



An Affiliate of NABS
 Mission: To increase the population of bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting birds through the promotion of bluebird awareness among concerned citizens.



The BANner

Volume 25, No. 4 | November 2018

Top 10 things to do for birds in the fall

By Bill Thompson III

Whether you'd like to admit it or not, summer is over and autumn is upon us. Spring cleaning gets lots of attention, but for the backyard bird watcher, there's just as much to do in fall as in spring. I've spent much of the past few weekends at our farm doing the items listed below, so this column came to me naturally, you might say. I like the anticipation of fall. At the farm, fall migration is almost always better than spring migration — we get more birds and more unusual birds. The only thing missing is fresh spring plumage and the symphony of singing males. To ensure that you get the most out of this fall's migration, I offer these suggestions for the birds in your backyard.

10 **Water in motion** Moving water in your birdbath created by a mister or dripper is a fantastic way to attract birds. During spring and fall migration, when species not normally

found in your area are passing through, an attractive birdbath can make them stop to bathe or drink. Make sure your bath is clean and in a spot where you can easily observe it throughout the day.

9 **Keep the cat indoors**

Migrant birds are not familiar with your backyard's delights or dangers. A lurking cat can take a heavy toll during migration as unsuspecting birds are lured into your yard by habitat, water and food. It's a good idea to keep your cat indoors throughout the year, but especially important during fall migration, when adult birds are joined by naive youngsters making their first southward flight.

8 **Replace old dirty nests**

It seems that our late-summer broods of bluebirds always are the messiest. By the time the young have fledged, the insides of the nest box are caked with droppings, feather dust and insect parts. We always give the houses a good sweeping in the fall and replace the filthy old nest with a clean new cup of dried grasses. We like to think of the bluebirds, chickadees or a downy woodpecker snuggled deep in the insulating grass inside the box on a cold winter night.

7 **Feeder checkup**

When fall is here, winter already is getting ready for its grand entrance. If you live in a region where

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By preparing in the fall, you can ensure bluebirds are ready for winter weather. Photo courtesy: Missouri Department of Conservation

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winter weather is harsh, now is the time to look over those large-capacity feeders that have been in storage since last spring. Are they fit for another winter of use? Do they need a good cleaning? Do you want to upgrade or expand your feeders and offerings? Avoid the holiday rush and get your shopping done now.

6 **Let your garden go** It's hard to resist the urge to pull up all the dead tomato, squash and other plants in your garden once the growing season is over. Some gardening experts encourage this immediate yanking and burning of the old plants to reduce the chance of plant disease carrying over to the next spring. We've never subscribed to that theory, but we don't spray pesticides or herbicides, either. We're not just organic, we're laissez-faire organic, which translates to "lazy." Our birds thank us by feeding on the old seed heads of our flowers and garden plants. Sparrows, towhees and juncos skulk in the thick dead vegetation. Sure, the garden lacks a certain tidiness, but it's always full of birds.



5 **Let your lawn go** It's all about seed heads. Stop mowing a section of your lawn in late summer and let the long grass go to seed. This is your own natural bird food. Passing buntings, sparrows and finches will thank you by spending time in your grass. During the past nine winters we've lived on our farm, our unmown lawn sections have attracted pine siskins, tree sparrows, Lincoln's sparrows, one grasshopper sparrow and lots of the usual suspects, including juncos, goldfinches, indigo buntings, and song, chipping and field sparrows.

4 **Leave your leaves** Leaving your fallen leaves alone helps your birds both directly and indirectly. The leaves trap and hold moisture from dew and rain, which helps keep your lawn from drying out. As the leaves break down — mowing over them can hasten this — they add valuable nutrients to the soil. Fallen leaves also attract and are fed upon by insects, which in turn are fed upon by birds such as robins, blackbirds, thrushes, bluebirds, catbirds and thrashers. A healthy lawn is always a birdy lawn.



3 **Scatter seed** I know bird feeding is done more for the watchers than it is for the ultimate survival of the birds. But, I still feel good when I scatter a handful of mixed seed, sunflower hearts and peanut bits under the brush piles and thick shrubbery around our lawn. This food is intended for those skulking species that may never come to our feeders — the sparrows, thrashers, catbirds, towhees and others that are too shy, or too smart, to venture across our yard to the centralized feeding stations. I am sure chipmunks and field mice enjoy this banquet, too. But then again, they might lure a kestrel or red-tailed hawk into the yard seeking a mammalian meal.

2 **Keep hummer feeders up** You've probably heard the myth: Take down your hummingbird feeders in the fall or the hummers will "forget" to migrate. It's not true. Birds, including the hummingbirds at our feeders, are programmed by instinct to migrate when their inner clocks tell them to leave. Changes in daylight, in terms of the length and intensity of sunlight, affect the birds' departure date and time, as do changes in weather. But there's no way your feeder will interfere with a bird's migratory urge, unless the bird is hindered from migrating by some other factor such as illness or injury. Sick or injured birds and late migrants from points to the north will benefit from your late-fall feeding station. Leaving up your hummer feeders will do no harm, and it might even do some good. Make sure your feeders are clean and the solution is fresh — sorry, I couldn't resist.



1 **Make your windows safe for migrants** Migrant birds get restless and almost hyper-active in the fall. Watch a red-eyed vireo chase a warbler all over your yard and you'll see what I mean. All this activity around your house can have tragic results if one or more of your windows is in a location where flying birds strike the glass. I recently devoted an entire "Top Ten" column to preventing window strikes. Julie and I use a FeatherGuard idea. Our window kills have been reduced by more than 80 percent. There's also a new bird screen available from The Bird Screen Company at www.birdscreen.com, designed to prevent birds from feeling pain from your panes. Whatever you do, make sure it works to break up the window's reflection or prevent birds from striking the glass.

— Reprinted with permission from *Backyard Bird News*

Need mealworms? They've got a farm for that

Jord Producers is a woman-owned Nebraska commercial mealworm farm operation located on two sites near Hastings and Lindsey. We sell live mealworms in varying quantities for our customers to attract and keep wild birds throughout the year. From customer interviews, we discovered the availability and sourcing of quality mealworms at an affordable price is a problem. Jord Producers believes strongly in supporting those who care for nature and the wild birds around them. Our live mealworms help bird lovers who delight in the environmental enrichment and deep connection with bluebirds and other wild birds.

Next spring, bluebirders will be able to purchase mealworms to feed their bluebirds via mail order through this new local Nebraska company. Look for more information in upcoming issues of The BANner.

Founder Cheryl Powers grew up on a farm outside of Neligh, Nebraska. Before starting Jord Producers, she spent nearly 20 years as a public school educator and five years as a private college recruiter.

Co-founder Kris Vrooman has been farming mealworms on her small hobby farm for about a year and has a strong knowledge of mealworm production. Besides being Jord Producers' production manager, Kris operates Innovative Grants, a grant-writing business.

Co-founder Amber Burenheide has been farming cage-free chickens since

Mealworms a potential avenue to reducing plastic waste

Indeed, it is possible to find a research study on anything. One of our personal favorites from 2015 — you may recall it made national news — is a Stanford University Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering study showing that mealworms can safely biodegrade certain types of plastic.

The study, a cooperative effort between Stanford engineers and China researchers, resulted in at least two papers published on the subject. To me, some of the most fascinating information provided by the research has to do with the mealworm's capacity to biodegrade Styrofoam via microorganisms in its gut, in very much the same way it would "normal" food, converting about half of it into carbon dioxide but excreting the bulk of the remaining plastic into droppings within 24 hours.

According to the study, worms being fed Styrofoam were as healthy



Mealworms munch on Styrofoam, a hopeful sign that solutions to plastics pollution exist. Photo credit: Yu Yang, Stanford University

as those eating a normal diet, and their waste appeared to be safe to use as soil for crops. Yes, as part of their continuing research, they plan to study the effect of plastic-eating worms on the animals that consume them. Just in case you were wondering, you are still fine growing your mealworms in plastic containers. There is no need to worry that they may eat their way to freedom. You can read more about the research at tinyurl.com/stanford-mealworms.

— Reprinted from *The Fledgling*, the official newsletter of the Missouri Bluebird Society, Winter 2017

she was a teenager. Amber's farm site is our newly created second location. Her expertise as operations manager is to ensure all regulatory matters are in place at both farm facilities.

As we work to grow our mealworms and our company, we are

excited to meet new people every day who have a great devotion and care for wild and domestic animals alike. We hope to reflect that same care as we provide a nutritious and stimulating product to people across Nebraska and the Midwest.

BAN mourns loss of Dorene Scriven, Minnesota bluebird

In 1978, the Bluebird Recovery Program of Minnesota, made up of 12 Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis members, reported 22 fledglings in their first year. Among those BBRP pioneers was Dorene Scriven. The publication and distribution of informational material, the quarterly Bluebird News, public workshops, an annual conference and publishing of

the acclaimed book, "Bluebird Trails, a Guide to Success," were accomplished under her early leadership.

Our BBRP secretary received word from her son of her passing on June 25. A celebration of her life will be held Nov. 10 at the Unitarian Society of Minneapolis.

— Excerpted from *Bluebird News*, Summer 2018

The House Wren: Unjustly accused

By Hannah Waters

In the early 1900s, when Althea Sherman began noticing House Wrens nesting in her backyard in Iowa, she was delighted. Opportunistic nesters, House Wrens will set up shop in pretty much any empty crevice they can find — John James Audubon’s illustration of a House Wren family depicts them nesting in an old hat — and over the next several years, as Sherman hung birdhouses in her yard, more wren tenants eagerly filled the vacancies. At one point, there were 10 pairs nesting on the property, each raising at least five chicks a season. All the while, Sherman, an artist and budding ornithologist, meticulously recorded the birds’ rendezvous, their squabbles, their romances, and their parenting trials.

But before long, Sherman’s admiration for the wrens began to sour. First, she saw one invade a Phoebe nest and toss out two eggs — an “evil deed,” she wrote in her journal. Then, when two wren-beak-sized holes appeared in the shell of a Black-billed Cuckoo egg, she described the bird as a “frightful devil that thrust its sharp bayonet into the egg.” In time she came to launch a full-fledged crusade against the House Wren, publishing her observations—and condemnations — of the bird in scientific journals, and demanding that ornithologists and bird-lovers face the facts, denounce House Wren boxes, and end their fawning over these “criminal” birds.

At the time, some ornithologists wrote Sherman off as overly emotional — to which she countered that they were the emotional ones, too attached to their little brown birds to see them for the monsters they really are. “They are fond of their bird and are angry when the truth is spoken about it,” Sherman wrote in *The Wilson Bulletin* in 1925. “They act precisely like the parents of vicious children, refusing to believe the evil things their darlings do.”

And indeed, over the last century, several studies have confirmed Sherman’s observations: Wrens will puncture the eggs of bluebirds, woodpeckers, nuthatches, sparrows, chickadees, swallows, Bobolinks, and warblers, and occasionally take over their nests. It would seem that the House Wren is, as Sherman put it, a “felon, criminal, demon, and devil.”

Or is it?

We’d prefer that the bird patiently and politely wait its turn, perhaps. But evolution rarely rewards patience. Indeed, House Wrens are fiercely impatient across the board. In many cases, a male House Wren may lure a second mate to move in to a nest site on his territory while his primary mate is still

incubating their clutch. Or he may sneak out to woo the female on a neighboring male’s territory — perhaps destroying her eggs or young afterwards so that she must lay new eggs — his eggs — in their place. And if a male holds no territory, he may boldly attempt to take one by force. The usurper sometimes succeeds in driving out the resident male, claiming his mate, and killing her eggs or young so that she must start over. The fiercest males are the most successful — and pass on those fierce genes to their abundant offspring.

Why House Wrens go after the eggs and young of other species — especially those who don’t nest in cavities — is difficult to explain. It might reduce competition for food, suggest some researchers. But perhaps there’s simply no downside to destroying any and all unrelated eggs — for the wrens, anyway.

It doesn’t look pretty. But who are we to judge? As the prominent ornithologist Witmer Stone — who, as it happened, agreed with Sherman that reducing the number of House Wren nest boxes in certain areas would be wise — wrote at the time: “The Wren is no more of a ‘felon’ for destroying the nest of a Bluebird than is a Flicker for destroying a nest of ants.”

Sherman, though, remained unpersuaded. She even went as far as to write her backyard wrens out of her will, stipulating that the birds be barred from breeding on her homestead even after her she was gone. But in spite of her crusade, the species is today one of North America’s most common songbirds — helped along, no doubt, by the same opportunism that Sherman considered so morally wrong. Ecologically speaking, at least, the House Wren seems to be doing something right.

— Reprinted in part from *Audubon.org*.

I VOTED
AGAINST
RUNNING
THIS
ARTICLE.



Following our two-part series on the destructive tendencies of the House Wren, we present you with an opposing view. You can find the original stories about Althea Sherman’s findings in the June and August editions of *The BANNER* under the “Resources” tab at bbne.org.

Welcome | new members

Nebraska: Bob & Teresa Aernif & family, Unadilla; Chris Dunning, Bennington; Chuck & Diane Genuchi, Unadilla; Dan Kreitman, Wahoo; Dan O’Briot, Falls City; Jim & Linda Swenson, Greenwood; Lynn Erb, Clatonia; Mark Kemper, Nebraska City; Molly Curnyn, Allen; Monty Lovelace, Syracuse; Myrna Brown, Blair; Ramon Rocha, Omaha; Robert & Lynnel Wilcke, Ponca; **Georgia:** Fred Stille, Waleska; **Iowa:** Alyssa Utecht, Granville; Fred Koopmann, Bennett; Kenneth O’Donnell, Clarinda; Lynda Swanson, Sioux City; **Missouri:** Darla Davison, Cosby

The bluebirds will return – will you be ready?

Here are 10 tips to help get a jump-start on a successful bluebird season:

1

Check the condition of your boxes

Roofs are usually the first part of a box to need replacing. When you check your trail, take along an extra roof or two (a light-colored shingle can be attached to the top of a weather-worn roof to extend its useful life). Be prepared: Carry extra screws, nails, hammer and a cordless drill in case other repairs are necessary — a backpack or carpenter/gardener apron might be a good idea. Make note of any boxes that need to be replaced.

2

Check your past records

Note boxes that have had raccoon predation problems and check your boxes for scratch marks indicating predation or predation attempts. Boxes should never be mounted on wooden posts or metal fenceposts. Boxes should be mounted on a smooth metal pipe or the Gilbertson conduit/rebar system (the mounting system recommended by BAN). To further guard against predation problems when using the conduit/rebar system, wipe down the pipe with steel wool and apply a generous coating of carnauba car wax. There have been reports in the past few years of raccoons getting to boxes mounted on 1-inch metal pipe. To stop raccoons from climbing these pipes, apply a coating of a high quality automotive grease or put a predator guard on the pipe. BAN has predator guards available at a very reasonable price.

3

Close your boxes

If you left the doors on your boxes open after your final check last season to prevent sparrows and mice from occupying them over the winter, now is the time to close them up. Next fall: If sparrows and mice aren't a problem, boxes can be left closed and bluebirds wintering over can use them for roosting.

4

Check for changes in habitat

What started as good bluebird habitat may now be good wren habitat due to growth of nearby trees and/or bushes. If wrens have been a problem at certain box sites, relocate those boxes as far away from wren habitat as possible (300 feet if possible).



5

Relocate boxes with a history of sparrow problems

Sparrows like areas near man-made structures such as houses, barns, and outbuildings. For more information on sparrow control, BAN has a fact sheet available at no charge through your county coordinator or BAN's website, www.bbne.org/articles.

6

Pair your boxes if necessary

Pair your boxes if necessary. If more than half of your boxes were used by tree swallows last year, try placing a second box (pairing) approximately 10 feet from the existing box. Bluebird and tree swallows will generally nest side by side. Face the entrance holes to the paired boxes in different directions.

7

Adjust distance between boxes

For many years the recommended distance for spacing between boxes was 100 yards, but unless you have "ideal" bluebird habitat it has been determined that 100 yards is too close. Boxes should be placed approximately 125 to 150 yards apart. If both of two adjoining boxes have not been used for several years, they could be placed too close together. When possible, place your boxes where a tree, hill, etc. will block the view between the two boxes.

8

Try a new location

Boxes that have not been used by bluebirds for three or four years should be relocated. Sometimes moving a box as little as 25 to 30 feet can make a difference.

9

Add boxes to your trail

Ideal bluebird habitat is an open area with shorter grass and nearby things to perch from such as fences, power lines, and scattered trees and bushes. If space is limited on your own property, don't be afraid to ask neighbors for permission to place boxes on their land. Most landowners are happy to help.

10

Ensure your record-keeping system is ready

Record keeping is important! As you can see from the previous tips, it not only keeps you informed on a week-to-week basis of what's going on in your boxes, but also it provides valuable information that you can review to help you determine what has and has not been successful on your trail in past years. Become familiar with BAN's annual report form before you begin your trail records so that you know the information you are asked to submit at the end of the nesting season.

It's not too late to turn in your report form

Thanks to everyone who turned in their annual report forms. We might think of monitoring our trails as a hobby, but each of our individual efforts makes a difference in increasing the bluebird population. No matter how large or small your trail may be, when all of our efforts are added up, we are a force to be reckoned with.

These reports help provide a picture of how the bluebirds are doing, but they also help us celebrate our successes while contemplating our challenges.

Now that fall has arrived and the bluebirds are done nesting, please complete and submit the easy-to-fill-out nesting report for your trail if you have not yet done so.

Three ways to submit your report:



Complete your report form, then affix a first-class stamp and mail it to BAN.



Scan and email your completed report form to info@bbne.org.



Visit bbne.org, click on "Report 2018 Bluebird Nesting Statistics Online Now."

Need advice? | Have questions?

Where should I put my nest box? What kind of bird built this nest? Do I need to monitor my box? Having a problem with sparrows, wrens or raccoons? CALL YOUR COORDINATOR – THEY CAN HELP! You can find your county coordinator at bbne.org under the "Resources" tab.

Selecting a nest box

Buying or building a nest box should be a simple matter, but there are some things that should be considered when deciding what type of boxes you want to use on your trail. First of all, it is very important to know the basics of a good nest box. There are a lot of good nest boxes out there to choose from, but there are also boxes available that are not a good choice. By taking a moment to evaluate the box you are buying or building, you will be able to provide a better nest box for your bluebirds.

1 Does this box provide a safe environment for the bluebirds to raise their young?

Is there adequate roof overhang to prevent rain from being blown in? The roof should overhang the front of the box a minimum of 2 inches with approximately 1 inch overhang on the sides. As a general rule, the more roof overhang, the better, especially on the front of the box.

Is there proper ventilation to keep the box from overheating? A box either needs front or side ventilation to allow rising hot air

to escape and to allow cooler air to be blown in.

Does it have the correct hole size for the species of bluebird that nests in your area? A 1 1/2- to 1 9/16-inch hole is recommended for Eastern and Western Bluebirds. A 1 9/16-inch hole is recommended for Mountain Bluebirds and Western Bluebirds where their ranges vastly overlap. A slot entrance should be 1 3/16 to 1 1/4 inch tall. The oval hole should measure 1 3/8 inches wide by 2 1/4 inches tall.

Are the inside dimensions large enough? For the conventional NABS style box, the floor size should be no less than 4-by-4 inches. The Peterson and Troyer boxes measure less than this at the bottom, but because of the sloping front, the floor size increases with the height of the nest. The Gilbertson PVC has a 4-inch diameter which works out to 13 square inches. Although this may be small, the PVC has been successfully used for many years. Research has shown that sparrows prefer a larger, deeper box, so the smaller inside dimensions of the box may make it less attractive to the House Sparrow.



If painted, is it a light color? Never use a dark color on a bluebird box as it will significantly increase the inside box temperature on a hot day.

2 Can this box be easily monitored and cleaned out after the bluebirds have fledged?

First of all, it is imperative that the box opens easily for monitoring on a regular basis. In addition, since old nests should be removed after each nesting, you might wish to consider how difficult the box is to clean out.

3 How will this box be mounted?

Can it be easily attached to a round smooth pole? Is it light enough to be mounted with the Gilbertson rebar/ conduit method? Consider the weight of the box and mounting pole if you have to carry the boxes a great distance when setting up your trail.

The Troyer, Gilwood and PVC boxes are made to be easily mounted on the conduit/rebar mounting system, which is very effective in deterring predators.

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Have you had a change of address?

If you have moved, changed from a box number to a street address, or have your mail forwarded for several months, please let us know. Under bulk mailing restrictions, the Postal Service does not forward newsletters, but returns them to BAN with postage due. If the return notice has a new address, BAN then sends your newsletter to the correct address with the additional required postage. Please contact Membership Chair Sandy Seibert, 2115 South 114th Street, Omaha, NE 68144 or email us at info@bbne.org if this applies to you. Your help in keeping our costs down is greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Is it time to renew?

Take a moment to check the date above your name and address on Page 8. If your membership has expired, please renew today. Your continued support is appreciated.

BAN membership | Renewal form

Name _____

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County _____ Phone _____

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Please check if you have had a change of address or phone.

1 year \$10

3 years \$20

Business/Corporation - 1 year \$50

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Additional tax-deductible donation \$ _____

We are a 501 (c) (3) organization

**Please mail this membership form and your tax-deductible contribution to:
Membership, BAN, P.O. Box 67157, Lincoln, NE 68506-7157**

From the | mailbox

Grass clippings provide bluebirds with a head start

I don't know if you will find this interesting, but it has, in my opinion, helped my bluebirds in several ways.

Each fall, I put well-dried grass clippings in each of my 75-plus bird boxes after I clean them out well. Lots of my birds winter here, and since I have been doing this, I have not found any dead birds in spring.

Plus, the little buggers make their first nest out of those clippings, which gives them a boost and gets them ahead of the tree swallows, who seem to take over briefly.

Just make sure the grass clippings are well dried.

— Jeanette Stamm, Washington, Kansas

Hopp reports impressive numbers

Gordon Hopp reported that he monitors 428 boxes and, at the time of the last BAN meeting, he had 3,406 bluebird eggs, 2,600 chicks and 32 third nestings. His trail is approximately

150 miles long, which he monitors on a four-wheeler over a period of several days. Gordon also reported 55 kestrel babies, 225 wood duck babies and a turkey buzzard nest.

Selecting a nest box

Continued from Page 6

4

What is the life span of this box?

Cedar is a long-lasting wood for bluebird boxes. Boxes made of various scrap wood and exterior plywood will work, but if those woods are used, the box should be painted. Give careful consideration to the roof, as it is almost always the first thing

to deteriorate or break on a box. The roofs of all BAN-made boxes have a coating of Conklin Rapid Roof, which greatly extends its life span. How is the box held together? If nails are used, they should be galvanized. Galvanized screws work well on the roof and the door in case they need to be removed or replaced.

If you are building your own box, consider whether or not it will be

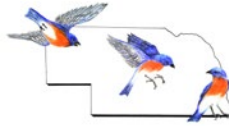
difficult to build. Building a box should be simple, rather than a complex project. An inexperienced woodworker may have a difficult time building a box with a lot of angle cuts.

BAN has plans available for the Peterson, Gilbertson PVC, NABS, Troyer, and Gilwood boxes. See your Bluebird Basics Information Booklet, www.bbne.org, or contact your county coordinator for a set of plans.

“
*His soft warble
 melts the ear, as the
 snow is melting in the
 valleys around.
 The bluebird comes
 and with his warbles
 drills the ice and sets
 from the rivers and
 ponds and frozen
 ground.*
 — Henry David Thoreau,
 March 2, 1859

Members: We want to hear from you!

You can always contact us with success stories, questions, comments, concerns or “error advisories” via email at info@bbne.org. We will respond to all emails received! Or write to us at P.O. Box 67157, Lincoln, NE 68506-7157.



Bluebirds Across Nebraska

P.O. Box 67157
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Calendar of events | Mark your calendar and save the date

2018

Nov. 11

BAN fall potluck meeting at Roca Community Center, 15545 B St., Roca; 1 p.m. potluck followed by 2 p.m. meeting.

Dec. 2

BAN Christmas Party at The Bar, Unadilla, 2 p.m. Social time, buffet dinner. In addition to BAN's non-traditional gift exchange, holiday food items will be gathered for donation to the Lincoln Food Bank on behalf of "The Members of Bluebirds Across Nebraska." RSVP to Sandy Seibert at 402-334-8691 or wseibert@cox.net.

2019

Jan. 18

Note: No annual conference in 2019

Annual Women's Wellness Weekend at Ponca State Park — Women of BAN will present a bluebird educational program and attendees will assemble a bluebird box.

Feb. 17

BAN winter potluck meeting at Roca Community Center, 15545 B St., Roca; 1 p.m. potluck followed by 2 p.m. meeting.

2020

March 12-15

BAN will host the North American Bluebird Society's 2020 National Convention in conjunction with our own annual state conference in Kearney, Nebraska, during the annual Sandhill Crane migration.

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