

Placement and Maintenance

Mounting the bluebird box

Bluebird boxes are often pole mounted. Smooth round pipe may be the best choice and is available from almost any hardware store. Wooden poles are also acceptable and widely used. The entrance to the nesting box should be about 5-6 feet above the ground.

If raccoons or other predators are present it is better not to mount your box on a tree or fence post, where raccoons are more likely to locate the nest box. It is often a good idea to place a shield or hardware cloth under the box to prevent snakes and other animals from entering the nest box.

Locating your box

Bluebirds are most common in rural areas and in the outer edges of suburban developments. Locate your bluebird box in an area relatively free from underbrush, in the open, but near a wooded area. Bluebirds like to perch on a tree limb or telephone wire and observe the open fields, golf courses, meadows or other open ground for the insects on which they feed.

Nesting boxes should be mounted so the entrance hole is five to six feet above the ground. Face the box away from prevailing winds. Ideally, boxes should face toward a tree or shrub, which is within 100 feet of the box. This provides easy access for young birds leaving the nest. Boxes should be placed 300 yards apart.

Bluebird boxes should typically be in place by mid-March, but may also be put up later in the nesting season.

Monitoring your bluebird box

Bluebirds usually nest in late March or early April. They usually have two broods per season. They typically lay 4 to 5 light blue eggs, but as many as 7 are possible. Some eggs may be white. The incubation period is 12 to 14 days. Young birds remain in the nest 18 to 21 days before they fledge.

Remove bluebird nests, clean out the nest box and close it after you are sure nesting is complete for the season. Remember that two broods may be raised. Wait several weeks after the first brood has left the nest to insure that it will not be used again that year. A bluebird nest is cup-shaped and is usually made up of 100% woven grass.

A house sparrow nest is a thick collection of grass, weeds and junk and can fill the entire bluebird house. Remove signs of a house sparrow nest immediately.

It may take several seasons for bluebirds to locate and select your nest boxes but your patience will be well rewarded when you find your first resident. Their sweet calls and shimmering beauty are will worth the effort.

Other Nesters

Several other cavity nesters may try to use your bluebird box.

House Sparrows

The bluebird's biggest enemy is the house sparrow. They have cream-colored eggs with small, brown spots. The nest is a thick collection of weeds, grass, feathers and debris. Remove house sparrow nesting materials whenever present. House sparrows are not native and are not a protected species.

Chickadees

A native species with cream to white, brown speckled eggs. Chickadees use moss during nest making. If they take up residence just enjoy them.

House Wrens

House wrens are aggressive and can take over a bluebird nest box. Their eggs are pale pink with reddish brown flecks and spots. House wrens are usually not a problem if your bluebird box is located away from heavy undergrowth, bushes and shrubs. Place a wren box nearby if this becomes a problem and you might lure the wren away from your bluebird box.

Tree Swallows

Tree swallows can be aggressive in using bluebird boxes in some parts of the country. Tree swallows are a beautiful glossy blue-green above with white underparts. Sometimes putting up a pair of boxes, about 25 feet apart, will result in one for the swallow and one for the bluebird.

Feeding

Bluebirds feed primarily on insects in the spring and summer and turn more to berries and seed in the fall and winter.

Predators and Parasites

House cats and raccoons are about the most serious predators. A nest box with a large slanted roof and overhang can prevent the cat or raccoon from reaching over and into the nest box. A shield can be placed on the mounting pole to prevent animals and snakes from climbing up the pole.

Winter care

Mice often like to build overwinter nest in bluebird boxes. To prevent this you can open the door of the bird house in the fall and leave it open until March. Close and screw the door shut prior to the nesting season.

Thank you for participating in today's activity. With proper care and maintenance your bluebird house should last for many years.

Bluebird Facts

There are three species of bluebirds in North American (Eastern, Western and Mountain) In Iowa we have the Eastern Bluebird.

Bluebirds often have two broods (nest of young) in a season.

Bluebirds may stay in Iowa during warm winters, but generally return to Iowa in mid March.

Eastern bluebirds are primarily found east of the Rockies, and range from Canada to Mexico and Honduras.

Bluebirds are much admired for their lovely coloring and for a distinctive song that many hear as "chur-lee, chur-lee."

Females lay four or five eggs and incubate them for about two weeks. Young remain in the nest, cared for by both parents, for an additional 15 to 20 days.

Size & Shape

The Eastern Bluebird is a small thrush with a big, rounded head, large eye, plump body, and alert posture. The wings are long, but the tail and legs are fairly short. The bill is short and straight.

Color Pattern

Male Eastern Bluebirds are vivid, deep blue above and rusty or brick-red on the throat and breast. Blue in birds always depends on the light, and males often look plain gray-brown from a distance. Females are grayish above with bluish wings and tail, and a subdued orange-brown breast.

Behavior

Eastern Bluebirds perch erect on wires, posts, and low branches in open country, scanning the ground for prey. Bluebirds eat small fruits and hunt insects, spiders, and other creatures from above. The birds perch, watch, and then swoop to the ground to pounce on their prey.

Bluebirds commonly use nest boxes as well as old woodpecker holes.

Habitat

Eastern Bluebirds live in meadows and openings surrounded by trees that offer suitable nest holes.

Ornithologist is a person who studies birds.

Bird watching is one of Iowa's top outdoor activities.

Eggs are powder blue (no dark spots), sometimes white. Surface is smooth, shape is subelliptical to short subelliptical.

Life History of the Bluebird

Description and Range: Bluebirds belong to the thrush family, Turidae, whose members are known for their singing ability. The Turidae family is comprised of 19 species including the popular American robin. There are three distinct species of bluebirds; the eastern, western and the mountain bluebird. The coloration of the eastern bluebird differs somewhat between adult male and female birds. The male is dark blue on the head, back, wings and tail. It is reddish brown from the chin down over the breast. The belly is white. Females are a lighter blueish-gray on the back, wings, head and tail. They also have a lighter reddish color on the breast and are white on the belly. Some females appear almost all brown while others are more similar to the adult male.

Feeding: Both bluebird species feed primarily on insects, crickets, spiders and beetles in the spring and summer. Perches such as fence posts, fence wires or highlines are often utilized to view for unsuspecting insects. If perches are sparse, bluebirds will hover overhead much like a hawk in search of prey. Bluebirds will utilize wild fruits, berries and seeds during the fall to prepare them for their migration south.

Arrival and Territory Establishment: Male bluebirds arrive in Iowa in March, weather permitting, and begin searching for nesting space. Having found a nesting site, males establish this area as a territory and defend it from other males.

Breeding Behavior: Once a female arrives on the territory, the male will begin a variety of behaviors which will attract a female and tend to call attention to the various nest holes on the territory. For example, the male may repeatedly poke his head in and out of a nest hole or cling to the side of the box and do a wing-wave display, flicking one or both wings open at a moderate speed. Once both birds go into the nest box several times, they are generally considered paired and will likely use that particular nesting site. An accepting female will begin nest building shortly after they have paired. At this point, the male begins what is termed mate-

feeding where he collects food and feeds it to the female. They keep in touch by calls and visual displays as they fly about the territory. The male follows the female closely as she forages and builds the nest. The male is close by both signaling her when it is safe to fly out of the nest box and to prevent other males from mating with her. Copulation can take place anytime from the beginning of nest building until the start of incubation. It generally takes place close to the nest box and may occur on top of the box itself.

Nest Location: Bluebirds are cavity nesting birds meaning they naturally nest in a hollowed-out area in a dead or dying tree. This is different from other songbirds such as robins and finches that build a cup-shaped nest in the branches of trees or birds like the meadowlark or horned lark that construct nests on the ground. They are further considered secondary cavity nesters because they cannot excavate their own cavities in tree trunks such as woodpeckers which have heavy bills adapted for heavy pounding. They are further considered secondary cavity nesters because they cannot excavate their own cavities in tree trunks such as woodpeckers which have heavy bills adapted for heavy pounding. Today, one of the most utilized nesting locations for bluebirds is the man-made boxes that mimic the natural cavities provided by dead and dying trees. This habitat has been limited throughout the years by removal of old trees thought to be of no benefit to wildlife. In addition to natural and man-made cavities, bluebirds have also been observed using crevices in rocks and cliffs, drain pipes, mail boxes and old farm machinery.

Nest Building and Incubation: As discussed earlier, the male bluebird takes the lead in exploring habitat and attracting a mate but the female is the one who makes final determination of where the nest is built. This process can be swift or it may take weeks. The time utilized in this effort is usually dependent upon the birds experience and whether they had previously nested in that same location. Females are in charge of all the actual nest building. At times, the male may carry some nest material but this seems to be a behavior to stimulate the female to nest build and does not amount to much in overall creation of the nest. A nest normally takes around six days to complete but may be interrupted and begin at a later date. All of this is dependent upon weather and individual bluebird habits. Pairs normally spend less time building nests for their second or third broods.

During egg laying, the female leaves the eggs unattended and begins incubating after the last or second to the last egg is laid. She is also in charge of incubating the eggs by herself. One reason for this is that she develops a brood patch consisting of an area on her breast where feathers are

lost and blood vessels increase. This allows her to keep the eggs at the right temperature for development, a task the male could not perform.

During incubation, the female attends to the eggs almost constantly. Eggs are incubated throughout the night and during the day except when she leaves the nest to preen herself or feed. On hot days, eggs may be left for longer periods of time since they maintain adequate temperatures without her help.

While the female incubating, the male may come by and sing or bring food. It may be a signal that no predators are nearby and that she can safely leave the nest. While she is away, the male will remain close by and may even enter the nest box. At night, the male may sit next to the incubating female.

Incubation for both species is about two weeks but can be affected by weather. In cold springs, incubation can actually take somewhat longer if eggs experience periods of cooling

