



Northern Neck of Virginia
Audubon Society

Northern Neck Audubon Society Bluebird Nesting Box Instructions

The Eastern Bluebirds is one of our best-loved and most useful birds. The species was formerly on the decline partly because of the reduction in its natural habitat, and primarily because the house sparrow (English Sparrow) had taken over many of the potential Bluebird nesting spots. Thanks, in part to the large number of bluebird boxes being erected, the Bluebird population has been increasing in recent years. For many years, the Northern Neck Audubon Society has been building and selling nesting boxes. At present, we build about 1000 boxes each year. We hope that the purchase of this box will help the birds and be a pleasure for you.

What Bluebirds Look Like

The Eastern Bluebird is one of the smallest thrushes, just a little larger than a sparrow. The male has a sky-blue back and rusty breast. The female is similar but paler. Other blue-colored birds, the Blue Jay is much larger, with a white breast; the Indigo Bunting and Blue Grosbeak have dark blue breasts and darker wings with pronounced wing bars.

Where to Locate the Box

Ideally, Bluebird nesting boxes should be erected in a reasonably open area with the entrance hole facing from north to east and with a tree or large shrub 50 to 150 feet in front of the box so that the fledglings can fly to a tree on their first flight. The parents will feed the young birds for some time while they stay in this tree. Bluebirds will not usually nest closer together than about 100 yards. Although they will perch on your feeder arches or overhead wires they will not use the feeder for food.

When the Box Should Be Erected

Bluebird boxes should be up by late February or early March. At this time of year, the male birds are scouting the area looking for nesting spots. However, if the box is erected later, there's a good chance that the birds will select it for their second or third nesting of the year.

Mounting the Box

The box should be mounted on a post about four or five feet from the ground. It should not be mounted on a building, fence, or tree. Small screw holes are pre-drilled on the top and bottom of the box, but any method may be used to fasten the box. Efforts should be made to protect the box and birds from predators. A separate instruction sheet about predator control is enclosed in your box.

Monitoring

When the birds are building their nest, you will usually notice the activity round the box. You can look into the box to see the progress, but don't do this more than once a day. Once the female starts laying her eggs there will be a small light blue egg usually each morning, until all eggs are laid. Generally, there are four or five eggs the first time and one fewer in the second and third broods.

Once all the eggs have been laid the female will sit on the eggs a large part of each day. In about 13-14 days the eggs will hatch. Both parents will feed the chicks and in about 17-18 days the fledglings will leave the box for a nearby tree, never to return to the nest.

It is good to monitor the box to observe the progress and watch for problems. Avoid opening the nest after the 13th day because a young bird might flop out.

When monitoring the box, it is a good idea to tap on the side to warn the adult bird. It will usually fly out. Sometimes, however, the bird will continue to sit on the eggs.

If House Sparrows should move into the box, clean out their nests daily until they stop building them. You can tell a sparrow's nest because it's quite messy whereas a bluebird's is neat and tidy. The House Sparrow is a real predator. It is legal to destroy House Sparrow eggs and it is important not to allow their eggs to hatch in your box.

Maintenance

The birds will rarely use the same nest twice. Once you are sure that the young birds have fledged you should remove the nest from the box. Use a glove or tongs. Many times, the birds will then build a new nest and lay more eggs. Dispose of the old nest away from the box to avoid attracting predators.

At the end of the season clean out the box. Sometimes the birds will use it for protection during the winter. Then, in February, make sure that it is still clean in order to start the process over again.

Don't be discouraged if you do not get Bluebirds the first year. If you don't get birds the second year, you might try moving the box to a new location.

Additional Information

North American Bluebird Society Website: www.nabluebirdsociety.org

Sialis Website: www.sialis.org