



Attracting Bluebirds

If you've never had the pleasure of being a nest-box landlord, you're in for a treat!
Here is information to help you get started.

Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*)

Bluebirds are members of the thrush family, relatives of the robin. Western bluebirds and mountain bluebirds round out the bluebird family which is distinctive to North America.

Found east of the Rocky Mountains, throughout the eastern U.S. and Canada and down to central Mexico, eastern bluebirds are found in rural and suburban habitats. Some are year-round residents, but most migrate to more southerly regions for the winter.

Insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, caterpillars, butterflies, moths, and katydids make up most of bluebirds' diets. Spiders, wild fruit, and berries are also consumed. Bring bluebirds to feeders and windowsills by putting out mealworms, live or dried.

Male bluebirds begin nest-site selection in mid-March to April, depending on weather conditions. Bluebird nests are built mostly by the female in natural tree cavities, old woodpecker holes, rail fences, holes in stumps, and bird boxes. Building materials are dried grasses, weed stems, and occasionally pine needles formed into a neat cup. The 'cup' is lined with finer grasses. Male bluebirds guard the site during the four to six days of nest building.

First clutches of sky-blue eggs can be laid as early as March or as late as early June, again depending upon weather conditions. One egg is laid each morning, until three to five eggs are laid. A small percentage of eggs are white. Incubation lasts 12 to 14 days, with the eggs hatching over one to three days. The male and female both feed the young 16 to 22 days in the nest, and for several more weeks after fledging. Bluebirds can raise two to three broods per season.



Welcoming Bluebirds

By the early twentieth century, bluebird populations in North America were dangerously low due to destruction of natural nesting sites and species introduction of aggressive non-natives like European Starlings and English House Sparrows. In the 1960s and 1970s, the establishment of bluebird trails and introduction of home nest box campaigns began the recovery of the bluebird species.

Primarily ground feeders, bluebirds prefer feeding and nesting in areas with short vegetation, which gives them a clear view of ground-dwelling insects. Typical breeding sites include fields, meadows, and orchards. They avoid heavily wooded areas and cityscapes. Cut lawns with spaced trees for perching and viewing are ideal bluebird landscape.

"There is no one single perfect, ultimate bluebird nest box," according to the [North American Bluebird Society](#) (NABS). A good box should be made of untreated, unpainted wood. You will need

to open the box weekly for monitoring and cleaning once the young have fledged. You can use NABS guidelines to purchase an inexpensive prebuilt birdbox or use one of the many bluebird box blueprints available to make your own. (See the back of this brochure for resources.) Place your box on a pole, not on a tree or post, to protect it from predators such as raccoons, snakes, and neighbor-hood cats. You might consider installing a predator guard on the pole below the box.

Ideally, nest boxes are checked once per week during the nesting season. As a bird box landlord, you are protecting both the young and adult bluebirds from predation and destruction by birds competing for the boxes. You will want to read the suggested resources for information on protecting the nests and young from ants and blow flies. You will also need to educate yourself on the other kinds of cavity-nesting birds who may occupy your bird boxes.

Besides eastern bluebirds, you may find black-capped chickadees, tree swallows, or wrens occupying your nest boxes. Don't panic! These are all protected songbirds, and although they're not bluebirds, they are just as interesting to monitor and raise. **It is against DNR regulations to remove these bird species from your boxes.**

Today's boxes have holes too small for European Starlings to enter, but you will want to monitor for the English House Sparrow who will destroy the eggs and adults of all other acceptable birds. **As alien species, you may destroy house sparrow invaders and their eggs and young.**

(Please see the companion article "Who's That in My Nest Box?" for further information.)

Resources:

Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin (BRAW) www.braw.org

Frequently Asked Questions about Bluebirds [www.https://madison.wbu.com/content/show/24678](https://madison.wbu.com/content/show/24678)

Find out how you can help the eastern bluebird www.eekwi.org/critter/bird/bluebird.htm

Cornell Lab of Ornithology - Official Site www.birds.cornell.edu

Welcome Bluebirds with Nest Boxes www.audubon.org/news/welcome-bluebirds-nestboxes

The Bluebird Book: The Complete Guide to Attracting Bluebirds by Donald Stokes and Lillian Stokes
Enjoying Bluebirds More by Julie Zickefoose

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