

Juvenile Bluebird Siblings Assist in Parenting and Fledging

By Leif Marking

I have read and heard stories of juvenile sibling bluebirds helping the parents by bringing food items to second or third brood nestlings, but I've never had an opportunity to witness this activity until this past nesting season of 2010. Fledging is perhaps the most exciting action of bluebird reproduction for the parent bluebirds as well as for one that monitors these activities. Numerous times in the past I have attempted to photograph or video the actual fledging process when the nestlings leave the nest box on their maiden flight into their new and unknown environment, but they have somehow always evaded my presence and cameras.

The secret of success in this effort is to keep good records. Biological variability must be accounted for, since fledging generally occurs in 17 to 19 days from hatching. Box number six had four bluebird nestlings that were scheduled to fledge on August 1, which was 18 days from hatching. I placed my camouflaged blind about 12 feet from the occupied box four days prior to the expected fledging to allow time for the adults to become familiar and accept my presence. The next morning I was in the blind with my camcorder at sunup to take advantage of early low angle, incident sunlight and to make sure the nestlings were not ready to fledge. The parents were busy hauling nutritious insects to the youngsters who met the adults just inside the entry.

On days 16 and 17 a juvenile bluebird, apparently a sibling from the first brood, accompanied the adults in the feeding and visiting process. The nestlings continuously chirped in the presence of the breadwinners and actually displayed their speckled breast and beaks as they took turns to consume the variety of insects provided. The juvenile sibling was easily discernible with the speckled breast and back and seemed to carry

in as much food as the adults, but it never entered the cavity entirely to remove fecal material in a manner like the parents.

Day 18 was a Sunday and we had an important obligation to be present at a church service. During the sermon I prayed the nestling bluebirds would not fledge that morning, and when I returned to the site at 11 AM, fortunately my prayers were answered. After about 20 minutes in the blind the nestlings perched in the entry, consumed more insects, and threatened to leave their home only to return inside to allow a sibling to repeat that activity. The four nestlings were both anxious and reluctant to leave the security of their home, but by noon all had fledged and I had successfully videoed their first flight and the presence and activity of a juvenile sibling bluebird. I'm confident that the juvenile sibling shared its survival techniques with that sibling brood.

Then a week later box number four was scheduled to fledge on Aug 8 so I again placed my blind four days in advance to repeat the process of recording the fledging process. This box was located about 400 yards from the previous box and located in an agricultural setting. Interestingly, on days two and three, two juvenile bluebirds participated in the feeding process.

This puzzled me a bit because Tree Swallows produced a brood in this box during the first nesting season. These two juvenile bluebirds were



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very active and seemed to compete for the opportunity to feed the nestlings. Unlike the first juvenile observed, these two entered the cavity on occasion, but I didn't observe them removing fecal material. Since these two juveniles acted and performed differently than the previous one, I assumed they were from a different brood. Also, those adults must have produced the two juveniles in a nearby cavity for them to be siblings of the three nestlings yet to fledge.

Day 18 resulted in heavy rain all morning, and I trusted the nestlings would not venture into their new world during such conditions. After the rain subsided about noon I proceeded to take my recording equipment to the blind only to find the nestlings had fledged despite the inclement weather. So once again the nestlings eluded my efforts to record their fledging, however I gained additional information that fulfilled my curiosity regarding juvenile assistance and parenting.