

ACTIVITIES, TIPS AND EVENTS
FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY



Families
Can Help
Restore
Bluebirds
Their sweet
calls and
shimmering
beauty are
worth the
effort

The greatest spectacle in an Iowa birder's season is arguable, but listen to Jaclyn Hill of Ellsworth talk, and it's easy to tell what hers is. Mention bluebirds and her voice raises a pitch and the words flow like the bird's *tu'wheet-tudu* call itself. The undisputed queen of bluebirds believes if other Iowans take time to learn more about this bird, they'll discover a fascinating, educational activity that will bring young and old together.

Bluebird numbers reached critical status in the mid-1900s due to habitat destruction, pesticide use and nest predation from non-native house sparrows and European starlings. But populations are recovering, thanks to growing interest in their protection. Most notable are bird lovers' commitments to providing bluebird nest trails and monitoring their use.

HABITAT

Establishing a bluebird trail can be fun and rewarding. Habitat is the most important factor in establishing a

trail, says Hill, who has garnered numerous awards for her bluebird conservation work and founded and edits the Iowa Bluebird Directory. Open rural country with sparse ground cover is best. Grass must be mowed weekly to aid in finding food. Avoid pesticide use. Suitable perch sites, like a high wire or tree branch, should also be available to facilitate foraging. If bluebirds do not find suitable habitat, they probably will not use your boxes, Hill says.

BLUEBIRD TIPS AND TIDBITS

- Usually nest in late March or early April.
- Often have two broods per season, with three possible.
- Regularly lay four to five light blue eggs, but up to seven. Some eggs may be white.
- The incubation period is 12 to 14 days.
- Young birds remain in the nest 18 to 21 days before fledging.
- Bluebird nests are cup-shaped, usually made of 100 percent woven grass.
- House sparrow nests are a thick collection of grass, weeds and junk and can fill the entire house.
- Remove a house sparrow nest immediately.
- It may take several seasons for bluebirds to locate and select your nest boxes, but patience is rewarded when you find your first resident.
- Remove bluebird nests, clean out nest boxes and close after you are sure nesting is complete for the season. Remember, two or even three broods may be raised. Wait several weeks after the first brood has left the nest to ensure it will not be used again.

PREDATOR CONTROL

Predator control is also critical, and Hill goes to great lengths to protect her birds. Avoid brushy and heavily wooded areas—habitat of competing birds that pierce bluebird eggs with their beaks or destroy chicks. Steer clear of farmsteads and feedlots where the house sparrow, also called the English sparrow, thrives. Mount nest boxes on PVC conduit pipe—never wood—to deter predators.

LOCATION

Proper monitoring and spacing of nest boxes increases chances for successful bluebird trails. Mount boxes so the entrance is five to six feet above ground. Face boxes away from prevailing winds, ideally toward a tree or shrub within 100 feet of the box. This provides easy access for young birds leaving the nest. Boxes should be spaced at least 100 to 150 yards apart. Some experts recommend placing boxes in pairs about 25 feet apart, with each pair 100 to 150 yards apart. Make sure boxes are in place by March 1 for these blue marvels who enjoy early nesting.

MONITORING

Hill and other bird pros agree that monitoring nest boxes and reporting findings is critical to the bluebird's future. It's also rewarding, as it makes for fun family walks and teaches children the basics of keeping records. If you don't have time to monitor, it might not be wise to start a trail. Check boxes at least weekly throughout the nesting season, but not after nestlings are 12 to 14 days old so fledglings aren't prompted to leave the box too soon.

GET INVOLVED

Protect Iowa bluebirds by reporting nesting success and failures. Box plans, trail location tips and simple-to-complete monitoring forms are available at www.iowadnr.gov/wildlife/files/bbird.html. Instructions for returning the simple information are on the forms. Return data by Nov. 1 for inclusion in the directory.