

ATTRACTING BLUEBIRDS



HABITAT

The most important factor in attracting nesting bluebirds is to place the nesting boxes in good bluebird habitat. Even the best nesting box will not attract bluebirds if it is in the wrong place.

Listed below are some aspects of a good bluebird habitat.

1. Blue birds nest primarily in suburban and rural areas.
2. During breeding, bluebirds hunt insects by scanning the ground from a perch, spotting the insect, and then dropping down to the ground to catch it. Fences are ideal since they provide continuous perching spots in open areas. 4 to 5 foot stakes driven into the ground 10 - 20 yards from a nest box are readily used by bluebirds. Scattered young trees or shrubs, fence posts, and lower branches of mature trees make good hunting perches.
3. Sparse or low vegetation is also important since it enables the bluebirds to see and capture insects. Cut meadows, mowed lawns, and grazed fields are good bluebird habitat.
4. Nest boxes should be at least 100 feet from brushy or wooded areas where wrens are likely to be and, preferable, at least a quarter of a mile or more from farmyards and barns where house sparrows live.
5. Good areas for bluebird nesting boxes include: open fields, fence rows, orchards where there is no pesticide spraying, and pastureland.

References:

Bluebird Book: The Complete Guide to Attracting Bluebirds by Donald and Lillian Stokes
K-State Extension Master Naturalist, Rex Collier

MOUNTING THE NESTING BOX

Material: Bluebird nesting boxes may be mounted on wooden posts, U-posts, and metal pipes. They are best for providing protection from predators as you can easily add various kinds of predator guards to them.

Height: A nesting box mounted 4 – 5 feet above ground is ideal. However, the birds are flexible and may nest up to 15 feet in the air. Your main considerations in box height should be deterring climbing predators and allowing easy monitoring.

Direction: There is no one compass direction that bluebirds favor. However, you can aid the birds by facing the box away from prevailing winds and, in hot climates, placing it to face north or east to avoid direct sunlight midday and afternoon sun. Perhaps more important is facing the box toward some tree, shrub, or fence post within 100 feet, for when the nestlings leave the nest they make their initial flight to safety. This will offer them an easy mark.

When: As soon as possible. Bluebirds start looking for breeding nest boxes by February in the South and March in the North. Where bluebirds have three broods they can use them for breeding well into August. In the fall bluebirds often explore boxes briefly as they move about feeding, and in winter they may roost in the boxes.

Spacing: Bluebirds are territorial when breeding and have territories of about 2 – 3 acres. They generally do not nest closer than about 100 yards from the next bluebird. Generally!

MONITORING

When: At least once a week. Go quickly and quietly to the box, open and look inside. Do not worry that your presence will make the parents abandon the nest. Bluebirds are very tolerant of human presence. It is not true that if you touch the nest your scent will make the birds leave.

When Not to Monitor: When the nestlings are 12 days old or older for eastern bluebirds. The reason being that the nestlings may bolt from the nest prematurely at that age. They will not be able to fly and will not survive. You may think you can return the nestling(s) back inside the box but this does not work. Once out they do not return.

Remove House Sparrow Nests: House sparrows are aggressive competitors for bluebird houses and will even kill bluebirds and take over their boxes. Remove any sparrow nests you may find. Sparrow nests are always sloppier than bluebird or swallow nests and contain grass strands than bluebird nests and contain grass strands and other fibers haphazardly spread all over the inside of the box.

NOTE: Do not remove the nests of any other nesting birds, such as chickadees, titmice, and tree and violet-green swallows or wrens. These birds are all protected by federal law. House sparrows, starlings, and pigeons are not.

Predators: As in all of nature, predators exist. Predators such as snakes, raccoons, domestic cats, deer mice, white-footed mice, etc. can rob the nest of eggs and kill nestlings. Predator Guards such as the Noel nest hole extension, apron pole guard, stovepipe pole guard, and the PVC pole guard may reduce or prevent predation. Plans for these guards should be available on line.