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Anecdotes from a Central Oregon Bluebird Study

After two breeding seasons of looking into 350 bluebird nest boxes every week or two, I thought I'd seen it all. Now, after twelve such seasons, I know better. Two incidents from the last year might be of interest to fellow bird admirers.

Anyone who thinks that dickey-birds are little featherpuffs operating purely by hard-wired, stereotyped behaviors should come along with us and look into nest boxes for a day, or do observational diet samples for a couple of hours. Even if you just look at western bluebirds (*Sialia mexicana*), the most common resident of our boxes in central Oregon, the parents' response to one of us checking a nest varies from vanishing to the next county for the afternoon, to hovering above our heads watching what we are doing, to perching nearby and scolding, to divebombing – avoiding contact by a hair's breadth. Females incubating eggs or brooding hatchlings occasionally fly out shrieking, but are more apt to just sit, so that we must gently pick them up a few inches or push them to one side to count eggs or nestlings.

This past summer, I met a female with a different idea. (Not wanting to descend to anthropomorphism in these august pages, I must be careful with my storytelling.) As I was walking toward one box, I noticed a female western bluebird flying parallel to me, pausing on a branch now and then. When I got within a couple of meters of the box, she darted ahead and popped inside. I removed the lid and peered in. She was looking straight up at me, and I noticed that her legs were braced out to the sides of the nest. I slowly reached in and tried to push her to one side. No go. She pushed back harder. I moved my hand to the other side. Nope, she pushed that way. Tried to feel underneath her but she squunched down more firmly into the nest cup. Tried to pick her up but she was gripping half the nest in her feet and might have grasped a nestling and damaged it if I pulled her any harder. Eventually a tiny, pink head poked out from under her wing and gaped for food. Well, at least I knew that the eggs had hatched, but I never did get an accurate count.

Then there was the merry mountain mix-up. On the first visit to another box, a pair of mountain bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) hovered and flew around, scolding loudly, while my co-worker Ginny counted their 4 blue eggs in the woven cup of dry grasses. On the next visit, I checked this box, with the nest tally in hand. A pair of mountain chickadees (*Parus gambeli*) remonstrated as I approached. Hmm, must have gotten Ginny's notes wrong – mountain chickadee, not mountain bluebird. Inside the box was the typical dense blanket of vole fur that these chickadees glean from dry coyote scats. In the tiny fur cup were 2 speckly pinkish chickadee eggs. And 4 bluebird eggs. Now, it often happens that a nest and eggs are abandoned when the weather turns bad, and later another nest (of the same or a different species) is built on top. But in this case the chickadees had built their nest around the bluebird eggs and laid their own with them. The next time we returned, Ginny visited this box again. When we tallied nests from field notes afterwards, she got to this box and reported, "Mountain chickadee, four babies, but they looked kind of funny." "What kind of funny?" "Well, kind of big." Oh, no, I'd forgotten to tell her to pay really close attention to that box. We double checked, and indeed the

mountain chickadees were raising the mountain bluebird nestlings. They successfully fledged all four, and when we examined the empty nest, there were three undeveloped chickadee eggs pushed down into the nest by the growing bluebirds. Here's what I figure must have happened: The female mountain bluebird must have died. The male bluebird abandoned the eggs (the males do not incubate). The mountain chickadees were ready to nest and took over the box. The chickadees could sense that the eggs were still alive and so did not cover them up. The tiny chickadee eggs fell between the cracks of the much bigger bluebird eggs so they did not receive enough warmth to develop. And the chickadees put in a whole bunch of time and energy with little reproductive gain for them but a lot for the adoptees' birth parents.

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To the Editor:

In the Summer, 2000, issue of *Bluebird* (vol.21, no.2), Marjorie Gibson discussed bluebirds and other species occasionally assisting in raising the offspring of other parents, even of other species, by bringing food to nestlings. We have regularly found juvenile Western Bluebirds helping feed a second brood in our nest boxes in central Oregon. The Prescott Western Bluebird Recovery Project volunteers (who band hundreds of birds a year) have documented an extra adult helping feed at a nest on several occasions. In the Spring, 1999, issue Lorna Beasley captioned a photo with a story of an Eastern Bluebird incubating her own eggs plus those of a Tufted Titmouse that laid her eggs in the same nest.

All of these examples involve bluebirds as the helpers, but I guess turn-about is fair play. We had an interesting occurrence this past summer in which the bluebirds were the beneficiaries. A pair of Mountain Bluebirds laid 4 eggs in one of our

– *Charlotte Corkran, Portland, Oregon*