

NATIVE FLORA & FAUNA FACTS

A Flash of Blue

By GARY WOODS

Mountain Press contributing writer

If you've ever visited the McKenzie Preserve off Auberry Road, chances are you've noticed a bunch of brown boxes with a hole in them placed around the parking lot and along the road with a number on them. For the last dozen or more years those boxes have provided safe nesting structure for several species of birds that need cavities of some sort to build their nest in and raise a family.

The design was specifically created for Western Bluebirds, but a number of other species use them when there aren't enough natural woodpecker holes in trees to go around. In 2019 for instance, 28 percent of the boxes were used by Western Bluebirds while Ash-throated Flycatchers used 23 percent, and less than two percent were used by House Wrens and Tree Swallows. Other birds that use cavities include White-breasted Nuthatches, Violet-green Swallow, Oak Titmouse, House Finch and European Starlings. Those needing bigger cavities (and boxes) include American Kestrel, Wood Duck, Western Screech Owl and Northern Pygmy Owl.

Designs for different sizes of nest boxes are easy to find online with a Google search and the box size used on the McKenzie is easily built using fence boards available at many hardware stores and held together with #6x1-1/2" drywall screws. One side of the box is designed to swing away



Western Bluebirds nest in boxes build on Sierra Foothill Conservancy land.
GARY WOODS PHOTO

when a duplex nail holding it in place is removed, thereby allowing the box to be easily cleaned out every winter to remove old nests and prevent a buildup of parasites that could harm the next crop of chicks. Birds will start pairing up and hanging around the nest boxes as early as February and most nesting starts by April and into May with most young flying on their own by June.

If you are interested in making your own nest box to put up on your property, look here: <https://www.birdwatching-bliss.com/bluebird-house-plans.html>

To support Sierra Foothill Conservancy or to become a member, please visit sierrafoothill.org

2nd Lieutenant

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The vice president offered words of praise, acknowledged excellence, and conveyed confidence in the ability of the class of 2020 to move forward to face an "invisible enemy" as well as other obstacles, as they "defend and uphold the constitution." Rix commented that Pence delivering this address "was perfect, as he's taking a lead role in the COVID-19 response." At the end of the ceremony, the graduates tossed their caps and were honored with a flyover by the Thunderbirds.

Rix expressed great pride in being a member of the USAFA's 67th class. She noted that 80 of her peers were commissioned into the Space Force. When asked what motivated her to pursue a career in the Air Force, Rix recalled that when she was in the eighth grade, an SHS senior spoke about the USAFA.

With cadet training recently behind her, Rix gave insight into the both challenging and enriching mo-

ments of her journey to graduation. Rix shared that during the freshman year, adjustments could be challenging, and finding a "rhythm" was key to balancing basic training and academics. What she found helped her to persevere was embracing the time-honored Academy traditions which bolster morale, motivate, and honor achievement. Rix noted that recognition came after a military challenge during the freshman year.

Other "milestone" moments for the Second Lieutenant included the sophomore Commitment Ceremony during her sophomore year, a Junior Ring Dance, and the ultimate celebration: Commencement. As a result of a shared commitment, triumphs and difficulties, Rix has built lasting bonds with those in her squadron. In June, Second Lieutenant Rix will report to Luke Airforce Base in Phoenix, Arizona where she will be an investigator for the Air Force Office of Special Investigation (IFOSI). The Rix family is pleased that she will be in a neighboring state.

"Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all." — Helen Keller

Miniature horses provide companionship during shutdown

By THOMAS W. CATCHPOLE

Mountain Press contributing writer

For retired music teachers D'Arcy and Bruce Weinberger, just like for everyone else, the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing orders have drastically changed their normal routine. However, they are resilient and have been weathering through this situation.

Bruce retired one year ago from Sierra High School and had been enjoying his retirement job as director of the Fresno Community Concert Band (FCCB) based at Fresno City College (FCC). Their last three concerts (March, April and May) were cancelled along with the weekly rehearsals. The musicians hope to get back together in September, depending on when it is deemed safe to do so and when FCC opens up the facilities. In the meantime, Bruce has been busy reading music scores for future performances, going on brief shopping trips, cooking, doing lawn work and helping D'Arcy with her miniature horses.

D'Arcy would have been playing clarinet in the FCCB, the Fresno City Community Orchestra and other ensembles, as well as participating in many events involving the miniature horses. During the shutdown she practices on the clarinet, is learning to play the ukulele, and cares for her two miniature horses. They also have two dogs that need walks and four

cats for companionship.

The miniature horse is the result of centuries of selective breeding, having been bred down in size from larger breeds. Miniature horses were first developed in Europe in the 1600s, and by 1765 they were seen frequently as the pets of nobility. The English began using small ponies in their mines after the Mines and Collieries Act 1842 prohibited the use of young children as mine workers. They are strong workers and by 1861 miniature horses were working in the mines in the US, pulling coal carts in eastern and central USA until the 1960s, when they became popular for equestrian disciplines. The miniature horse needs extra care since, due to selective breeding for small size, they have sensitive digestive systems and require a special diet.

D'Arcy is a member of Central Valley Horses Association Club, which includes all sizes of horses, and the Sierra Precision Equine Driving Society, which is mainly miniature horses. She trains her horses to pull a one-horse carriage in which she rides as they practice different routines. She uses local side roads around their house to keep the horses trained and in good condition. When things get back to normal again, the organizations she belongs to will have many events and workshops for the miniature horses.

D'Arcy is looking forward



D'Arcy and Bruce Weinberger exercising their miniature horses last week. D'Arcy is standing by 13-year-old miniature horse Tristan, while Bruce is with 20-year-old Doctor Pepper. (Note the sign reading "Beware of Miniature Horse.")

CATCHPOLE PHOTO

to getting back to having her horses do special presentations of precision driving before audiences again. They have performed at Valley Children's Hospital, fairs and other gatherings. There are special workshops that

train the horse and rider in the proper "dressage" and handling skills, obstacle courses, and other challenging driving events she enjoys. One advantage of the miniature horse is the ease in transporting them com-

pared to large horses. They consume less food and have less manure (making it easier for Bruce when he cleans the stalls).

The Weinbergers wish for a safe recovery to all from this pandemic.