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## ***North American Bluebird Society***

[www.nabluebirdsociety.com](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.com)

### **FAQ**

**Category: Boxes**

**Q: "I want to mount a Bluebird box but do not know where to begin."**

**A:** Once you've caught the 'bluebird bug,' it's difficult to resist these beautiful creatures. However, bluebirds have quite specific nesting requirements, so it is important to understand that the keys to attracting bluebirds are placing properly constructed nest boxes in suitable habitat. Bluebirds are insectivorous during the nesting season, feeding mainly on ground-dwelling insects. Ideal bluebird habitats are open and barren or short-cut/sparsely grassed areas (so they can see their food) with a few trees nearby (for perching). Pesticide and herbicide-free cattle or horse pastures, cemeteries, acreages, abandoned orchards, hike-and-bike trails, prairie coulees, lightly traveled roadsides, abandoned railroad rights-of way, golf courses, open areas in parks, the edges of meadows, clear cuts adjacent to or within forested areas that have been recently burned, and sagebrush flats provide excellent bluebird habitat. Bluebirds will also nest on the fringes of towns and cities, especially if they were nesting in those areas prior to development

Poor bluebird habitat includes areas that they naturally shun (i.e., city centers, densely wooded areas, or intensively farmed areas where there is a lack of natural habitat), areas where they are in competition with House Wrens or House Sparrows, or locations where the boxes are at risk of being subject to predation or vandalized.

**Q: "How do I know if I have the right kind of nest box for my bluebirds?"**

**A:** There is no one single perfect, ultimate bluebird nestbox. Dozens of different nestbox designs are being used with equal success by bluebird trail operators throughout North America. Although styles and designs can vary, all boxes should provide the birds with a safe and secure nesting site. If possible, build or purchase a box that is NABS-approved.

The following are some tips for a good bluebird box:

- The best materials for bluebird box construction are 5/8 or 3/4-in. exterior grade plywood or cedar. Redwood and pine boards can be used, but redwood often splits when it dries so it should be avoided in dry areas, and most boards will warp over time. Do not use treated lumber or interior grade wood (including OSB board). When possible, use scraps salvaged from construction sites, or where it is available, try to use environmentally sound certified lumber from sustainable managed forests. Cardboard, plastic jugs, milk cartons and large tin cans provide little insulation (especially against heat) so should not be used.
- Bluebird boxes made from good quality plywood do not need to be painted, but most trail operators paint the outside of their boxes with a good quality exterior paint (use non-lead paint only) or stain. Do not paint the inside or the inside of the entrance hole). Use a neutral color in northern areas, and a light colors in hot areas to reduce overheating.
- Assemble the box with screws or nails. Screws are more expensive, but they make construction easier, and make it easier to replace parts.
- One panel (top, front or side) should open to allow for monitoring and cleaning. Make sure the panel fits snugly to prevent rain from blowing in the seams.
- If plywood or smooth boards are used, place hardware cloth or etch shallow saw kerfs on the inside of the front panel, just below the entrance hole. Although young bluebirds are fairly adept at exiting most boxes, this roughness provides an extra toehold for them. If using hardware cloth, be sure the material is pressed tight against the wood so the birds won't get a toe caught.

- Perches encourage House Sparrows and predators. Do not build or purchase a nestbox that has a perch.
- Dimension recommendations box are as follows:
  - Entrance hole - Eastern or Western Bluebirds: 1 1/2-in.; Mountain Bluebirds: 1 9/16. In areas where overlap with either use the larger entrance hole on all boxes. Oval holes, measuring 1 3/8 in. x 2 1/4 in. are also used with success in Peterson-style boxes.
  - Nestbox depth - at least 7 in. (17.8 cm) from the bottom of the hole to the bottom of the box. Shallow boxes put the occupants at greater risk of predation.
  - Floor size - Eastern and Western Bluebirds: at least 4 x 4 in.; Mountain Bluebirds: at least 5 x 5 in.
  - Roof overhang - approximately 3 in. to provide shade, protect the entrance hole from driving rain and to discourage predators.
  - Ventilation - the hotter the climate, the more ventilation should be provided. Vent holes should be drilled near the top of each sideboard (drill holes at an upward angle to provide ventilation without allowing rain to blow in). Use 1/2-in. holes in hotter regions, 1/4-in. holes in the north.
  - Drainage - cut off a small amount of each corner of the bottom board or drill 3/8- in. holes in each corner. The floor of the box should be recessed 1/4" to prevent the floor from absorbing water.

To learn more about proper nest box construction, go to

**Q: "Where and how should I mount my box?"**

**A:** Boxes should be spaced at intervals of about 300 ft. If House Wrens are likely to be a problem, be sure the box is mounted at least 200 feet away from a wooded or brushy area. If Tree Swallows or Violet-green Swallows are likely to use the box, try setting out two boxes about ten feet apart so that the bluebirds can use one and the swallows the other. Most bluebirders have found that this practice of pairing the boxes will allow both species to nest side by side in relative peace. Boxes should be mounted on a smooth metal pole at a height that is convenient for monitoring and maintenance. Bluebirds tolerate a box mounted as high as 15 feet and as low as 3 feet from the ground. However, a box mounted lower than 4 or 5 feet is at greater risk of predation. The nest box should be mounted so the entrance hole is directed away from prevailing winds to reduce the amount of rain that might be blown into the box. The box opening should also face away from direct sun exposure. A nearby tree provides young bluebirds both with a place to fly to when they first leave the nest, as well as shelter from the elements and predators. Boxes mounted along roads should always face parallel with, rather than perpendicular to, the road so that the birds (especially the fledglings) are more likely to fly along the road ditch, rather than out across the road and into the path of oncoming traffic.

For more information go to "[Getting Started](#)."

**Q: "OK, I've got my box mounted. Now what?"**

**A:** Monitoring your box on a regular is very important, as it will enable you to collect important scientific information (e.g., the number of eggs, nestlings, fledglings etc.), and it will also help you take the necessary steps should problems arise. Because bluebirds and other songbirds have a very poorly developed sense of smell and they are not able to detect human scent, they will not abandon their box if you open it. Click here to learn more about [monitoring nestboxes](#).

**Category: Monitoring Problems**

**Q: "Everything seemed to be going fine with my bluebird family, but today I've only seen one bluebird parent at the box. What should I do?"**

**A:** If the male bluebird is killed, the female can—as long as there is plenty of food - take care of the young herself. Since only the female has a brood patch (a bare patch of abdominal skin), she is solely responsible for incubating the eggs and keeping the young warm (called brooding) during their first week of life. If she is killed during these two critical stages, the nest is doomed unless the nestlings

can be moved to a foster box or delivered to a wildlife rehab center. If the nestlings are older than about seven days, they are sufficiently feathered to stay warm at night, and the male can (again, as long as there is adequate food) take care of them.

When you notice that one parent is missing, check the nest to see what condition the nestlings are in. If they have succumbed, clean the box out. If they are still alive, make your decision based on the information, below.

To locate a nearby wildlife rehabilitation expert, go to:

<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~devo0028/contact.htm>

You might also try contacting your area or regional NABS affiliate group. You can find a list by state or province on our [Affiliates](#) page.

**Q: "Something isn't right because I don't see the parents around and the babies look hungry. What should I do?"**

**A:** If neither parent returns after an hour has passed, then check the box to see if the young are alive. If they are begging vigorously, they are hungry. If they are listless, they are in a weakened condition and will likely perish if they are not immediately warmed up and fed. In either case you should contact your local wildlife rehabilitation expert as soon as possible. Not all of the nestlings will necessarily survive, but the sooner you get them to a licensed wildlife rehabilitation expert, the better their chances. See question above for contact information.

**Q: "I checked the nest box and found broken eggs on the ground outside the box."**

**A:** House Wrens, which are protected migratory birds, will enter a nest box, poke small holes in the eggs and sometimes turf some or all of the eggs out onto the ground. Remove all the pecked eggs from the box, pick up all eggs and shells from the ground and dispose of them. If there are intact eggs still remaining in the box, the female—depending on the stage of incubation and her temperament—may return. Leave the nest for a day or two to see what happens. If it is abandoned, remove the nesting material and move the box to a more suitable location for bluebirds. House Wrens are less likely to use a box that is placed at least 200 ft. away from wooded or brushy areas.

**Q: "I came out to check my babies, and found several of them dead and strewn out on the ground. Others were still in the box, but looked like they had been battered on the head and eyes. HELP!"**

**A:** House Sparrows, which are exotic pest species, will enter a box and peck the occupants to death. Clean out the box and either take steps to either eliminate the sparrows or move the box to a more suitable location. House Sparrows are found only around human dwellings, in cities and around farm buildings. To minimize competition from this aggressive predator and competitor, place your boxes where sparrows are not likely to be a problem. Please see our [House Sparrow Control](#) page for more sparrow management techniques.

### Category: Bluebird Behavior

**Q: "I have a bluebird that has been relentlessly pecking at our windows for days! We can't get it to stop. Please help!"**

**A:** During the nesting season, both male and female bluebirds are extremely territorial. Typically, the male more aggressively defends the edges of the territory while the female tends to defend the area around the nest site. When bluebirds display territorial behaviors at windows, they are reacting to what they perceive to be a rival bird. While seldom resulting in death or injury, this behavior can cause increased stress levels (for both the birds and the house occupants!) and is a waste of energy. The behavior generally ceases once egg laying commences.

The only effective way to deal with this problem is to eliminate the reflection. Closing the curtains does not usually work, so other options that might be considered include: covering the window on the outside with cloth, newspaper or any other type of paper; hanging garden netting over the windows; covering the window with hand soap; placing a window screen over the window; tying several rows of

string across the window (to which are tied several thin pieces of colorful cloth or ribbon from the string); hanging long, thin pieces of reflective Mylar over the window, allowing them to blow in the breeze.

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Note: It is important to remember that bluebirds and all other native birds that use nest boxes are wild birds that are protected under Migratory Birds Convention. It is not legal to touch or handle bluebirds or any other native bird without being in possession of a banding permit or other special permit. State DNR offices or provincial Fish and Wildlife offices should be contacted for more information about permit requirements.

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### Getting specific:

Attracting and Keeping Bluebirds

**I live in southern NH. I have six houses in a cluster from 15 to 30 feet apart. The bluebirds come in the morning, sit on the houses and mess around for a while and then leave. No takers. Any ideas why they won't stay?**

### NABS Reply:

If there is not a football field between your boxes, then they're too close together. WHY? Because bluebirds are territorial. With that many houses in close of an area, the bluebirds are probably using them as perches to look for insects. If this has been happening on a regular basis, there's a good chance they are nesting near by. Check to make sure your boxes meet the requirements for bluebirds and space them further apart. Please see the NABS fact sheet, [Getting Started with Bluebirds](#).

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Raising Bluebirds

**My mother has 9-day old Bluebirds. For the first 8 days of their lives, they were active and appeared healthy. Today, the 9th day, they are very lethargic and just lay in the nest. She has checked for parasites and there are none. She lives south of Dallas. The weather has been very warm until today. We have had about a 10 to 15 degree weather change due to a cool front. It is cooler today by maybe 15 degrees. Do you have any suggestions about what we should do? They have been very active until today. Now they just lay in the nest and barely move.**

### NABS Reply:

It is quite possible that something has happened to the parents of your baby Bluebirds. The first thing you must do is be 100% sure the nestlings have been abandoned. If possible, watch the box from a distance for one to two hours to see if they are being fed. If this is not possible, wedge a very small stick or weed stem in the entrance hole and return later to see if the obstruction remains. Nestlings require a great deal of sleep and that could be one reason they seem lethargic. If you are POSITIVE the nestlings are abandoned, it is possible to place them in nests with other nestlings close to the same age. If this is not possible, call a licensed bird rehabilitator.

Their problem is not a cold snap but lack of food and water. It is difficult to revive and raise Bluebird babies. The female feeds the young every 20 minutes. The babies receive body fluids via insects. NOT PURE WATER. Do not try to raise them yourself, but move the babies to different boxes along your trail with babies of similar ages. Let another bluebird pair raise the young for you. Make sure the adult birds are not around before you move them and remember that it is difficult for the Eastern Bluebird to raise more than six birds at a time.

The male bluebird will feed the babies if the female is killed. She won't abandon her babies voluntarily, so something must have happened to her. The male cannot incubate the eggs but he will raise the babies by himself once they have hatched. The male bluebird is very active in child raising. Also, previous broods have been known to help a single parent to raise the babies.

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**The "open-top nesting box"?**

**I have heard of another way to discourage house sparrows by cutting a 3 inch diameter hole in the roof of the blue bird boxes and putting chicken wire over this. The house sparrows do not like nesting in the open. Have you ever heard of this method? Supposedly, it is very new. Vince Baudry and a company called Native American Nest Boxes also believe these boxes work well.**

**NABS Reply:**

Prior to 1979, NABS recommended the open-top box. However, after receiving a large volume of letters and phone calls from people across North America telling of how nestlings were dying in the open-top box from hypothermia caused by wet nests and cold weather, NABS no longer recommends the box. NABS' Technical Advisory Committee recently readdressed the open-top box and voted to not recommend the box. The Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin (BRAW) which once recommended the open-top box, no longer does so. Through their data analysis study, BRAW has determined that bluebirds do not prefer this style of box. A nest should never be allowed to get wet. A properly ventilated box with an adequate roof overhang will prevent this. Bluebirds can tolerate the cold weather very well, but once a nest gets wet during a period of cool, damp weather, the chances of losing nestlings to hypothermia greatly increases.

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**Is there a way to make supporting NABS part of my everyday routine?**

**NABS Reply:**

Yes! We count on the continued support of members like you to make all that we accomplish at NABS possible. Yet, we know that there are only so many hours of time you can give and only so many donations. Now there's a way you can help the bluebirds while doing your everyday online shopping. When you access any one of the hundreds of brand name online retailers through our new online catalog, a portion of everything you spend comes back to us. Best of all, it doesn't cost you - or NABS - anything! Click on the button below and visit our storefront now (major credit cards accepted!).

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**Please read a good book on bluebirds such as THE BLUEBIRD MONITOR'S GUIDE BY Jack Griggs, Keith Kridler, Cynthia Berger; THE BLUEBIRD BOOK by Don and Lillian Stokes; or BLUEBIRD TRAILS by Dorene Scriven, all available from our Bluebirder's Catalog. Also please consider joining one of North America's most successful conservation organizations and help NABS protect our bluebirds.**

**Note:** The above replies are of the opinion of the North American Bluebird Society. These replies should be used to help in your understanding of bluebirding issues. Further research is often needed, and frequently underwritten by NABS. NABS welcomes differing points of view which can be submitted in writing to: NABS, PO Box 43, Miamiville, OH 45147.