

## Bluebird Nesting Cycle

### Territory

Males arrive in early spring (or they may over-winter in some areas) and establish breeding territories.

### Courtship

Courtship can begin as early as late-March. It ends when the female chooses a nesting site and construction of the nest begins.

### Nest Building

The female does all of the actual nest building in usually 4-5 days, although it is not unusual for nest building to start and stop over a 6-week period, especially in early spring. The nest is well built and neatly woven of grasses, pine needles, or fine weed stalks.

### Eggs

An average of 3-5 pale blue (sometimes white) eggs are laid. One egg is laid each morning until the clutch is complete; then the female begins incubation. (The male, lacking a "brood patch", cannot incubate.)

### Incubation

The average incubation period is 12-14 days. The female will sit almost constantly over the eggs, periodically leaving during the day to preen and feed.

### Nestlings

Generally, the chicks will hatch all on the same day. Because newly hatched chicks have no feathers, only a little down, they cannot regulate their body temperature and the female must "brood" them for about the first 5 days. The nestling stage is about 16-21 days. During this time, the young are fed insects by both parents.

### Fledglings

"Fledging" is the term used when nestlings leave the nest box. During the fledgling phase, the young are still dependent on the parents for food. After fledging from the box, they will spend the next two to three weeks being fed and learning foraging behavior from the parents. After this period, the female may begin a new nest while the male cares for the fledglings.

### The Second Nesting

Bluebirds in Michigan can nest up to three times in one season, so your box may be re-used, possibly by the same pair. It is a good idea to clean out the old nest to keep the nest box clean and will allow the new nest to be the proper height from the entrance hole. Be sure to dispose of it well away from the nest box to avoid predators' attention.

### After the Nesting Season

Many people clean out their next boxes with a simple solution of soap and water to ready them for the next nesting season. Bluebirds and other songbirds may use the empty nest boxes for winter "roosting."

## The Top 10 Tips For Bluebird Trails

A bluebird "trail" is defined by the North American Bluebird Society as "a series of bluebird boxes placed along a prescribed route." Trails don't have to go in a straight line; boxes can be arranged in a circle, square, or grid pattern – whatever makes sense to the person laying the trail out in their particular circumstances. Most people consider a trail to contain five or more boxes although some consider a couple of strategically placed boxes in their backyard to be their "trail."

Some who do not have a lot of room on their personal property will gain permission to establish trails on golf courses, cemeteries, parks or any other area with wide-open grassy areas.

1. Check your boxes at least once a week.
2. Place your trail in an open, grassy area with some scattered trees.
3. Use solidly constructed boxes that can be opened for monitoring and cleaning.
4. Set your boxes at least 100 yards apart. If you have tree swallows, pair your boxes (about 15-20 feet separation) and you may double your occupancy rate.
5. Mount boxes on smooth metal pipes about five feet up. Predator guards and pole baffles will help prevent losses to raccoons, snakes, and other carnivores.
6. House sparrows will kill adult bluebirds and their young. Do not place your boxes near buildings if sparrows are present.
7. Avoid putting your boxes in shrubby areas, which are good wren habitat. House wrens will defend every nesting site in their territory, even the ones they aren't using.
8. If you leave your boxes up all year, you can winterize them by plugging up the ventilation holes. Bluebirds will check them out on their way south and may roost in them over the winter.
9. Keep good records.
10. Share your knowledge with others. "Bluebirditis is contagious."



# Michigan Bluebird Society

**Dedicated to improving the nesting success of the Eastern Bluebird & other cavity-nesting birds in the state of Michigan through education of our members and the general public.**

*An affiliate of the  
North American Bluebird Society*

**Web:** [www.MichiganBluebirds.org](http://www.MichiganBluebirds.org)

**Email:** [info@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:info@michiganbluebirds.org)

## Why the need to help bluebirds by putting up a nesting box?

Cavity-nesting birds have suffered the double-whammy of loss of habitat and competition from introduced bird species. Bluebirds nest in old woodpecker holes or other cavities in dead trees, and many of these were lost when the land was cleared for farming. Today's urban sprawl decreases natural bluebird habitat. House sparrows and starlings, both imported from Europe, also nest in cavities and easily out-compete most smaller native birds.

Unlike chickadees and titmice, which have adapted readily to city life, bluebirds are restricted to rural areas by their need for breeding territory. Even in the 1970's, it was rare to spot this beautiful and melodic bird.

Fortunately, bluebirds readily accept nest boxes. Thanks to an enthusiastic public, their numbers are steadily increasing. A bluebird nesting box is perhaps the easiest and most rewarding way to do something good for the environment. If you have enough space, you can set up a series of boxes in a "bluebird trail."

Please become a member of the Michigan Bluebird Society and help us in our efforts to restore bluebird populations across the state.

In addition to receiving our quarterly newsletter, your admission fee to our annual spring event will be waived.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

1 yr (\$15)    3 yrs (\$40)    Corporate (\$125)

Lifetime (\$300 – includes **FREE** embroidered MBS shirt with membership)

### Mail your check or money order to:

Michigan Bluebird Society  
P.O. Box 2028  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106-2028

I would be interested in assisting in the following areas:

<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Website
<input type="checkbox"/> Fund Raising	<input type="checkbox"/> Monitoring Program
<input type="checkbox"/> Membership	<input type="checkbox"/> Publicity
<input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter	<input type="checkbox"/> Conservation shows/festivals

## Habitat

Nest boxes should be placed in open areas with scattered trees. Bluebirds defend their boxes and hunt for insects from perches. Mow the grass frequently enough to keep it short. (If ground-nesting birds are also present, mow after their young have fledged.) Set the boxes well away from buildings and shrubby forest edges to decrease competition from house sparrows and house wrens.

Remember, only put up as many boxes as you have time to monitor.

## Mounting your nest box

Use a smooth metal pole, or a post that is covered with something smooth such as stovepipe or PVC to create baffles for predators such as raccoons or domestic cats. The entrance should be at least 5 feet off the ground. Face the entrance hole away from prevailing winds.

Bluebirds are territorial, so boxes should be at least 100 yards apart. Many bluebirders "pair" their boxes to decrease competition between tree swallows and bluebirds. The paired boxes can be close in proximity (about 15-20 feet) as these two species nest together peaceably.

## Box styles

There are many styles to choose from, including pre-made boxes, kits or plans. Bluebirds will accept any box that follows a few simple guidelines:

- The box should be designed so that it can be opened for regular monitoring and cleaning at the end of a nesting cycle.
- Wood should be untreated and at least ¾" thick.
- There should be drainage and ventilation holes.
- The entrance hole needs to be 1 ½" in diameter.
- Interior dimensions should be *at least* 4" x 4".
- No outside perch.

Many nest box plans are available. Check out the websites or books under Resources on the next page.



## Monitoring

Visit your boxes at least once a week from late March to the end of August. The purpose of monitoring is to identify any problems. Peek into the nest box and check the activity around the box to see how its residents are doing. (Do not open a box in the morning while the female is in the process of laying eggs.)

It is a good idea not to open a box once nestlings reach 12 days old. If they are frightened out of the box before they are ready, their chances for survival are low. Watch from a distance for adults bringing food or for the young waiting in the entrance hole.

It's a good idea to record the activity observed in your nest box. Typical data collected include box type and habitat description, species using the box, how many eggs were laid, number of young, and the date young fledged.

Several organizations accept data from blue birders. If you would like more information about data submission, please contact the MBS.

## Other guests

Other songbirds may set up housekeeping in your box. The most frequently encountered species are tree swallows, chickadees, house wrens, and house sparrows.

Many people put up extra boxes if there is competition, however please be aware that house sparrows are a dangerous enemy to cavity nesters and many times will kill both young and adults in order to claim a box. It is against federal law to disturb native migratory songbirds but house sparrows (actually from the finch family, not the sparrow family) are not protected, as they are not a native species. There are many ways to eliminate the threat of the house sparrow including active and passive control.

Other guests might include wasps, ants, mice and squirrels. Dealing with these guests is up to you, but do not spray the nest box with insecticides. Birds are very sensitive to environmental toxins and can absorb lethal amounts of insecticides while nesting in a treated box.

## Resources

Books: The Bluebird Monitor's Guide, Copyright 2001 by Jack Griggs; Stokes Bluebird Book, Copyright 1991 by Don & Lillian Stokes.

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

Cornell Lab of Ornithology:  
[www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse)