

Helping Bluebirds In Michigan

By Kurt Hagemester



The eastern bluebird has had an up and down history in Michigan over the last 200 years. This popular member of the thrush family was once widespread in Michigan before the industrial revolution took hold. After peaking in the later 1800's, bluebird numbers steadily declined for the next 50 years due to habitat loss, the use of farming chemicals, and intense competition from two alien bird species – the Starling and House Sparrow. Fortunately, starting in the 1960's, bluebirds started their comeback when it was discovered that large numbers of actively-managed nesting boxes drastically improved their nesting success. The banning of the farm insecticide DDT in the 1970's also accelerated the recovery.

Today, the easiest way to bring these colorful, sweet-singing birds into the yard is a well-designed nest box. This is because bluebirds are cavity nesting birds, or birds that build nests in the hollowed out cavities of trees. Nest boxes simulate these cavities, which have become in much shorter supply over the years. Bluebirds will start claiming nesting sites in March in Michigan, with nest building usually starting as early as late March or early April. Bluebirds can have 2 or even

3 broods of young in a nesting season that can last into August.

How do you know if you can attract bluebirds to your yard? If you live in a generally open neighborhood and see bluebirds on a regular basis, you have an excellent chance. Bluebirds prefer open habitats like farm fields, open subdivisions, golf courses, office parks, meadows, and metro parks.

The first thing you'll need is a quality-made nesting box of the correct dimensions. You can buy a bluebird nesting box at a store or make it yourself. Boxes should be made of 3/4" thick wood – either cedar or pine, and requires an entrance hole of at least 1 1/2" in diameter. Of absolute importance is the ability to open up the box easily via a hinged side or top for easy nest checks.

Next, mount your nest box on a sturdy, metal pole so the entrance hole is about 5 feet off the ground. Locate the pole/box in a wide open spot with short grass below. The box should be as far away from dense cover, large trees, and buildings as you can. Finally, it's a very good idea to wax the pole or install some kind of guard to make it more difficult for climbing predators like raccoons and snakes.

Once your nesting box is up, it's critically important to monitor it for the rest of the season. This involves going out and opening the box to see what is happening once or twice a week and recording your observations. Why do this? Being a bluebird "landlord" entails taking the responsibility of ensuring the housing you have provided is safe and that the birds are OK. Research has shown that actively monitored bluebird boxes fledge far more birds than those left up unmonitored. For example, you need to make sure that parasites haven't invaded the box or that invasive species like house sparrows haven't taken over, among other potential problems. Go to www.michiganbluebirds.org for more information.



Bluebirds are one of the easiest birds to attract to nesting boxes and arguably the most pleasant backyard bird to have around. Both adults are dedicated parents and seem to like being helped by people. So, if you live in a good habitat for bluebirds, try putting up a nesting box this spring. You'll be helping one of America's favorite birds while learning a lot about how birds raise their young in the process.

For those interested in learning more about bluebirds, the **Spring Bluebird Festival** will be held on March 24th at the Washtenaw Community College in Ann Arbor. The event is free and open to the public, and will feature a variety of educational programs, displays, and products related to bluebirds and native cavity nesting birds. The event is organized by the Michigan Bluebird Society – a non profit group dedicated to bluebird conservation. For more information, go to michiganbluebirds.org/springfestival.

Kurt Hagemester is President of the Michigan Bluebird Society and has been a bluebird landlord for 19 years in the Ann Arbor area.