

Bluebirds in your Backyard



The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) is a member of the thrush family. About the size of a sparrow, the showy male bluebird is a bright blue with a reddish breast and throat. The female is a lighter blue with a more subdued orange-brown breast and throat and a gray head.

Bluebirds generally prefer grassy, open areas with a few scattered trees that the birds use for perching and nesting. This type of meadow habitat offers a great source of insects—such as caterpillars, earthworms, beetles, crickets, grasshoppers, snails, and spiders—which make up the majority of bluebirds' warm-weather diet. They are often spotted swooping to the ground to snatch a juicy critter, then fluttering to a nearby perch to consume it.

Bluebirds are secondary cavity-nesters; their beaks are not strong enough to excavate their own nests so they re-use cavities created by other birds like woodpeckers or use human-made nest boxes. The male entices the female to join him by bringing nest material to the cavity and showing off with a flutter of his wings. Then the female takes over, building the remainder of the grass and moss nest and incubating a clutch of two to seven eggs by herself. She incubates the eggs for about 14 days. After hatching, the young will leave the nest in approximately 17 days.

human impact.

Like many grassland bird species, Eastern Bluebird population levels are directly affected by human activity and land use. The number of bluebirds grew steadily in the latter part of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries as settlers cleared the forest and planted crops. During the height of their population, bluebirds were as common as American Robins are today. But their numbers declined dramatically in the middle of the last century with the loss of open space due to development, changes in farming practices, and increased reliance on pesticides. Competition from invasive bird species like House Sparrow and European Starling furthered the decline.



healthy competition.

Several other bird species may attempt to utilize your bluebird nest boxes. Species can often be identified by nesting materials and eggs.

Eastern Bluebird

- *nesting material*: pine needles and fine dry grass
- *eggs*: pale blue

Tree Swallow

- *nesting material*: dry grass with feathers
- *eggs*: pure white

Chickadee

- *nesting material*: moss and hair
- *eggs*: dull white with brown spots

House Wren

- *nesting material*: small twigs
- *eggs*: red and brown spots

House Sparrow

- *nesting material*: dried plants with feathers
- *eggs*: dull white with olive spots

lend a helping hand.

Bluebird populations have rebounded in the last 30 years due in large part to awareness about their decline and efforts to support them. Consider the following “dos and don’ts” so you can help bluebirds in your community:

do.



Add wooden nest boxes to your property or contact local officials to encourage nest box installation on township property (local parks or sports fields can be ideal locations).

Place nest boxes in open areas away from woodlands (though the birds prefer to have scattered trees within 50 feet of the nest boxes) about 100 yards apart at density of about one per acre. (Simple nest box plans can be found at: www.sialis.org/plans.) Install boxes by early March as male bluebirds will begin box selection as early as mid-March. Face the entry hole away from prevailing winds.

Monitor nest boxes and clean out old nests after baby birds have fledged to encourage a second or third brood. Monitor the nesting boxes once a week, between early April and late August.

Consider converting a portion of your property from lawn to native meadow grasses, which offer ideal feeding grounds for bluebirds. Songbirds need insects to feed their hungry chicks... LOTS of insects. Lawns are ecological wastelands, which simply don't support enough insects.

Plant native trees and shrubs (such as dogwoods, viburnums, winterberry holly, bayberry, hackberry, blueberries, chokeberries, shadbush, and red cedar) that will provide additional food and shelter for bluebirds.



Nestbox monitoring at Green Hills Preserve



Bluebirds at Mariton Wildlife Sanctuary

don't.



Don't install nest boxes in wooded areas or too close to shrubbery, which invites attacks by House Wrens.

Don't use pesticides or herbicides in your garden or lawn.

Don't get discouraged if bluebirds don't nest in your box the first year. It can take some time for them to find the cozy home you've installed for them.

Many of Natural Lands' nature preserves contain ideal habitat for bluebirds, so we've installed more than 300 nest boxes that staff and volunteers monitor annually. To learn more, please visit natlands.org/volunteer.