

# North Carolina Bluebird Society

[www.ncbluebird.org](http://www.ncbluebird.org)



Photos by Phil Egan

## Bluebird Tips

Prior to the 1930's, the Eastern Bluebird was one of North Carolina's most common songbirds. By 1979, bluebirds were declared rare and uncommon. Human activities and severe winters resulted in a 90% decline in bluebird populations. The continuing loss of natural nesting sites, the introduction of invasive species, and other problems faced by bluebirds make it likely that this beloved bird will always need our help to persist.

### REASONS FOR DECLINE

- Nesting sites were lost when wooden fence posts were replaced with metal posts, and dead trees were and still are being removed.
- Many small farms were combined into large operations that destroyed the mixed habitat needed by bluebirds.
- Growth of cities into rural areas further reduced preferred habitat.
- The wide use of DDT killed the insects bluebirds fed on and often killed the birds themselves.
- Recovering bluebird population size following occasional severe winters takes longer because of the disadvantages listed above.
- The introduction of the European Starling and House (English) Sparrow upset the balance of nature. These non-native birds are so adaptable and aggressive that they have spread and taken nesting sites and even killing and destroying native birds and their eggs.

### HOW WE CAN HELP

- Install nest boxes with 1 1/2" entry holes.
- Monitor and maintain nest boxes regularly; removing only House Sparrow nests.
- Supply fresh, clean water all year.
- Plant berry-producing plants or shrubs.
- Participate in the Society's nest box data reporting program.
- Join and volunteer with the North Carolina Bluebird Society.

Other informative web sites:

North American Bluebird Society  
[www.nabluebirdsociety.org](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org)

Sialis  
[www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org)

### APPROXIMATE NESTING SCHEDULE FOR NORTH CAROLINA

Feb: Bluebirds select nesting territory  
Mar - Apr: Nest building, egg laying, and incubation  
Apr - May: First clutch of eggs hatch  
Jun - Jul: Second clutch of eggs hatch  
Aug: Third clutch of eggs hatch

### NATURAL HISTORY

The brilliant blue male bluebird has a rusty throat, breast and sides and a white belly. He sits high on a dead tree or branch, or power line to search for the insects that make up two-thirds of the bird's diet. Bluebirds also eat wild berries, especially in cold weather when insects are not available. They do not damage crops, and are beneficial to farmers and gardeners by eating insects. The young bluebirds have spotted breasts until fall molt.

As early as February and as late as June, the male bluebird locates a nesting site, establishes a territory of two to five acres, and sings to attract a female and warn other male bluebirds to stay away. Once a female accepts the site, she builds a cup-shaped nest of dry grasses and pine needles. Nest building may take five days to three weeks.

The female lays one blue, or rarely white, egg each morning until three to six eggs are produced. The female begins incubating after the final egg is laid. About fourteen days later, all eggs will hatch within hours of one another.

The adults begin feeding the young immediately after hatching occurs, starting with soft insects and graduating to coarser foods as the nestlings grow. The adults also keep the nest clean by removing the fecal sacs which enclose the nestlings' waste. The nestlings grow very rapidly; their eyes open on or about the eighth day. By the time the nestlings fledge (leave the nest box) on or about the eighteenth day after hatching, they will be the size of adult bluebirds.

Usually the entire brood of fledglings leaves the box within two hours. The fledglings can fly fifty to one hundred feet on their first flight and try to land in a bush, shrub or low branch to avoid ground predators. The adults continue to care for the young and teach them to forage for food. The male bluebird will continue this job while the female begins her second or third nest. On

occasion, the young from a first nesting will help feed the nestlings from their parents' subsequent nesting.

After nesting season is over, bluebirds give up their territories and flock together. Typically, North Carolina bluebirds do not migrate. They are joined by migrant northern bluebirds and roam the area looking for berries. In winter, bluebirds will roost in pine tree stands and nest boxes to avoid cold weather.

### NEST BOX PLACEMENT

The location of a bluebird nest box is important. Select an open area with scattered trees and sparse ground cover. Avoid underbrush, tall grass, dense woods, farm buildings, and areas where pesticides are used. Good locations are frequently mowed lawns, fields, meadows, orchards, and road sides.

The nest box should be placed on a pole (not a tree) about five feet high, with a squirrel and raccoon baffle below the nest box. Face the nest box toward a shrub or tree with low branches so that fledglings can find a suitable landing spot above the ground on their first flight. Some recommend facing the entrance hole towards the east or south. While there is no bad time to erect a bluebird nest box, it is best to have it in place by February when bluebirds begin to select their nesting territory.

### NEST BOX MAINTENANCE

- In late winter, inspect your boxes and make any needed repairs. Make sure the box is in good condition and mounted securely.
- Make sure the entrance hole is 1 1/2" in diameter. If it is larger than 1 1/2", replace the box or modify the opening.
- Clean out any old nests that might remain.
- Check for and remove any wasp nests. Rub bar soap on the underside of the roof to discourage future wasp invasions.
- Move the nest box to a new location if there was no activity through the entire nesting cycle or if predators were a problem in the previous season.

## MONITORING

Many people are hesitant to look inside their nest boxes, but monitoring your boxes gives bluebirds a much greater chance of survival. Monitoring leads to early detection of problems and provides valuable research data.

1. Monitor nest boxes at least once a week during the breeding season.
2. Make a noise as you approach the box and tap on its side before opening. The female will likely leave the nest and the young will huddle down. If the female stays in the nest box, close the box and return later. If she is in the process of laying an egg, she cannot leave. During egg laying periods, it is best to monitor in the afternoon.
3. Stand to the side of the box, away from the entrance hole and open the box very slowly and carefully. Be prepared for animals other than birds.
4. Record the number of eggs or nestlings and the date.
5. Do NOT open nest boxes once the nestlings are fourteen days old. This could cause premature fledging.
6. Remove old nests from the box once the young have fledged. Remove House Sparrow nests and eggs immediately. Do NOT remove the nests of other native cavity-nesting birds.

### CAVITY NESTING BIRDS WHICH USE NEST BOXES WITH 1 1/2" HOLE

Species	Nest Material	Egg Color
Bluebird	Pine needles, dried grass	Blue, occasionally white
Chickadee	Moss, wood chips, hair, feathers, fur	White with brown specks
House Finch	Twigs, dried grass	Pale blue
Nuthatch	Wood chips, bark, dried grass	White with brown specks
Titmouse	Dried grass & leaves, feathers	White with brown specks
Tree Swallow	Dried grass, feathers	White, no markings
House Wren	Twigs, pine needles, grass	Tan with brown specks
House Sparrow*	Dried grass, trash	White with brown specks

\* Remove or otherwise interfere with **ONLY** House Sparrow nests or eggs. It is a federal and state offense to tamper with the nests or eggs of any native bird species. If you are in any doubt, leave the nest alone until a positive identification can be made.



**The NORTH CAROLINA BLUEBIRD SOCIETY, INC. is a statewide organization dedicated to ensuring the future of the Eastern Bluebird and other cavity-nesting birds native to North Carolina.**

The Society works toward its goals by:

- Promoting bluebird projects among its members
- Conducting educational programs and workshops
- Distributing educational materials and publishing the quarterly newsletter, *Bluebird Notes*
- Collecting and sharing nesting data
- Encouraging and aiding the development of nest box trails
- Undertaking other projects to aid native cavity-nesting birds

*NCBS is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization under the IRS code.*

The NCBS web site address is [www.ncbluebird.org](http://www.ncbluebird.org). Here further information on bluebirds and Society activities can be found. Additional copies of *Bluebird Tips* can be printed from the website.

Many NC counties are represented by NCBS County Coordinators. They can be contacted for presentations to groups or to answer questions about bluebirds and monitoring.

For immediate questions, you may contact:

Bill Abbey, Forsyth County 336-766-5857  
Ken Kernodle, Durham County 919-724-9470  
Ray Welch, Davidson County 336-764-0226



**Female and Male Bluebird**  
Photo by Phil Egan



**Bluebird nest of pine needles and dried grasses. Eggs are typically blue in color.**



**House (English) Sparrow nest of loosely woven grasses, plastic and trash. Eggs are white with brown specks.**

## North Carolina Bluebird Society Membership Form

NCBS memberships are for one or three years. New members will receive the current issue of our newsletter, *Bluebird Notes*, *Bluebird Tips*, and will receive quarterly newsletters each year which include informative and interesting articles.

Dues: \$10 per year or \$25.00 for three years

Gift membership from \_\_\_\_\_ to:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_

Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

*A member's email address can be used only for NCBS official business and is considered private and confidential.*

Check box if you prefer to access the NCBS *Bluebird Notes* newsletter via the Internet.

Please complete this form and send it with your check made payable to **NCBS** to:

**North Carolina Bluebird Society**

135 Lakeview Dr.  
Tarboro, NC 27886

Additional tax-deductible donation \$ \_\_\_\_\_

New Membership

Renewal

Check amount: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate if you also have an interest in:

\_\_\_\_\_ Establishing a bluebird trail in your area

\_\_\_\_\_ Contacting your local newspaper

\_\_\_\_\_ Volunteering to be a County Coordinator

\_\_\_\_\_ Helping with the newsletter

\_\_\_\_\_ Assisting with the annual meeting

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_