

# NATURE'S

## *Grapevine*

WASHINGTON CROSSING STATE PARK, NJ

Spring 2021

### The Bluebird of Happiness Awaits You in

#### Washington Crossing State Park

By  
Kevin Kavanaugh



photo credit: Wayne Henderek

**A male eastern bluebird visits his nest box in WCSP**

Growing up in an urban area in the northern portion of Central Jersey, I incorrectly thought that bluebirds were extinct in the state and were relegated to the realm of fantasy! In the summer of 1976, I worked at the Somerset County Park Commission's Environmental Education Center in Basking Ridge, NJ as a seasonal naturalist. It was there in the Great Swamp, that I had made first encounter with the beautiful eastern bluebird, *Sialia sialis*.

The first time that I spotted a bluebird, I could not believe my eyes and it was not until I saw several of them that I became a believer. During that summer, I had many more up-close and personal experiences with bluebirds. On several occasions, I assisted the full-time naturalists in checking the various bluebird boxes in the park and then clearing other bird species' nests out of the boxes.

In North America, there are actually three different species of these brightly colored bluebirds. The eastern and western bluebirds possess mostly blue plumage with a reddish brown

breast, contrasting with the (male) mountain bluebird that is entirely blue. The eastern bluebird, *Sialia sialis*, is found east of the Rockies, and its range is from Canada to Mexico and Honduras. Interesting enough, eastern bluebirds also reside in the mountains located in southeastern Arizona. These individuals are slightly larger and paler than eastern bluebirds found east of Arizona. Western bluebirds, *Sialia mexicana*, are found west of the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico. The mountain bluebird, *Sialia currucoides*, which inhabits much of western North America is often found at elevations above 7,000 feet.



photo credit: Wayne Henderek

**The somewhat less colorful female bluebird is shown for contrast**

In this article, I will discuss the eastern bluebird, which can often be found in family groups or small flocks favoring the old fields, young forests and other open countryside located in Washington Crossing State Park. The eastern bluebird is a bit larger than a sparrow at seven inches in length with a wingspan of thirteen inches. The male has a bright, blue back and, like its thrush family relative, the American robin, it has a rust-red throat and breast. The bluebird is not to be confused with the much larger and crested blue jay that lacks a rusty breast. Neither should it be mistaken for the indigo bunting, the blue grosbeak and the lazuli bunting all of which are primarily blue; the lazuli bunting has white bars on its wings. Female and young eastern



bluebirds exhibit a distinctive hunched posture, a light-colored eye ring, blue in their wings and tail but are a much duller blue than the males. Juvenile bluebirds' bodies are spotted like other birds in the thrush family.

Bluebirds are cavity nesters who build their nests in tree cavities such as abandoned woodpecker holes, two to twenty feet above the ground. They also learned to take advantage of wooden fence posts such as on farmland and pastures. The nests are small and bowl-shaped and are made up of weeds, twigs, dry grass, and lined with finer grass and sometimes with animal hair or feathers. Bluebirds tend to prefer to make a nest in a nesting cavity that contains an old nest. This old nest provides a foundation for the new nest. The old nest may contain parasitoids. These are parasites of the ectoparasites that feed on animal feces, uneaten food, old feathers, skin and other left-over debris. Ornithologists now believe that old nests containing parasitoids provide more suitable nesting sites for bluebird nestlings.

### Bluebird conservation

Bluebird populations dropped precipitously by the mid-twentieth century due to a loss of habitat and nest sites. Housing developments and suburban sprawl ate up much of eastern North America's open countryside habitat that bluebirds prefer. Suburbanites cleared dead trees from their properties eliminating the necessary nesting cavities. Additionally, metal fence posts replaced many wooden and split-rail fences on the remaining agricultural land further reducing the availability of potential nest sites. Adding insult to injury, was the introduction of aggressive non-native cavity-nesting songbirds to the continent such as the European starling and the English house sparrow. These invasive species basically out-competed the native bluebird for nest cavities, and greatly reduced the bluebird's capability to reproduce. Similarly, our native tree swallow seems to be quite capable of stealing bluebird nest sites.

The North American Bluebird Society made a herculean effort to increase the eastern bluebird population in the 1970s. These bird enthusiasts along with other conservationists, organized thousands of people including scout groups, landowners and even prisoners in the New Jersey Department of Corrections to build and install nesting boxes on farms, private property and public lands. These concentrated efforts created "bluebird trails" of nest boxes where the bluebird advocates monitored and maintained the boxes and policed them against predators and invasive species. As a consequence, the eastern bluebird made a roaring comeback and is, thankfully, once again a common wild inhabitant of eastern North America. WCSP maintains three different areas which contain bluebird nest boxes and we welcome contributions of nest boxes from our visitors to those projects.

### Feeding, courtship and nesting

Bluebirds forage for holly, dogwood and other wild fruits. They hunt the following: snails, worms, spiders, caterpillars and other insect larvae and insects such as beetles, weevils,

and grasshoppers, crickets, and occasionally a small lizard or frog. These birds perch on low trees or shrubs where they watch, and then they dive down to pounce on their prey. They often hover over the ground and catch insects in mid-air and also make quick flights from their nest to eat small berries.

Bluebirds can often be heard singing while they are perched on a tree branch, fence post, wire, or constantly while in flight. Their song is a pleasant soft phrase of mellow whistles: chiti, WEEW, wewidoo and similar variations. The bluebirds' call is also of a similar musical quality: a soft, husky whistle jeew, wiwi; and also a short, dry chatter.

Flocks of wintering bluebirds sometimes huddle together in tree cavities and nest boxes on cold nights, in order to stay warm. With the absence of insects, these birds feed on berries in the winter. Most of New Jersey's resident bluebirds migrate south in the fall while the eastern bluebirds in the southern regions do not migrate. In the late winter and early spring, male bluebirds arrive north usually about one to two weeks before the females do in order to establish breeding territories. When they are not nesting, these birds roam the countryside in small flocks.

The male begins flying oddly, with his wing beats being slow and deliberate like a butterfly when females arrive in his territory. The male will soon arrive at the prospective nest site where he will cling to the entrance. He will proceed to rock back and forth, putting his head and shoulders inside the hole, while peaking back to see if his potential mate is watching him. The male will then cling to the perch or entrance hole and slowly raise one or both wings. The male may sing and flutter in front of the female with his wings and then perch himself, with his back to his potential mate spreading his tail feathers and droop his wings to expose his vibrant blue back. While perched close together, pairs may preen each other's feathers and the male may feed the female. As part of their courtship rituals, the male may carry and then present the female with nesting materials.



photo credit: Wayne Henderrek

**A male brings lunch (a tasty green caterpillar) to his nestlings**

Bluebirds also exhibit an action referred to as a wing/wave display that is accompanied by singing or chattering. In this common visual display, the male or female slowly raises one or



both wings, sometimes making the wings quiver. Bluebirds often use this display as part of the mating ritual to communicate the selection of a nest site, or as a manner of greeting each other in a variety of situations.

Bluebirds breed pretty much throughout the spring and mid-summer. The females lay four or five white, light pink or light blue eggs and incubate them for about two weeks. The young bluebirds remain in the nest for an additional fifteen to twenty days and are cared for by both parents. Bluebirds often have two and sometimes three broods in a season. Occasionally, a young bluebird from an earlier brood will remain in the nest and assist its parents in caring for the next brood.

### Bluebirds and you

The steady increase in the eastern bluebird's population since the 1970s is an example of humanity making a choice to take strong positive action to address an environmental issue in which both wildlife and mankind benefit! At home, you can construct a bluebird box and install it on a post or tree in an open area with a shrub or small tree nearby for perching and with the box entrance facing south. The eastern bluebird does not favor urban nor most suburban habitats. Sizable fields and open countryside are ideal locations for a nest box. However, beginning in March, you can place meal worms, suet, peanut pieces, sunflower chips, raisins, currants, and grapes on a flat tray in your yard and hopefully, you will attract a passing migrant bluebird or two. Bluebirds are not generally attracted to millet sunflower or other traditional hard-cased bird seed. If you do not attract a bluebird, I am sure that you will see other feathered friends visiting your feeder. Take a look at your property and make the decision to begin this spring by planting more native plants in order to attract more native insects and as a result, more birds. Then, come and take a walk in Washington Crossing State Park this spring and stop in at the nature center and let us know if you caught the sight of the magical eastern bluebird!

### References

- Bent, A.C. (1964). *Life Histories of North American Thrushes, Kinglets, And Their Allies*. New York, NY: Dover
- Boyle, W. J. (1986). *A Guide To Bird Finding in New Jersey*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers.
- Brinkley, E. S. *National Wildlife Federation: Field Guide to Birds of North America*. New York, NY: Sterling.
- Cornell Labs. *All About Birds*. Retrieved from [https://www.all-aboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern\\_Bluebird/id](https://www.all-aboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Bluebird/id)
- Farrand, J. (1988). *Eastern Birds - An Audubon Handbook*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Gabrielson, I. N., Zim, H. S. (1956). *Birds: A Guide To The Most Familiar American Birds*. Golden Press New York, NY: Western.
- Kaufman, K. (1996). *Lives of North American Birds*. Boston, MA : Houghton Mifflin.

Harding, J. J. (1980). *Birding the Delaware Valley Region*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple.

National Geographic Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/group/bluebirds/>

Peterson, R. T. (1980). *Eastern Birds*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Robbins, C S., Bruun, B., Zim, H. S., (2001). *Birds of North America: A Guide to Field Identification*. New York, NY: St. Martin's .

Sibley, D. A., (2000). *National Audubon Society: The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York, NY: Alfred A, Knopf.

Tekiela, S., (2000). *Birds of New Jersey Field Guide*. ,Cambridge, MN: Adventure.

Terres, J. K., (1995). *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. Avenel, NJ: Random House.

*Wild Bird Watching*. Retrieved from <https://www.wild-bird-watching.com/Pil>

**Kevin Kavanaugh** is a retired teacher and school principal. He has been working at the WCSP Nature Center as a seasonal naturalist for the past eight years. In addition to teaching various educational and recreational programs, Kevin maintains the park's extensive trail system. He enjoys hearing park visitors express their positive reactions regarding their explorations in the park.

This newsletter is available free of charge electronically . It can be downloaded at the web address below. Requests to be included on the emailing list may be made by contacting the Nature Center.



## Nature CENTER

WASHINGTON CROSSING STATE PARK  
355 Washington Crossing - Pennington Road  
Titusville, New Jersey 08560-1617



**Phone**.....(609) 737-0609  
**Fax**.....(609) 737-0627  
**Email**.....wayne.henderek@dep.nj.gov  
**Hours**.....Wed - Sat 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.  
 Sun 12:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.  
 Closed Mon and Tues  
**Website**.....[www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/parks/washcros.html](http://www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/parks/washcros.html)

**Park Naturalist  
& Newsletter Editor**.....Wayne Henderek



*Around the Park*

✿ Ample snow cover with a good ice base provided great opportunities for cross-country skiers in the state park in February.

✿ Bird activity at our feeding stations had been unusually high last winter and autumn. Large flocks of white-throated sparrows had been observed at our feeding stations with fewer juncos, mourning doves, cardinals and other ground foragers.

✿ Buildings in the park, including the Nature Center, Visitor Center Museum and the Johnson Ferry House remain closed to the public due to ongoing public health considerations. Opening in some capacity, is anticipated for early summer. Nevertheless, WCSP is open per posted hours, at this writing, and has been quite busy with visitors on our trails and grounds.

✿ Outdoor public events are ongoing. Please see the enclosed events schedule for details.

✿ Outdoor interpretive programs for schools, scouts, home schoolers and other groups are also available on a limited basis at this writing. Please call the Nature Center (609-737-0609), the Visitor Center/Museum (609-737-0623), or the Johnson Ferry House (609-737-2515) for additional information.

*Volunteer Notes*

**Dan McAuliffe**, Langhorne, and **Kevin Kavanaugh**, Ewing, delivered two terrific cross-country ski/snowshoe workshops in February.

**Ellen Coleman**, Ewing, **Paul Moran**, Allentown, NJ, and **Mike Ramsey**, Pennington, all assisted with our maple sugaring activities. Ellen also assisted with our gardens.

**Washington Crossing Audubon Society** generously donated 400 lbs. of sunflower seed to WCSP for our feeder stations.

**Washington Crossing Audubon** members also led some great walks in the park for winter birds last March. Incidentally, these knowledgeable folks will be returning in June to lead more walks for breeding birds. Please see the enclosed events schedule for details.

## Spring Programs at the Nature Center

The following is a list of activities being offered through the Nature Center at Washington Crossing State Park in Titusville, NJ. Some programs are offered free of charge; some will require payment of a nominal program fee as indicated below. All programs will require advanced registration so that we can manage social distancing. Face coverings are also required at all these events. A gate fee of \$5.00 per car (\$7.00 out-of-state) will be charged to cars entering the park on weekends and holidays 5/29 - 9/6 (Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day). All programs will initially meet at the Nature Center unless otherwise indicated. Attendance is limited and is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Children must be accompanied by an adult. In the event of inclement weather, some programs might be canceled. It is always advisable to call ahead before coming out. These events are intended for families and individuals only. Programs for scouts, schools and other groups are scheduled separately by special arrangement. For additional information, please call us. **Nature Center Phone: 609-737-0609**

**THURSDAY AFTERNOON AEROBIC HIKE** (preteen-adult) Thursday April 8, 1:00 p.m. (weather permitting). Join us for a 2 - 3.5 mi. brisk guided hike on selected trails in the state park. Route to be determined. Bring a water bottle and wear hiking shoes. The trails are quite wet in sections. Free. Advanced registration required.

**PINE BOARD BIRDHOUSES** (6 - 11 yrs. old) Sunday April 11, 1:30 - 3:00 p.m. With the breeding season underway, several species of common cavity-nesting backyard birds will be looking for places to nest. Come out and build a simple nest box that will accommodate these feathery critters. Bring your own hammer. Fee: \$7.00 per box (exact change please). Advanced registration required.

**TOMAHAWK THROWING** (adults only) Saturday April 17, 1:00 - 3:30 p.m. Come on out and try your hand at throwing a small hatchet into a wooden target. Maybe even hit a bull's-eye. Free. Advanced registration required.

**THURSDAY AFTERNOON AEROBIC HIKE** (preteen-adult) Thursday April 22, 1:00 p.m. (weather permitting). Join us for a 2 - 3.5 mi. brisk guided hike on selected trails in the state park. Route to be determined. Advanced registration required. Bring a water bottle and wear hiking shoes. The trails are quite wet in sections. Free. Advanced registration required.

**WILD EDIBLE PLANTS** (3 yrs. - adult) Sunday April 25, 1:30 - 3:30 p.m. Participants will learn to identify and prepare some of the many native and introduced plants which earlier inhabitants of the area used to supplement their diets. This program will be led by plant lore enthusiast, **Pat Chichon** of Lambertville. Bring a pair of plant clippers and a garden trowel. Program fee: \$2.00/person, under 6 yrs. free. (exact change or check please). Advanced registration required.

**FAMILY NATURE WALK** (all ages) Sunday May 2, 1:30 - 2:30 p.m. Join us for an informal naturalist-guided trail walk. Free. Advanced registration required.

**THURSDAY AFTERNOON AEROBIC HIKE** (preteen-adult) Thursday May 6, 1:00 p.m. (weather permitting). Join us for a 2 - 3.5 mi. brisk guided hike on selected trails in the state park. Route to be determined. Advanced registration required. Bring a water bottle and wear hiking shoes. The trails are quite wet in sections. Free. Advanced registration required.

**GEOCACHE WASHINGTON CROSSING STATE PARK** (preteens - adult) Sunday May 9, 1:30 - 3:30 p.m. Geocaching is a high-tech update on the old-fashioned scavenger hunt game, which utilizes GPS (global positioning system) technology to locate objects hidden in the park. Participants will learn how to obtain information and hints from the Geocaching.com website, on the location of dozens of geocache sites in and around the state park. They will then use handheld GPS devices to go out and find as many caches as possible. Once a cache is found, participants typically will sign in on the log contained within and then take an object from the cache box after leaving a trinket for subsequent geocachers. Participants should bring a pocket full of trinkets to exchange when they locate caches. Trinkets can include small toys and balls, plastic jewelry, pens, pencils, scratch pads, patches, action figures, coins, etc. A limited number of GPS navigation devices will be made available to participants on a first come, first served basis. Bring your own handheld GPS device if you have one. Advanced registration and payment required. Fee: \$2.00/person (exact change or check please).

**TOMAHAWK THROWING** (adults only) Saturday May 15, 1:00 - 3:30 p.m. Come on out and try your hand at throwing a small hatchet into a wooden target. Maybe even hit a bull's-eye. Free. Advanced registration required. (More park programs, next page)  
(Nature Center programs continued)

**BALDPATE MOUNTAIN HIKE** (pre-teen – adult) Sunday May 23, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m. We will take the Summit Trail from its trail head on Fiddlers Creek Rd. Meet at the parking lot by Niederer's Pond (Church Rd). We will drive to the trail. Advanced registration required. Free.

**FULL MOON BIKE HIKE** (pre-teen-adult) Wednesday May 26, 8:45 p.m. Take a guided night time bicycle ride, by the light of the Flower Moon, up the Delaware & Raritan Canal Towpath toward the Lambertville wing dam (approx.. 13 miles round trip). Meet at the Nelson House parking lot. Bring your own bike, bike light and helmet. Advanced registration required. Call the Nature Center for directions. Free.

**SOLAR OBSERVATION** (all ages) Saturday May 29, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. View magnetic sun storms safely through a telescope equipped with special filters. Observe sunspots, solar flares, prominences and other solar phenomena. Learn how these storms can affect the earth as well as other interesting facts about Earth's closest star. **Jennifer** and **Dave Skitt** and other members of the **Amateur Astronomer's Association of Princeton** will lead this activity. Clear skies required. Park vehicle entrance Fee: \$5.00/car. Rain date: Monday May 31, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

**STREAM STOMP** (6 yrs. - adult) Sunday May 30, 1:30 - 3:00 p.m. Come out for a wet hike as we follow a park stream in search of crayfish, salamanders, caddisflies, stoneflies, mayflies, frogs, minnows and other stream inhabitants. Wear water shoes or old sneakers and come prepared to get wet at least up to the knees. Park vehicle entrance Fee: \$5.00/car. Advanced registration required.

**HIKE THE ROCK HOPPER TRAIL** (preteen - adult) Sunday June 6, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m. The Rock Hopper Trail in West Amwell Twp. is an outlier of Washington Crossing State Park. It contains mature hardwood forests, agricultural fields and interesting rock outcrops. The terrain is gently rolling, wet in places and rugged. Wear sturdy shoes and bring drinking water. The hike will be 2 - 4 miles in length. Meet at the parking lot by Neiderer's Pond in Washington Crossing State Park. (Church Rd). We will drive to the trail head. Advanced registration required. Free

**HOPEWELL VALLEY COME OUTSIDE AND PLAY - SHELTER BUILDING** (all ages) Thursday June 10, 4:15 - 5:30 p.m. Kids will build a weatherproof survival shelter completely of native materials in the forest. Advanced registration required. Free.

**SPRING/SUMMER BIRDS OF THE PARK** (all ages) Saturday June 12, 8:30 a.m. Come and join **Franta Broulik** and other members of **Washington Crossing Audubon** as we peruse the park for spring and summer resident bird species. Meet at the Nature Center. Face coverings required. Park vehicle entrance fee applies \$5.00/vehicle. Advanced registration required.

**TOMAHAWK THROWING** (adults only) Sunday June 13, 1:30 -4:00 p.m. Come on out and try your hand at throwing a small hatchet into a wooden target. Maybe even hit a bull's-eye. Park vehicle entrance fee applies \$5.00/vehicle. Advanced registration required.

**CANE POLE FISHING** (4 yrs - 12 yrs.) Sunday June 20, 1:30 – 3:00 p.m. Come out to the pond and use a basic fishing pole made from a bamboo shoot and rigged to catch bluegills. Any caught fish will be released but you get to take your cane pole home. Meet at Niederers Pond on Church and Brickyard Roads. Rain date: Sunday June 27, 1:30 p.m. Advanced registration required. Free

**FULL MOON BIKE HIKE** (pre-teen-adult) Friday June 25, 9:00 p.m. Take a guided night time bicycle ride, by the light of the Strawberry Moon, up the Delaware & Raritan Canal Towpath toward the Lambertville wing dam (approx.. 13 miles round trip). Meet at the Nelson House parking lot. Bring your own bike, bike light and helmet. Advanced registration required. Call the Nature Center for directions. Free.

**FAMILY NATURE WALK** (all ages) Saturday June 26, 1:00 – 2:00 p.m. Join us for an informal naturalist-guided trail walk. Free. Advanced registration required. (More park programs, next page)

**Spring Programs  
at the  
Visitor Center/Museum**

**609-737-0623**

**SATURDAY MUSKET FIRING DEMONSTRATIONS.** April 3, 10, 17, 24, May 1, 8, 15, 29, June 5, 12, 19, & 26. 2:00 p.m.

Join a Park Historian for an interpretive talk about some of the weapons used during the American Revolution and their use during the Battle of Trenton. Included will be a musket firing demonstration. \$1.00 program fee. Park vehicle entrance fee applies on weekends and holidays May 29 - September 6.

**Spring Programs  
at the  
Johnson Ferry House  
609-737-2515**

**Outdoor Food Ways and Site Interpretation** Saturday afternoons commencing April 10 (weather permitting).



**New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection**