

## Bluebirds

A gentle bird with brilliant blue plumage, the bluebird has endeared itself to people across the country. Bluebird populations, like many other birds, have declined over the last century due primarily to loss of habitat caused by development. Bluebirds nest in tree cavities, and the loss or destruction of old, decaying trees has reduced the availability of suitable nesting sites and increased competition with other cavity-nesting birds.

### Bluebird Natural History

There are three species of bluebirds in North America: Eastern, Western, and Mountain. The various species differ mostly in territory and feather color. The males of all three species are brilliant blue on the head and back, with varying amounts of white and rust on their neck and breast. Female bluebirds are less bright, with more gray-brown coloring on the back and blue highlights on the wings and tail.

Bluebirds feed on a large variety of insects, arthropods, and invertebrates, including spiders, caterpillars, and grasshoppers. Bluebirds perch on posts, wires, or branches while scanning for insects. Watch for the bluebird's characteristic behavior of flying down from its perch to catch prey and then returning to the original perch to eat. In winter, bluebirds are dependent upon berries to supplement their diet.

Bluebirds prefer open habitats, such as meadows, parks, orchards, farm fields, and golf courses. They often spend the winter in woodlands or groves.

### Ranges

- Eastern Bluebirds are in all states east of the Rockies, from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.
- Western Bluebirds breed from southern British Columbia and the western U.S. to the mountains of central Mexico.
- Mountain Bluebird breed west of the Rockies from southern Alaska and western Canada to as far south as southern California; usually found in sub-alpine areas above 7,000 ft.



*The Eastern bluebird is one of three species of bluebirds found in North America. Bluebirds are cavity nesters, and can be attracted to your property by installing nest boxes.*

## Breeding Habits

Courtship and nesting begins early in Spring. The male chooses several potential nest sites and urges the female to choose one through singing and tail and wing displays. Nest building may start right away or the pair may wait as long as six weeks before weaving their tidy nest of grasses and sedges. Though the female builds the nest almost entirely by herself, the male will accompany her while she collects the nesting material. Once the nest is finished, the female will lay four to six blue eggs, one each day until the “clutch” is complete. Incubation by the female then begins, and in approximately 14 days, the young hatch. The nestlings are fed insects and cared for by both parents until they are ready to leave the nest 17 to 18 days later. The family stays together for another two to three weeks, and then, if conditions are right, the adults will begin a second brood. If habitat conditions are ideal, a breeding pair may have a third brood.

## Attracting Bluebirds

### 1. Mount nest boxes.

You have a good chance of attracting bluebirds to your property by providing bird houses designed specifically for them. These *nest boxes* are readily used by bluebirds who are scouting for nesting cavities. Ideal sites for nest boxes include open areas with scattered trees, fields with posts or wires for perching, large lawns near open country or farmland, and orchards.

Proper placement of nest boxes will encourage bluebirds and discourage other competing birds and predators.

- ❑ Mount boxes three to five feet high on a pole or tree trunk (not on a branch). Lower than this will increase the chances of predation and higher than five feet will encourage house sparrows.
- ❑ Use poles made of metal piping to further decrease the risk of predation.
- ❑ Many people *double up* bluebird nest boxes by erecting two boxes within about 10 to 15 feet of each other. This is the best way to decrease competition for the box. If a tree swallow or other bird takes up residence in one box, the other will be left open for bluebirds. Place “sets” of boxes 100 yards apart.



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### 2. Monitor and maintain your nest boxes.

Monitoring the progress of the birds using your boxes is important for ensuring their long-term success. During the nesting season from mid-March through August, check the boxes once a week. Briefly opening the box *will not* frighten the birds into deserting the nest. The only time to refrain from opening the box is after the nestlings are 12 days old, as this might make them leave the nest too early.

Keep a written account of when the nest is built, when eggs are laid, young born, and when the nest is empty. Clean out the box after each group of young has fledged so it can be used again for second or third broods. Your nest boxes may be left up all year long. Some boxes are used by bluebirds and other species as winter shelter. Before nesting season begins make sure all debris is removed from the box.

### 3. Deal with predators and competitors.

Bluebirds have to deal with many natural predators. Several mammals, reptiles, and even insects prey on adults, young, and the eggs of bluebirds. These animals include: raccoons, opossums, squirrels, snakes, domestic cats, and a parasitic insect called the blowfly.

The adult female blowfly lays her eggs in the nesting material. The eggs hatch and the larvae attach themselves to the young birds and feed on their blood. These oval, grayish maggots usually attack the nestlings at night and hide in the nesting material during the day. After they have gorged themselves, the larvae burrow deep into the nest and remain there until mature. The pupa are inactive then, and resemble small, brown eggs about 3/8" long. Though bluebirds may be able to survive the attack of blowflies, young bluebirds are often seriously weakened or killed if the infestation is heavy (100+larvae). If blowflies are a problem, they can be controlled by dusting the nest with 1% rotenone powder. Dusting may be done before or after egg laying but before hatching. If eggs have been laid, carefully remove them prior to dusting the nesting material.

In addition, many species of birds compete with bluebirds for nesting sites. Several of these are native to the United States, others are not. Nest site competition between bluebirds, starlings, and house sparrows has contributed to the decline of bluebirds. These two species, both brought here from Europe, are very aggressive and often force bluebirds away from nesting sites. Sparrows, who can enter any hole which bluebirds can, will evict bluebirds, and may even kill the young or adults. House sparrows can be a particular problem when nesting boxes are placed near buildings. Place your boxes away from buildings and monitor them to help keep sparrows out.



Other desirable cavity-nesting birds may take up residence in your blue bird nest boxes. These include:

- Chickadees (left)
- Tree Swallows
- Wrens
- Nuthatches
- Tufted Titmice

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act protects all native North American birds, as well as their eggs and young. You may not remove an active bird nest, unless it belongs to a house sparrow or starling, which are both introduced species.

### HELPFUL WEB SITES

North American Bluebird Society:  
[www.nabluebirdsociety.org](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org)

All About Birds, administered by The Cornell Lab of Ornithology:

- Eastern Bluebird  
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/eastern\\_bluebird](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/eastern_bluebird)
- Mountain Bluebird  
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Mountain\\_Bluebird](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Mountain_Bluebird)
- Western Bluebird  
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Western\\_Bluebird](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Western_Bluebird)

NestWatch, administered by The Cornell Lab of Ornithology:  
<http://nestwatch.org>