



# The Eastern Bluebird

The Eastern Bluebird is a member of the thrush family and closely related to the robin. Migratory bluebirds arrive in northeast Ohio in early March and stay throughout late October. Local bluebird populations will stay in northeast Ohio during mild winters. The male has a brilliant blue back and rusty breast; the female is duller in color.

Bluebirds use natural cavities as nesting sites. The female builds a neat, cup-shaped nest woven of grasses or pine needles. She lays 3-6 light blue eggs, which she incubates for about 2 weeks. Both adults feed the young a diet of insects for 16-21 days, at which point the young leave the nest, or fledge. After the young fledge, the male continues to feed them and teaches them to hunt on their own. The female rests or begins to build a nest for another brood; bluebirds often raise 2-3 broods per year.

## Decline and Comeback

Bluebirds once flourished in Ohio, but loss of habitat caused a rapid decline in the population.

- ◆ Wooden fence posts, which provided nesting holes, were replaced by metal posts.
- ◆ Dead limbs in orchards were pruned and wooded lots were cleared.
- ◆ House sparrows and starlings competed for nesting sites and usually won.
- ◆ Pesticides such as DDT hastened the decline by making eggshells thin and by killing the insects that bluebirds eat.

The Holden Arboretum began scientifically monitoring bluebird boxes in 1965. Today volunteers place and maintain 200 nest boxes and keep accurate records of the number of eggs, birds hatched and birds fledged. Holden has seen a dramatic increase in the number of bluebirds as a result of this program. In 1965, only 8 nesting pairs were recorded. In 2003, 79 pairs used the nesting boxes and 295 young fledged. The highest number of young was recorded in 2000 when 365 bluebirds fledged.

## Selecting Sites and Nesting Boxes

- ◆ To attract bluebirds, place boxes in open areas with scattered vegetation and plenty of perches, such as small trees, dead limbs, wires, or fences, within 100 feet of the box. The adults use these perches to hunt and guard the nest and the young can usually reach the perches safely on their first flight.
- ◆ Place boxes 100-200 yards apart. Avoid brushy areas and buildings by 50-100 feet to discourage house wren and house sparrow infestation.
- ◆ The Peterson box has proven most beneficial. For instructions on how to make your own Peterson box, contact The Holden Arboretum at 440.946.4400.
- ◆ If you wish to paint the box, paint only the outside. Use an exterior latex paint in an earth tone, such as green or brown. Avoid white, which attracts house sparrows and vandals. Be sure to reopen all plugged holes.

## Mounting the Box

- ◆ Mount your box securely on a steel pipe at least  $\frac{3}{4}$ " in diameter and 8 feet long. Steel pipe is named by interior diameter, so that  $\frac{3}{4}$ " pipe is about 1" on the exterior.
- ◆ Drive the pipe about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet into the ground; to protect the nest from predators, be sure the bottom of the box is at least 5 feet from the ground.
- ◆ Face the box anywhere in the 90° arc from east to south so the sun will warm the box on cool mornings. Never face the box west, as the hot afternoon sun will overheat the young.
- ◆ Never mount the box on a wooden post or tree, this merely provides a meal for raccoons and cats.
- ◆ Never place boxes where pesticides and herbicides are used.

## Monitoring

Monitoring nesting boxes helps ensure the survival of bluebirds. Monitor boxes at least twice a

week and not at all if parents seem disturbed. You can use a penlight and a 1" x 2" machinist's mirror (available in hardware stores) to look inside without disturbing the occupants, or you can simply open and close the box quickly. Be sure to leave the nest in the box for at least a week after the young have fledged. The nest is used for roosting while the young learn how to find food on their own. After the week, remove the nest; this leaves the box vacant for another nesting and rids the box of parasites.

## COMPETITORS FOR BLUEBIRD BOXES

### Beneficial Competitors

- ◆ The most common beneficial competitors are tree swallows; these birds are encouraged to use nest boxes because their aggressive behavior chases away bluebird predators. Two boxes can be placed within 20 feet of each other, one for the bluebirds and the other for tree swallows, this encourages both species to nest in harmony. A tree swallow nest is made of dried grass lined with feathers.
- ◆ Black-capped chickadees build nests of moss and fur.
- ◆ The tufted titmouse also builds a nest of moss but lines it with leaves.
- ◆ White-breasted nuthatches build nests of twigs and dirt lined with fur.

### Harmful Competitors

- ◆ The main predator is the house sparrow. This bird builds an open messy nest and lays beige speckled eggs. House sparrows, a non-native species imported to this country in the 1950's, are legally considered a pest. For this reason, you can remove this bird, its nest and eggs.

- ◆ It's important to discourage wrens which compete aggressively for sites. Wrens pierce the eggs of nesting birds and will build stick nests atop existing nests. **Wrens legally and ethically must be permitted to nest, since as native songbirds they are protected by law.**

### Dealing with problems

To prevent raccoons, cats, opossums, foxes and some snakes from climbing the post and eating eggs or young, apply a coat of chassis grease to the middle third of the pipe; you can get used grease from an auto mechanic. Use a putty knife to apply the grease as thick as cake frosting.

If wasps build a nest in the box, birds will not nest. The only way to deal successfully with wasps is to smear vaseline inside the box on the upper corners and roof in the spring. Wasp nests must be removed; never spray bluebird boxes with insecticide.

Parasitic mites and blood-sucking blowfly maggots will weaken or kill young bluebirds.

- ◆ Change the nest at least twice during the nesting season; remove all parasites from the young and nest box.
- ◆ Place a hand-made nest of clean, dried grass into the box. The old nest should be destroyed far from the nesting box.
- ◆ Do NOT change the nest until AFTER the young are 5 days old and again BEFORE they are 12 days old. **It is extremely important that you keep very accurate age records of the nesting birds from the time of hatching if you are to handle them. Otherwise they will prematurely bolt from the nest if they are older than 12 days.** Attempts to place them back into the nest will be to no avail.

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### FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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Grooms, Steve and Dick Peterson. Bluebirds! Minocqua, Wisconsin: NorthWord Press, Inc., 1991.

Stokes, Donald and Lillian Stokes. Stokes Bluebird Book. Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown & Company, 1991.

Zeleny, Lawrence. The Bluebird: How You Can Help Its Fight for Survival. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976.

Ohio Bluebird Society, PMB 111, 343 West Milltown Rd., Wooster, Ohio 44691, [www.obsbluebirds.com/](http://www.obsbluebirds.com/)

The North American Bluebird Society, Inc (NABS), The Wilderness Center, P.O. Box 244, Wilmot, Ohio 44689 [www.nabluebirdssociety.org/](http://www.nabluebirdssociety.org/)

The Birdhouse Network (TBN), <http://birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/>

The Bluebird Reference Guide, <http://bluebird.htmlplanet.com/>