has become “wilder,” despite the construction of new buildings. The campus

features many natural areas, which Michael believes has allowed for more diversity of wildlife. The Stoney Creek pond near the NLM is a prime example of this wildlife diversity.

Even with many established volunteers, the Bluebird Box program is very welcoming to new helpers. Inexperienced volunteers will be trained alongside the veterans, so experience with bird box monitoring is not necessary. Monitoring begins by splitting the volunteers into groups of 3-4 people, with each group responsible for 8-12 houses. Groups walk the campus and monitor their houses at least once every 2 weeks, but not more than once per week. Each bird box is designed with an easy-to-access door that can be flipped up to monitor nesting activity up close. Monitors collect data on the presence of nesting birds, the species of these birds, the quantity of unhatched eggs, the presence of insect pests and the need for box repairs.

It is also vital that volunteers identify the nests of undesirable species, like the invasive house sparrow, and remove them immediately. House sparrows compete with bluebirds for nesting locations and will attack and kill bluebirds and their young.¹ The nests of invasive house sparrows, unlike our native birds, are not protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.² Nest removal of these invasive species not only helps to control the proliferation of the house sparrow, but also frees up available housing for more desirable species. Fortunately, the nests of house sparrows (loose jumble of odds and ends; tunnel-like entrance; cream, white or gray eggs with brown speckles) are easy to identify when compared to bluebird nests (neat, cup-shaped nest; powder blue or white eggs).³ It is better to not have bird boxes at all than to allow house sparrows to nest within them.³ Invasive European



A bluebird nest on the Bethesda campus.

starlings can also be problematic for bluebirds. However, the entrance holes to the bird boxes at the NIH have been restricted in size to keep out these larger birds.⁴

If you are interested in monitoring bird boxes on the Bethesda campus, please contact the NIH Landscape Architect, [Brandon Hartz](#).