

BLUE GROSBEAK NESTING IN NEW YORK STATE: A FIRST RECORD

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Blue Grosbeak – Richmond County
27 June 1982 *H. Fischer*

On 17 June 1982, a nest of the Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*) was found on a shrubby hillside in Latourette Park, Staten Island (Richmond County). When first located, it contained three eggs. This represents the first breeding record for this species in New York State.

Blue Grosbeaks, whose range has recently been expanding northward (Peterson, 1980, map 362) have been seen in central Staten Island with increasing frequency each spring since 1979. Most sightings had been of individual birds, usually sub-adult males, but in 1981 a pair was seen (*Kingbird*, vol. 31, no. 4, p. 268; Fall, 1981) and it was felt that it was only a matter of time before breeding would take place.

Thus when on 27 May 1982 the authors saw a pair of Blue Grosbeaks in an area known as Heyerdahl's Hill (after the family who farmed there a century ago) we decided to monitor the site daily until breeding evidence was obtained.

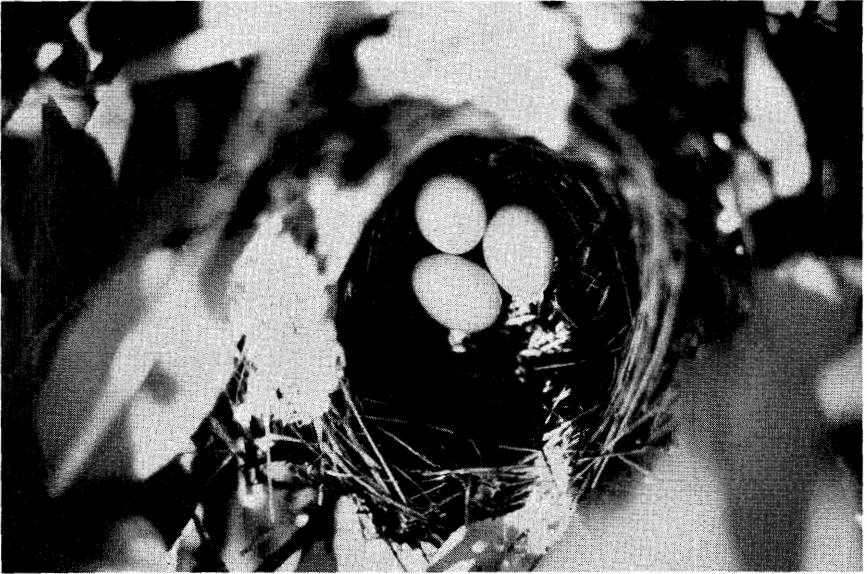
Beginning with that first day we kept a detailed journal, recording everything we heard or observed about the grosbeaks. We visited the hill at various times of day, morning or afternoon, and usually spent about three hours at the site each time. We generally saw the birds for less than one-half hour during each three hour visit, and between 6 June and 15 June we did not see them at all and were almost convinced they had left the area.

On the latter date, however, we heard the male sing—something we had not heard often during our observations. The following morning we arrived at 7:00 a.m. and heard him singing again from the same place. A day later, on 17 June, we discovered the nest. It was located 32 inches above the ground in a sapling Sweet Gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). The three eggs were very pale blue, almost white.

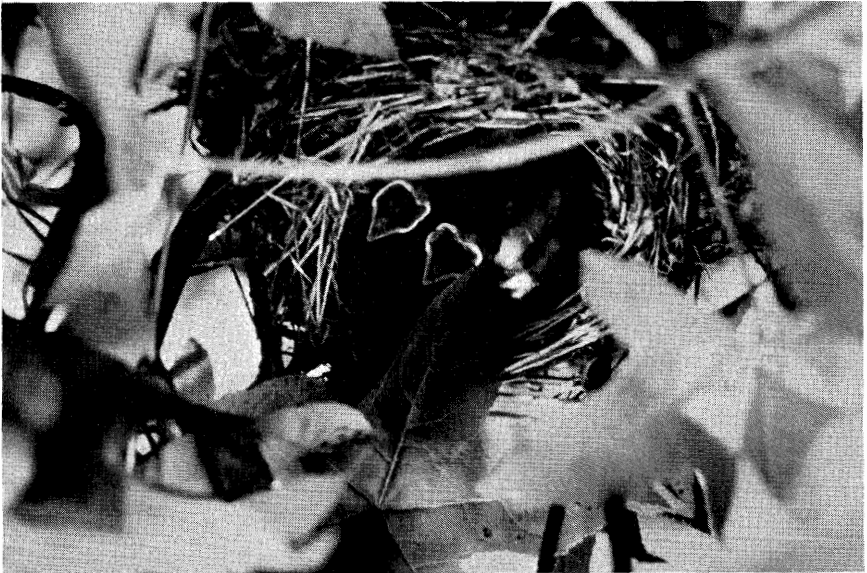
Thereafter, we visited less frequently so as not to disturb the birds unduly. The eggs had not yet hatched on the morning of 21 June, but on 24 June we found three totally unfeathered nestlings. By 27 June they had almost doubled in size and were showing pinfeathers and moving about in the nest much more than before, their heads reaching out over the rim.

On 1 July, our next visit, we found the nest empty except for one dead nestling. A few minutes later we saw the adult birds in a clump of small Black Birches (*Betula lenta*) about 20 feet away, "clicking" and acting in an agitated manner. As we approached them, their behavior became even more disturbed. Finally we saw two fledglings in the brush behind the adults. The young were partially obscured, but from their lack of tail feathers and fluttering flight, as well as from the very protective behavior of the parent birds, we are sure that these were the two fledgling Blue Grosbeaks, and that they had left the nest only hours before.

Heyerdahl's Hill is a serpentinite hillside of approximately 15 acres in an undeveloped portion of Latourette Park known as Buck's Hollow. The hill is covered with Little Bluestem Grass (*Andropogon scoparius*) and Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) (Buegler and Parisio, 1981, p. 16), with a great deal of low growth consisting primarily of sapling trees such as Sweet Gum, Black Birch, oak (*Quercus* sp.) and poplar (*Populus* sp.). Common Catbrier (*Smilax rotundifolia*) covers



Blue Grosbeak Nest and Eggs – Richmond County
17 June 1982 *H. Jenkins*



Blue Grosbeak Young in Nest – Richmond County
27 June 1982 *H. Jenkins*

large parts of the hill. During the time of our observations, Whorled Loosetrife (*Lysimachia quadrifolia*) was a common herbaceous plant, interspersed among the grasses. There are a few scattered large trees, mostly oaks. The hill is surrounded on all sides by mature deciduous woodlands, the entire complex being part of the 3500-acre undeveloped heart of Staten Island known locally as the "Greenbelt."

The breeding area is similar to habitats described by Bent (1968, p. 67ff) and H. Harrison (1975, p. 226). Other species confirmed as breeders on this same hillside since 1980 include Ring-necked Pheasant, Common Flicker, Eastern Kingbird, House Wren, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Starling, White-eyed Vireo, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Red-winged Blackbird, Northern Oriole, Brown-headed Cowbird, Cardinal, Indigo Bunting, House Finch, American Goldfinch, and Field Sparrow.

The nest measures 2½ inches across (inside diameter) and is 2¼ inches deep. It is a neatly woven cup of dried grasses and weed stems. It does not contain any snakeskin, although that is a common component of Blue Grosbeak nests (H. Harrison, 1975, p. 226) and both the Northern Black Racer (*Coluber constrictor constrictor*) and the Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) are found on the hill.

The nest and the dead nestling were collected and are now in the collections of the Staten Island Museum, 75 Stuyvesant Place, St. George, Staten Island, along with our original notes of the entire experience.

The following are a few general observations we made during this time:

1. The birds were extremely secretive during most of the nesting period. The male sang very little; during the more than 50 hours we spent on the hill we heard him on only five occasions. His voice was weak, almost tentative, and did not carry far. He did not begin to sing with gusto until the day the young were fledged. At this writing, more than a week later, he is still singing heartily.
2. The birds were also very difficult to locate visually. They ranged over the entire hillside; we never knew where to expect them and because of the size of the area we had difficulty following them when they flew. Only once (on 3 June) did we see the female carrying nesting material; we never saw her again in that precise area until 17 June when we discovered the nest.
3. We never saw the male at the nest. Each time we approached the nest we found it either unguarded or occupied by the female. She

appeared to be fending for herself during the incubation period, leaving the eggs for twenty minutes at a time while she fed on the ground nearby. At this time the male was nowhere in sight. After the nestlings hatched we spent less time at the site; we saw only the female bringing food, but our observations were not extensive enough to state definitively that the male did not participate in this activity. The young fledged at a (maximum) age of 10½ days. This seems a very short period for the size of this bird but is consistent with information given by C. Harrison (1978, p. 389), who states that some Blue Grosbeaks fledged as early as nine days after hatching.

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