2026 Year End Trail Narrative

Another Bluebird nesting season is behind us, and I can breathe a sigh of relief. No big fire on the trail this year. The birds did well, although there is a significant difference in numbers between this year and last. In 2025, Western Bluebirds on the Vredenburgh fledged 426 chicks. This year they fledged 353 – a 17% decrease. In 2025 Mountain Bluebirds fledged 254. This year they fledged 194 for a 24% decrease. There were also 9 "Bluebird species" that fledged (we didn't see either parent and could not tell whether Mountain or Western species). The Durr road boxes had a successful year with 28 Western Bluebirds, 74 Mountain Bluebirds and four Bluebird species fledged. Total Bluebirds fledged for both trails are 381 Western, 268 Mountain and 13 Bluebird species.

We can only speculate as to why the numbers are down. I believe that the wind had something to do with it. The wind started in the spring, knocking over trees which blocked the road at times. The windy conditions persisted well into summer. My speculation is that it is hard for insect eating birds (like bluebirds) to hunt insects with 20-30 MPH winds blowing nearly constantly. It was also a dry year, which would also have an impact on some insect populations. This year when we found dead nestlings, it was seldom an entire clutch. Often there would be one – sometimes two – chicks who died while the others fledged. To me, that suggests that there was not enough food for them all. Finally, Bluebirds may be nesting in cavities in snags created by the large fires in 2020 and 2022. Woodpeckers have been actively foraging and nesting in the snags, leaving cavities for secondary cavity nesters - like bluebirds. Our boxes are great, but natural cavities are better, and Bluebirds may be taking advantage of that.

Of course, it could be just the natural cycles in nature. They can't all be blockbuster years.
Even though the numbers are not as high this season as in the last few, it was still a successful season. If the trail fledged 100 birds in a season it would still be a success. We give them a place to nest and keep the boxes clean and maintained. The birds do the rest.

In addition to Bluebirds, we were fortunate to have White-breasted nuthatches use one of our boxes again this year. They fledged six young ones. We also had 10 House Wrens successfully fledge.
Another "house" bird, the House Sparrow, was prevented from nesting despite their best efforts. House WRENS are native birds, House SPARROWS are invasive, non-native birds who tend to congregate where humans live. There are more homes in the area of the trail these days and despite the fire danger it seems more are built every year.

Mountain Bluebird hen

There has been a lot of talk and writing lately about the benefits of being out in nature. I know that I feel better about life and feel connected with nature when I am out with the birds. There is nothing like being out there watching the birds as they tend to their young and seeing the faces of cute little nestlings peek up at you when you are monitoring. But there is more – the wildflowers, the trees, the scenery, insects like butterflies and bumblebees, other wildlife like deer, elk and badger- even those pesky chipmunks - and the dozens of other bird species who live and nest in the area.

This year you will notice a difference in the "1982 to Present" part of the report. Instead of using the entire span of time, I have included the past ten years for both the Vredenburgh and the Vredenburgh plus Durr road reports. However, **the totals** at the bottom of the ten-year forms are the totals from 1982 to present. The original "1982 to Present" report has grown to two pages, and I feel it is more information than is needed. In fact, I may eliminate this portion of the report next year and just compare year to year, although I will keep the records updated on my computer if anyone wants the information.

Elk Cow - calf was hidden in shrubs

I will close now by saying thank you. A big thank you to all of our volunteer monitors, and to Richard Repp, who continues to help with the trail by keeping in contact with sponsors about their boxes. Thank you to those who sponsor boxes. I hope you enjoy the report and I hope your box had a successful nesting season. If not, there is always next year. Hope springs eternal on the Vredenburgh Bluebird Trail.

Karen Zook,
Vredenburgh Bluebird Trail Caretaker AKA Chair

A Mountain Bluebird (male) has a great view