

A Very Unusual Brood

Kate Brennan

Nesting in bluebird boxes started very early this past year in the Sierra foothills of California—bluebird eggs appeared in one of my boxes on March 23. And many unusual activities were reported by our nestbox monitors throughout the season. But the tale of this very unusual brood is my most fascinating experience in 10 years of monitoring nestboxes.

This most unusual nest was on our Garden Bar trail in Nevada County. Nestboxes are usually visited once a week once monitoring begins, and on the seventh visit of the season to this box (April 28), it was apparent that a Western Bluebird (WEBL) was building a nest and it was almost complete. The next week, it was complete. However, there was black and white fur around the edges, indicative of an Ash-throated Flycatcher (ATFL) nest. And there was an ATFL in a nearby tree calling out. Next visit, two lovely brown and white ATFL eggs were in the nest, along with a bit more black fur. So, it looked like the ATFL won the battle for that box. However, on the next visit, there were five eggs in the nest, but now there were three ATFL eggs and two beautiful bluebird eggs, with a female Western Bluebird on the telephone wire. Whoa, a mixed brood! I had never seen this before.

So the questions that came to my mind were—who was going to sit on these eggs?? Would they all hatch?



Who's going to feed them? The first egg to hatch was a Western Bluebird. You can see in the photo above one scrawny pinkie with one blue egg remaining and three white and brown eggs.

And who flew out of the nest as we approached—the Ash-throated Flycatcher. The only parents seen in all subsequent visits were the Ash-throated Flycatchers. On our next to last visit to this box, we were lucky to observe the two ATFL parents in nearby trees calling to the nestlings, and as Rhian Gastineau, the monitor helping me this season, approached the box, one fledgling ATFL flew out and crashed into the tree near one parent. Rhian quickly snapped a photo inside the nestbox and hurried back to the car. The photo she took showed alternating ATFL and WEBL nestlings all lined up like little jets ready to take to the air.

Amazed and delighted! As monitors, we rarely get to witness the actual fledging of the young birds. But we sat in the car and watched for a bit to see what would happen next, and were overjoyed as we watched another young ATFL fly out of the nestbox, lured by the incessant calling of the parents.

Since two birds had already fledged, it was likely the others would follow suit, that day or the next. But it was VERY HOT, so we left. And we went back for the final visit to this box three days later, just to see if the



bluebirds did indeed fly off with the flycatcher family, and we found the box empty. It appeared that all the birds had fledged successfully (no dead birds inside).

I expect that sometime I will notice some Western Bluebirds in my neighborhood with very strange vocalizations—not totally a Western Bluebird sound, and not totally an Ash-throated Flycatcher.

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