

# Hands on Monitoring Saves a Few Bluebird Chicks

By Claire Romanak

This year was shaping up to be the best ever on my trail. The warm, early spring brought many pairs of Bluebirds to my boxes and they began to set up housekeeping early as well. I was cautiously optimistic that this could be my best season ever. However, I knew that if the weather changed, and instead of above normal temperatures we saw a swing to below normal temps, my trail could be in serious trouble. As April progressed ever closer to May and the weather stayed mild, I thought that we just might make it through without the kind of prolonged cold spell that would spell doom for the early first nesters.

The weather report for the second weekend of May brought the kind of news that I had been so fearful of hearing. I went over my monitoring report and figured out that I had three boxes with chicks at the most vulnerable age – old enough to be left alone at night but too young to be fully feathered and able to keep themselves warm through the kind of cold nights that were in the forecast. On Friday, May 7<sup>th</sup>, it started to snow and continued overnight until there was a pretty significant snow cover. I was up and out early in the morning on May 8<sup>th</sup>. The weather report was pretty grim, with cold rain and very cold nights in the forecast for the next few days. I was hopeful that the boxes with eggs or newly hatched young would make it through, but I was very concerned



about the three boxes with the older chicks. I gathered up some mealworms and drove to check some of the boxes. As I thought, the boxes with younger chicks or eggs seemed fine. The three boxes with the older chicks were in trouble though. The first box checked had five chicks that were 6 days old. They were warm enough, but absolutely screaming for food. Good thing I brought some mealworms. I fed them some and left more in a dish near the nestbox. As I watched, the parents hurriedly ate some and fed the rest to their chicks. The next box had five young that were 7 days old. These chicks were cold and unresponsive. I brought them into my vehicle and held them near the heater vent, just to see if I could possibly revive them. To my surprise, one chick moved slightly as the warm air moved over it. It took quite a while, but eventually all five chicks responded to the warming. They were still too weak to beg for food though. I fed them each a couple of mealworms and continued to hold them over the heat. It took a good

hour of warming and feeding before they were recovered enough to beg for food. I put dry nesting material in the box and popped them back in. I left some mealworms in a dish, but didn't see any adult Bluebirds around so I played a recording of a bluebird call. That did the trick as the adults flew in to see who was in their territory. They seemed amazed to hear noises coming from the box and quickly checked inside. I saw them take mealworms to the chicks, so I left and hoped for the best. The last box I checked was the one closest to my home. This box had three chicks that were 8 days old and I had been supplementing them with mealworms all along. They felt very cold, barely moving so I took them out and warmed them, changed the nesting material and left mealworms for them also.

I was very upset as I talked to my sister later in the day. The weather was not going to improve for a few days, with very cold nights. How would these Bluebird chicks survive. The parents were going to have a very hard time finding enough food for themselves, let alone their chicks. I could supplement them with mealworms, but would that be enough? Would these very vulnerable chicks survive the kind of nighttime temperatures in the forecast? My sister asked me if anyone had ever tried somehow keeping the box warm at night, like with hand warmers, the kind used by hunters. I told her I didn't think

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that would work, that they wouldn't last long enough to keep them warm all night. But later on, I kept thinking about her suggestion. I knew that my husband had some hand-warmers left over from last hunting season, so I dug through his hunting paraphernalia until I found them. Huh, I thought, non-toxic and lasts 10 hours. Well, what could it hurt? That night, as it began to get dark, I slipped two handwarmers under each of the three nests that weren't being brooded.

The next morning I couldn't believe how cold it was. I was afraid that none of the young could have survived such an extended period of extreme cold. The first box I checked, the one closest to my house, was a huge surprise. The three chicks were not only warm, but bright eyed, active and ready for some breakfast. I checked the handwarmers under the nest and they were still giving off quite a bit of heat. I found the same result at the other two boxes – the chicks were warm and begging for food. It was quite a change from the previous morning, and I had to believe that the handwarmers actually gave off enough heat to keep them from going hypothermic. All during the ensuing cold spell, I kept supplementing these chicks with mealworms and slipping handwarmers under their nests at night. I monitor 38 boxes, so this is not an experiment I would have tried on a larger scale, but I did manage to save most of these chicks. I did eventually lose one chick from each nest, possibly due to getting out-competed for food. I do believe that all of these chicks would have perished without the supplemental heat at night. My trail is near Athens, Wisconsin, in northern Marathon County. The Bluebirds in question were in two Simple boxes and one NABS box.