

ABOUT THE COVER: Eastern Bluebirds

Within fifteen to twenty days of hatching, the young bluebirds leave the nest, their distinctive juvenile plumage of spotted breasts and large eye rings giving them a definite "rookie" look, especially when compared with their more striking parents. Adult male Eastern Bluebirds have rich blue upperparts and chestnut underparts with a contrasting white belly and undertail. A. C. Bent said, "He carries on his back the blue of heaven and the rich brown of the freshly turned earth on his breast." Females are similar to males in distribution of colors but are paler with a brownish wash across the back that contrasts with the color of the rump and back of the head. In areas where they overlap with Western and Mountain bluebirds, female bluebirds present some identification problems, and emphasis should be placed on throat, flank, and wing colors, feather edging, and relative wing length.

Eastern Bluebirds, *Sialia sialis*, are distributed over a wide area. They breed from the Atlantic coast over eastern North America west to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and southern Canada. The highest concentrations of Eastern Bluebirds occur in regions where the frost-free period averages at least 180 days and where there is more than twenty-four inches of precipitation a year.

Winter populations occur mainly in the middle portions of the eastern United States south throughout the breeding range. Most of the birds from the Gulf States southward are sedentary. Some hardy Eastern Bluebirds spend the winter in the northern states including New England where they sustain themselves mainly on wild berries, a necessary departure from their usual insect diet. To survive the wind and cold, they roost separately and together in hollow trees or nesting boxes. Forbush recounts a story from a woman in Stowe, Vermont, who, during a snowstorm, heard a bluebird calling in her living room and found two in the stove. They had sought shelter in the chimney and had come down the stovepipe.

During this century, the Eastern Bluebird has faced a precipitous decline and uncertain future. Reforestation of open fields, increased development, loss of natural cavity nesting sites, and competition with House Sparrows and starlings have all taken their toll. Fortunately, the downward trend apparently has reversed itself due to a nest box program. The boxes are effective substitutes for scarce natural cavities and are sometimes all that is needed to attract the birds to a particular area. This is a good thing, for it is easy to wish to encounter more bluebirds. Forbush felt the same way when he wrote, "There must be something wrong with the man who, hearing this brave and happy bird and seeing him fluttering and warbling in his lovely vernal dress, does not feel a responsive thrill."

Chur-lee, chur-lee.

J. B. Hallett, Jr.