

THE HISTORY OF BLUEBIRDS IN ORANGE COUNTY

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By Bob Franz

Today one can see Western Bluebirds (WEBL) throughout Orange County - in many parks, golf courses, cemeteries and green belts - but it wasn't always that way. To better understand why, we must go back in time to the 1800s.

Early History

- From *The Bluebird Monitor's* Guide published by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in 2001, we learn:

"House sparrows, imported from Europe in 1851, had multiplied rapidly. By the early 1900s, these aggressive newcomers were overwhelming bluebirds in their competition for nesting cavities. Bluebirds needed our help.

"Thomas E. Musselman of Quincy, Illinois was the first person to spread the gospel of bluebird conservation. In 1934, he wrote an article for the National Audubon Society magazine *Bird-Lore* urging the establishment of bluebird trails throughout the country."

- From Dorene Scriven, in her book *Bluebird Trails*, we learn:

"The introduction on the East Coast of house sparrows (formerly called English sparrows) beginning in 1852 and European starlings in 1880 was disastrous, for house sparrows spread very quickly, and starlings eventually, across the United States and became the bluebirds' worst avian enemy.

"Potential nesting sites were decreased by the removal of dead trees considered unsightly, in the way of clearing land, or needed for firewood; extensive logging practices compounded the problem.

"In 1978, the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) was founded in Maryland under the leadership of Dr. Lawrence Zeleny. There are now many independent volunteer state and provincial organizations. Twenty-one of these are now affiliated under the umbrella of NABS." (The number of NABS affiliates is now 61, with 55 being in the U.S., 5 in Canada, and 1 in Bermuda.)

"By 1979, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird Survey reported Eastern Bluebirds , 'very rare' in many areas of the Midwest and East, 'rare' in other areas, and 'uncommon' in much of their original range. "

Early Sighting of Bluebirds in Southern California

- The following is from Volume 17 of *Condor* :

"Dr. Miller's notes on the Western Bluebird in a recent *Condor* recalls some old notes of my own. In 1892, a pair of this species persisted in trying to nest in a mail box on the corner of Solano Avenue and Buena Vista Street (now called North Broadway), Los Angeles. The birds considered the mail box a wholly suitable place, but the mail man and the owner objected. In spite of the resulting discouragements, several eggs were laid before the Bluebirds gave up the site. - W. Lee Chambers, Eagle Rock, California"

Bluebirds in Orange County

Now shift to the early 1980s in Orange County, California when Dick Purvis started helping WEBLs repopulate the County by making and installing nestboxes. To learn how his initial efforts have expanded the interest in WEBLs during the past 30+ years, I invite you to review the vertical time-line below that identifies significant events that were directed at helping local WEBLs make a come-back:

- 1984 - Dick Purvis observes several pairs of WEBLs in O'Neill Park (OP). He makes 10 nestboxes and nails them to trees in the park. WEBLs nest in 3 of them and raise their young.
- 1985 - Dick makes and installs 25 nestboxes in OP with similar success.
- 1986-1993 - Dick continues to make nestboxes and install them in local parks near his home in Anaheim including Featherly Park.
- 1988 - Dick recruits James Cox, his first recruit.
- 1994 - Dick attends the NABS Conference in Boise, Idaho where he learns that Roger Thompson adds a hook to the top of his nestboxes enabling him to install his nestboxes on tree limbs. When Dick returns, he starts making nestboxes that include a hook made from stiff wire that is bent into the shape of a large "C". To enable him to hang his new nestboxes from tree limbs. This necessitates Dick designing and making a lifter device that consists of an open-ended wooden box that swivels between the forks of a yoke made from PVC. The lifter/yoke is inserted in the end of an expandable 8-foot pool pole that enables Dick to emplace nestboxes up to 16 feet above the ground.
- 1994-2006 - Enthused with this new ability to place nestboxes on tree limbs, Dick places more of them each year in local parks and green belts that attract increasing numbers of WEBLs. As he spreads the word about

the joys of monitoring, he finds and trains additional volunteers throughout Orange County that expands the reach of man-made nest sites for WEBLs.

- 1997 - With Sea & Sage Audubon's sponsorship, Dick helps organize the 1997 Annual NABS Conference in Newport Beach.
- 1999, June 20 - Dick Purvis receives an Outstanding Bluebird Conservation award at the Annual NABS Conference in Great Falls, Montana.
- 2006, Summer - Sully Reallon monitors two nestboxes in north San Clemente that fledge ten WEBLs. Mike Spohn joins Sully to form the San Clemente Bluebird Club (SCBC).
- 2006, December 27 - Mike Spohn creates a SCBC blog.
- 2006, December 29 - In a blog entitled "A Call for Action", Mike addresses an email he received from Dick Blaine, who took over the California Bluebird Recovery program (CBRP) after its founder Don Yoder passed away. Dick was concerned about being able to sustain the CBRP and was soliciting help in finding a Program Director.

Southern California Bluebird Club

- 2007, January 6 - At the request of Mike Spohn and Sully Reallon of the San Clemente Bluebird Club(SCBC), Dick Purvis and Bob Franz meet them at *It's a Grind* coffee shop in Laguna Hills where they discuss the future of the SCBC and related efforts toward helping WEBLs thrive. They agree that their efforts be expanded to include the whole County and to change the name of the club to Southern California Bluebird Club (also SCBC). Regular meetings are scheduled for the first Saturday of every month with Mike Spohn as Meeting Chairman. Mike also initiates a SCBC Web Blog and posts weekly entries.
- 2007, February - Nestbox Plan, Guide and Assembly Guide created by Dick Purvis are added to the SCBC Website.
- 2007, March - Bob Franz contacts Huell Howser - seen on KCET - about taping a segment on bluebirds. Huell agrees and arrives at Bob Franz's home on April 19 to start taping a segment for "California Green". Dick Purvis arrives, and after Huell tapes his introduction, they move to Loma Vista Memorial Park where Susan Bulger joins them. Although it is rather early in the WEBL nesting season, they find nests with both eggs and nestlings in them. The taping ends at the Coyote Hills Golf Course and total taping time is under two hours with no "retakes".
- 2007, May 5 - Due to his work schedule, Mike Spohn turns over chairing the meetings to Bob Franz who becomes SCBC President.
- 2007, June 19 - The Huell Howser "California Green" segment about bluebirds is shown on KCET and Bob Franz receives close to 100 phone calls in response.

- 2007, July 7 - The meeting location for the SCBC meeting is changed to the Corner Bakery in Irvine.
- 2008, January 11 - Dick Purvis and Susan Bulger receive the *2007 Volunteer of the Year Award* from the Fourth Supervisorial District and the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation for "Creating Community Through People, Parks and Programs".
- 2008, February 2 and March 1 - The meeting location for the SCBC is changed to the Lakewood Country Club.
- 2008, February - The SCBC achieves "non-profit (501(c) (3))" status by joining the International Humanities Center (IHC) as a "project". The IHC will manage our donation account including Credit card donation support and file tax returns.
- 2008, April 5 - The meeting location for the SCBC is changed to Brywood Park in Irvine.
- 2008, December 6 - The meeting location for the SCBC is changed to the Strawberry Farms Golf Course in Irvine.
- 2009, January 13 - KOCE-TV airs interview of Dick Purvis by Chapman College President James Doti.
- 2009, February 7 - Jim Semelroth volunteers to be editor of the CBRP newsletter *Bluebirds Fly!*.
- 2009, March 19 - Sea and Sage Audubon gives the Sylvia Ranney Gallagher and James Ross Gallagher Award to Dick Purvis at their Annual Dinner for his contribution in "Establishing the Orange County nest box program and inspiring many people to participate and carry on."
- 2009, May 2 - The meeting location for the SCBC is changed to O'Neill Regional Park.
- 2009, June - James Cox, first Purvis recruit passes away. To honor him, Dick Purvis places a nestbox above his grave in Fairhaven Cemetery.
- 2009, August 8 - After much coordination between Danette Davis and Dawn Jordan of the Irvine Ranch Water District (IRWD), the IRWD agrees to provide a meeting room adjacent to their main offices on the second Saturday of the month, and at no charge . The SCBC honors Dick Purvis with a plaque denoting his 25 years of dedication toward helping WEBLs and a hand-painted nestbox from Jo-Ann Coller. His wife, Katy receives a blueberry bush for her support as well. Various members offer thanks to Dick for his efforts and about their interface with Dick. In addition, Bob Franz read a poem he wrote about Dick's dedication.
- 2010, March 13 - Vicki Hernandez volunteers to create and maintain SCBC Archives to include early SCBC Minutes prepared by Mike Spohn and newspaper articles covering SCBC members and events. Tom Croom volunteers to take over as Treasurer from Mike Spohn with Jo-Ann Coller as back-up.

- 2010, March 19 - Sea & Sage Audubon awards Dick Purvis the Fern Zimmerman Conservation award at their annual dinner for Dick's conservation of bluebirds for the last 25 years.
- 2010, April 15 - SCBC presents Mike Spohn with a Commendation for his contributions as co-founder and Treasurer. Tom Croom replaces Mike as SCBC Treasurer.
- 2010, November 13 - Jo-Ann Collier presents her new book, *My Mom Was a Feather Duster* which can be used as a fund-raiser.
- 2011, March 12 - Jim Semelroth completes the SCBC Website that can be found at www.socalbluebirds.org. Jo-Ann Collier presents her new book *Bluebird Blues* which can be used as a fund-raiser. Jim Semelroth reports that the SCBC will host the 2012 Annual NABS Conference on October 4, 5, 6. Jim and Jo-Ann establish a planning committee and ask for volunteers.
- 2011, May 14 - Jim Semelroth is presented with "2011 Outstanding Volunteer" award by OneOC and the Orange County Register in recognition of his dedicated service to OC Parks and Laguna Niguel Regional Park. Jo-Ann Collier replaces Tom Croom as Treasurer.
- 2011, July 9 - Mike Clayton receives a *Commendation for Outstanding Service* certificate from the Senior Citizens Advisory Board.
- 2011, August 13 - Jo-Ann Collier reports that the 2012 NABS Conference will be held at the Radisson hotel in Newport Beach.
- 2011, September 15-18 - Bob Franz, Jo-Ann Collier, and Dick Purvis attend Annual NABS Conference in Jackson, TN to do research prior to the SCBC hosting the 2012 NABS Conference.
- 2012, February 11 - Jo-Ann Collier reports that she received a letter from the IHC -that they were closing their doors and that the SCBC has lost their balance of \$5423.00. Upon hearing of this loss, NABS donates \$2000. In addition, the SCBC receives generous contributions of \$1000 from Mike Spohn, \$1000 from Dick Purvis, and \$500 from Gillian Martin.
- 2012, Spring - Gillian Martin observes how much our bluebird population is dependent on man-made nestboxes/cavities. This spurs her to create the Cavity Conservation Initiative (CCI) with a mission statement that reads "We Save Dead Trees To Help Cavity-Nesting Birds and All Wildlife That Rely on Dead Trees." More on the CCI below.
- 2012, August 4 - Jim Semelroth works with Dick Blaine of the CBRP to simplify Year-End reporting.
- 2012, October 3-6 - The SCBC hosts the Annual NABS Conference at the Radisson Hotel in Newport Beach with Bob Franz as Master of Ceremonies. Dick Purvis receives an "Outstanding Contribution" award from NABS President Sherri Linn. Conference attendance is 150 and the SCBC realizes a profit of nearly \$5000. The Conference goes smoothly thanks to stellar work by Jo-Ann Collier, Jim Semelroth, Beverly White, Gillian Martin, photographer

Jim Rogers, Bill and Inge Wallace and the SCBC "Team". In addition, the opening ceremonies were videotaped by my son Norm Franz and his wife Judi. Subsequent feedback on the success of the conference was very favorable.

- 2012, November 3 - Bob Franz retires as SCBC President and meeting Chairman and is replaced by Dick Purvis. Jo-Ann Collier receives a letter from IRS authorizing the SCBC as a tax exempt charity under section "501 c.3" of the IRS Code.
- 2013, October 3-5 - Dick Purvis, Jo-Ann Collier and Bill and Inge Wallace attend the Annual NABS Conference in Aiken, South Carolina. Bob Franz is awarded "Outstanding Contribution" award that is accepted by Dick Purvis for Bob who was unable to attend.
- 2014, January 4 - Bob Franz is re-elected SCBC President and Meeting Chairman.
- 2014, November 1 - Bill Wallace is new SCBC President and Meeting Chairman to replace Bob Franz, who retired.

Cavity Conservation Initiative

Gillian Martin, reports that the CCI has achieved many notable goals that include:

- Meeting with chief administrators of Orange County Parks that sets in motion the approval of a snag¹ retention policy. This accomplishment brings credibility of the CCI mission and helps start similar dialogue with other land owners and managers.
- Receiving recurring grants from the Fund for Wild Nature, the Edison Company, and Pasadena Audubon that enables development of educational resources for a variety of audiences.
- Submitting articles on the value of dead trees to regional and national publications that results in requests for presentations and more articles.
- Partnering with West Coast Arborists as co-leaders of a state-wide project to set Best Management Practices for tree care for birds to reduce harm to nesting birds.

¹ A snag is defined as a standing dead tree or a dead limb on a live tree.

In 2014, in recognition of her work with the CCI, Gillian Martin receives two awards. One is the American Birding Association award for "Conservation and Community". The other is a "Conservation Award" for developing the CCI that is given by Sea & Sage Audubon at their annual dinner.

How Are We Doing?

Now that you have read a rather detailed account of the efforts that have been taken to help WEBLs thrive in Orange County, the obvious question might be - how are we doing? There are several answers depending what area you look at.

SCBC

- Mailing List - The SCBC mailing list totals approximately 400. Of this number, 63 are active monitors who submitted their yearly totals to the California Bluebird Recovery Program in 2015.
- Website - Jim Semelroth reports 13,000 visitors and 48,000 page views since 2011.

California Bluebird Recovery Program (CBRP)

- Year-End Totals - The CBRP publishes an Annual Report that provides year-end totals of activity for each nesting season. The following table provides a measure of our success starting with 1996 - unfortunately, there are no data available from Dick Purvis' early efforts prior to 1996:

	<u>1996</u>	<u>2015</u>
Number of volunteers reporting	3	83
Number of nestboxes	499	1660
Number of Tries ¹	299	2172
Number of fledges	1029	5994

¹ A Try is a completed nest with one or more eggs

- Top Producers - Every year the fledge totals for SCBC members are among the highest in California - and 2015 was no different with 11 being in the top 20 - see below:

	<u>Total Fledges</u>	<u>WEBL Fledges</u>
Dick Purvis	1115	1115
Susan Bulger	578	578
Christine Tischer	377 ¹	52
Kappy Hurst	376	358
Linda Violet	309	291
Bob Keally	295	295
Bill/Inge Wallace	252	252
Venhuizen, John/Kim	246	199
Bob Franz	241	236
Larry Fulton (LA County)	233	233
Joan Miller	223	218

¹325 were TRES

San Diego County

In the latest issue of the CBRP Newsletter *Bluebird's Fly!*, San Diego County CBRP Coordinator Carol Killebrew writes:

"Over much of its range, the Western Bluebird population trend appears to be increasing. This is a reversal of the earlier decline as a result of loss of nest cavities to logging, fire suppression, and from competition for cavities from non-native European Starlings and House Sparrows. The Western Bluebird is not considered a 'threatened' or 'endangered' species. Its current conservation status is listed as 'Least Concern' by the IUCN Red List. And in San Diego County, despite many competitors for nest sites, the Western Bluebirds appears to be extending its breeding range."

By several measurements it seems as if our collective efforts are being rewarded in terms of helping our "feathered friends" not only survive but thrive - and this is reward enough.

