



NEWS FROM:
Office of Public Defender
Matt Shirk, Fourth Circuit
www.MattShirkPublicDefender.com

Contact: Matt Bisbee
Public Information Officer
Tel: (904)630-7350
MPB@PD4.COJ.net

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Nassau County APD Donates Spare Time to Nature Enhancement at Courthouse

Yulee, FL: For 23 years, Assistant Public Defender Chris Clayton has been protecting the rights of her clients who have been charged with felonies, misdemeanors and juvenile infractions among other things. Now a senior attorney in the Nassau County Office of Public Defender Matt Shirk, Clayton can add natural habitat defense to her resume.



In her spare time, Ms. Clayton pursues a variety of outdoors activities such as hiking, kayaking and bird watching. She is also a longtime member of the Audubon Society. When the Nassau County Courthouse was moved from downtown Fernandina Beach to the more Interstate-accessible location near Yulee, some wooded area was cleared for the construction. That wooded area is home to at least 17 different species of birds. From her office window in the new Courthouse, Ms. Clayton noticed that a few Eastern Bluebirds appeared to be thriving in the new environment that includes a very large Courthouse lawn, perfect for finding bugs; but the many saplings that were planted are still too young to become ideal nesting trees for the birds. So one weekend she did something about that.

Crediting her friend Butch Mankovich for the hard work, Ms. Clayton researched Eastern Bluebirds on the Internet and found a very simple construction plan for a birdhouse designed for this species. In February, the two cut a piece of cedar to the specifications and built two separate birdhouses. Presently they are mounted on opposite ends of the Judicial Complex property; one birdhouse already has a resident. Clayton says March and April are prime nesting season for the species and expects both will soon be inhabited.

“We are very lucky in Nassau County to have such incredible environmental surroundings,” said Clayton. “With that comes a lot of diverse wildlife. The number of different birds that I see regularly either driving out to the Courthouse or simply peering out my office window is amazing. I thought it would be neat to encourage the Bluebirds.” Clayton continued, “Without reassurance from Judge Foster

(Administrative Judge for Nassau County), we would not have done this. An outdoorsman himself, he has a sincere appreciation for nature and thought this would be a worthwhile project.”

“Chris Clayton is a very good attorney, a tremendous asset to our Nassau County office,” said Shirk. “I’m always very impressed with our staff, many of whom generally dedicate their spare time to notable pursuits. Chris’ initiative to construct bird houses for the Judicial Complex was a great idea and really helps preserve the natural charm that is found in Nassau County.”

A Jacksonville native, Chris Clayton started with the Public Defender’s Office in 1987 in Duval County and moved to the Nassau County office in 2004. Presently, she resides in Yulee. She is a graduate of Emory University in Atlanta and earned her J.D. at The University of Florida College of Law.



(Left) APD Chris Clayton displays one of two bird houses presently mounted on the grounds of the Nassau County Judicial Complex. The construction was crafted for the Eastern Bluebird, though Clayton demonstrates her design was modified with a bottom hinge to allow for ease in periodic cleanings.

(Right) Though no Eastern Bluebirds or eggs are seen in this photo, this birdhouse clearly has a resident. The territorial birds are native to Nassau County and nest in seclusion. They reproduce multiple times per year.

