

EASTERN BLUEBIRDS IN OHIO

Jackie Thoma presented an interesting and informative program on Eastern Bluebirds. Her husband, Dick Thoma, was President of the Ohio Bluebird Society for several years, and the couple continues to support and promote this Society and the recovery of bluebirds in Ohio.

Of the three types of bluebirds in North America, Jackie explained that the Eastern Bluebird is the type that lives east of the Rocky Mountains. Males are a deep, Crayola-blue color with an orange patch on the neck and upper chest, and white on the belly. Females are grayish-blue, and the patch is more of a pale rust color. Because of encroachment on their open meadow habitats, bluebirds in Ohio were once considered an endangered species. Hostile house sparrows, starlings, and other non-native birds also competed for their nesting sites, making it almost impossible for the small, but beautiful bird to survive. But in 1978, an all-out effort to save bluebirds across North America was begun.



Bluebirds build nests made of soft grasses and pine needles in cavities and special bluebird houses or boxes. Nests are cup shaped and about the size of a hand. The female lays anywhere from 4 to 7 pale, blue eggs with 4 or 5 being the most common in Ohio. Females incubate the eggs for 13-15 days while males keep watch and bring food to the nest. Young birds usually leave the nest 15-20 days or so after hatching, but may stay a while to help raise a second or even third brood. Bluebird trails consist of a series of carefully monitored boxes along a specified path in open areas like golf courses or cemeteries. These manmade habitats have saved bluebirds and increased their numbers.

The survival and proliferation of Eastern bluebirds is dependent upon many factors. Bluebirds are not especially feisty, so larger and extremely aggressive house sparrows (bluebirders call them “rats with wings”) and European starlings that try to occupy the same boxes will destroy eggs and kill bluebirds. The cute little house wren is another territorial bird that will take over a bluebird nest by poking holes in the eggs and removing them. Other predators include snakes, raccoons, and red squirrels. Wasps and blowflies inside the box also present a problem for bluebirds. An extreme cold spell in late spring can wipe out an entire flock of bluebirds, and insecticides used on lawns or boxes made of treated lumber are harmful to both adult birds and their young.

Jackie told members not to put up a bluebird house/box unless monitoring and protecting its inhabitants is a top priority. Boxes should be clean, dry, and made of cedar or other weather-resistant materials. They should have ventilation and drainage holes with a 1-1/2” opening and no perch and can be painted a neutral color. Boxes should also have a removable or hinged front for easy cleaning. Locate a box away from low-growing shrubs that attract sparrows in an open area with higher trees nearby. Place the box atop a metal pipe about 5-6 feet above the ground facing east or west.

Grease the pole and/or use a predator guard (baffle) to prevent sneak attacks.

Although commercial insecticides are not recommended unless absolutely necessary, Rotenone and Neem may be sprayed inside the house against wasps and blowflies.

Once the box is available, don't be surprised if it takes a while—sometimes several years—before bluebirds occupy it. Occasionally, Tree Swallows find the boxes first, and these desirable birds should be encouraged to stay since their numbers are dwindling and they pose no threat to bluebirds. Male bluebirds usually arrive in Shelby County between late February and April, depending on the weather. They choose suitable nesting sites before the females arrive. Other birds



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will usually try to build a nest in the box, and these nests can be removed and the box cleaned to encourage bluebirds. Once a nest has eggs, however, it is against the law to remove the nest or destroy the eggs—unless the birds are house sparrows. Then all bets are off. These nests and eggs should be destroyed since house sparrows are non-native pests and endanger not only bluebirds, but many other species as well.

Contrary to popular belief, most birds have no sense of smell, so temporarily removing bluebird nests to clean or dry the box will not disrupt their lifestyle. In fact, if the nest becomes wet or if insect infestation occurs, both eggs and young birds will benefit from being gently transferred to a dry, homemade nest inside the cleaned box.

Bluebirds are primarily insect eaters, although they supplement their diet with a variety of wild berries and fruit. They rarely come to bird feeders, so the best way to convince them to stay in your area is to feed them live or freeze-dried mealworms. They can be purchased in quantity online and should be placed in a feeder away from the nest. Bluebird pairs that finally choose one site are more than twice as likely to return year after year to the same place.



Jackie ended her presentation by giving away a bluebird box to one lucky member who promised to monitor and protect the beautiful birds that would hopefully choose this backyard habitat for many years to come.

Much more information on Eastern Bluebirds can be found online:
The North American Bluebird Society: <http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/>
The Ohio Bluebird Society: <http://www.ohiobluebirdsociety.org/index.htm>
Sialis-Helping Bluebirds: <http://www.sialis.org/index.html>

