

Attracting BLUEBIRDS

To Our Yards

by Cynthia Berger

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Standing Guard

A male eastern bluebird keeps a sharp lookout from atop his Peterson nestbox while his mate prepares to exit the box.

Nestboxes for Bluebirds — A Helping Hand

Steve Garr lives near a big city — Nashville, Tennessee. “When I first moved here 15 years ago,” he says, “I’d be lucky if I saw a bluebird once in a while. Now it’s unusual if I don’t see a bluebird every day.”

The pair of colorful eastern bluebirds that Steve and his wife watch from their bedroom window didn’t show up in the Garrs’ backyard just by chance. The birds are there because the Garrs have welcomed them and provided for their needs — especially with regard to a nest site.

Across North America, dedicated bird lovers like the Garrs are inviting nesting bluebirds into their backyards by providing essential nesting sites. All three bluebird species (eastern, western, and mountain) are what scientists call “cavity-nesters.” They build their nests in cavities — holes in dead trees and similar sheltered places. But though primary cavity-nesters such as woodpeckers can excavate their own cavities in decaying wood, secondary cavity-nesters, including bluebirds, lack the sturdy beaks and powerful muscles needed to chisel out a nest site. Instead, they use abandoned

woodpecker cavities or find tree holes created by the natural action of decay.

The trouble is that these days natural cavities are rare. Across much of North America, cities, residential areas, industrial parks, and “industrialized” farms have replaced natural habitat and small family farms. Also, where forests are managed for timber, trees are harvested before they die, so there are no standing dead trees to provide nest sites for cavity-nesters. In residential areas, no one wants a dead tree in the backyard.

And in places where nesting cavities remain, they are the target of increasingly fierce competition among the birds themselves. In the last century, two cavity-nesting species introduced to North America from Europe — house (or English) sparrows and European starlings — have multiplied to be among the most abundant birds on the continent, making it harder and harder for bluebirds to find a natural nest site.

No wonder cavity-nesting birds need a helping hand. This book explains how you can help bluebirds — and other cavity-nesting birds — by providing “nestboxes” where they can safely raise their young. While the birds benefit from your generosity, you’ll enjoy the sight, the song, and the fascinating behavior of these beautiful wild creatures right in your own backyard.

Nestbox (or nest box) is the accepted ornithological term for a structure that most people simply refer to as a “birdhouse” — a small, frequently house-shaped structure that is usually (but not always) rectangular and made of wood, with (again, usually but not always) a round entrance hole. Nestboxes come in many sizes and shapes, in designs that accommodate birds as small as a chickadee and as large as a wood duck. This book focuses on nestboxes that are sized to accommodate the three species of bluebirds. Because a number of other cavity-nesting species readily nest in bluebird-sized boxes, the book also covers the needs and habits of those birds. You’ll find it can be just as fascinating to watch chickadees or tree swallows raise a family as it is to fledge a box of bluebirds.

This book could not have been written without the generous contributions of dozens of nestbox monitors from across North America — people who put up homes for the birds and monitor, or check regularly, to help protect the birds from predators and competitors.

In these pages, the experts tell you, in their own words, what has worked for them: how to build or buy a nestbox the birds will flock to, how to prevent predators from raiding your boxes, how to evict or deter competitors, and all the other ways that you can help cavity-nesting birds to have a successful nesting season.

The Ten Most Commonly Reported Cavity-Nesters:

Eastern bluebird
Tree swallow
House wren
House sparrow
Mountain bluebird
Western bluebird
Carolina chickadee
Black-capped chickadee
Tufted titmouse
Ash-throated flycatcher

Source: The Birdhouse Network



Eastern bluebirds pass food as a courting gesture. The male has a bright blue back; notice that the female is much grayer on the head, back, and wings.