

THE BLUEBIRD NEEDS YOUR HELP

by William Allan, Sharon

Few birds are as well-known to the birder and non-birder alike than the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*). It appears in our poetry, graces our greeting cards, and is a harbinger of spring. However, most people under 30 have never seen one. Bluebirds are becoming rare, and are not often seen even by active birders. Estimates show an alarming population decline of 90% over the past 40 years.

Fortunately, there is something you can do to help reverse the trend: set up a bluebird trail. The bluebird is one of our few cavity nesters, and its inability to find proper places to breed is the major factor in its decline. The unaggressive bluebird loses the battle for suitable holes to ever-increasing Starling and House Sparrow populations. Harsh winters, raccoons and snakes, and pesticides have also taken their toll.

The most practical way to help is to supply proper and abundant nesting boxes. People all over the country from all walks of life, as well as groups such as Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, garden clubs, and school groups, have been maintaining bluebird trails from which thousands of birds have fledged; but many more trails are needed. The largest of these in western Canada is more than 2000 miles long, but 3 or more boxes arranged around a rural piece of property can help.

A trail can consist of any number of boxes spaced 100 or more yards apart in the proper habitat, such as open country with scattered trees and low ground cover, orchards and abandoned fields, golf courses and country cemeteries. Avoid heavily wooded locations. My trail consists of 18 boxes placed near the edge of the clearing below the high tension wires crossing Moose Hill in Sharon. Boxes should be placed so they can be easily monitored, for example, along a circular trail or a trail beside a country road where a car or bicycle could be used. Nesting sparrows and starlings must be evicted. The male House Sparrow is particularly persistent in claiming a box and will bring several females to a chosen box. Place the boxes 4 to 5 feet above the ground to discourage the sparrows. Disregard folklore about the direction the hole should face: it makes little difference, except the hole should face away from prevailing winds and possibly towards a nearby tree.

The design of the box is critical if it is to be acceptable to bluebirds. The box should be built to the proper dimensions of sound 3/4-inch wood treated with an oil stain or painted to protect against the weather. Details to consider are:

1. Entrance hole 1-1/2 inches in diameter to discourage starlings.
2. Entrance hole 5 to 6 inches above the floor.
3. Inside dimension 4 to 5 inches square.
4. Easy access for cleaning.
5. Perches for young provided on inside slightly below the hole, or by roughing inside of front (no outside perches).
6. Proper ventilation and drainage.

Below is a simple plan for such a house but any adaptation of these requirements will do.

If anyone would like larger and more-detailed plans, or more information on the bluebird trail project, please write to me at 13 Woodland Street, Sharon, Mass. 02067. Good luck with your trail and may you have the satisfaction of adding to the bluebird population.

