

Bluebird Nest Boxes Fact Sheet: Monitoring

WHY MONITOR YOUR NEST BOX?

It is very important that bluebird nest boxes be actively monitored (checked) at least once a week. Doing so increases the chances of success for bluebirds using the box and also is valuable for determining population trends. A box that is not monitored may be more harmful than helpful to bluebirds. All bluebird boxes should be built so that they can be opened either from the side, front, or top.

Monitoring nest boxes will alert you to problems the birds may be having with blowfly parasitism. Uncontrolled, the larvae of this species may weaken or possibly even kill the nestling bluebirds. If you identify larvae in the nest, you should replace all the nest material with dried lawn clippings in a shape similar to that of the original nest. This will increase the chance that the chicks will survive. Many bluebird enthusiasts replace all nests holding chicks periodically even before the blowfly larvae are visible. You should also replace any nest with young birds that has been saturated following rainfall. This is especially important during cold periods.

Being aware of what species is using the box is also beneficial. Bluebird societies would like you to monitor and report all species using your nest boxes, not just bluebirds. Species such as bluebirds, tree swallows, house wrens, and chickadees are all native and beneficial birds. Mail survey forms submitted at the end of the nesting season allows the identification of population trends in each species.

House (English) sparrows and European starlings are non-native species introduced from Europe and their aggressive seizure of cavity nest sites is the main reason for the rarity of bluebirds today. Starlings nest in many of the natural nest sites but can be excluded from nest boxes by only using 1 1/2 or 1 9/16 inch entrance holes. House sparrows can readily enter bluebird nest boxes and frequently kill bluebirds, destroy their eggs, or drive them from their nests. At no time should they be allowed to successfully nest in bluebird boxes. Doing so will increase the house sparrow population and further reduce the number of the bluebirds.

After any nesting effort has ended, either due to nest failure or successful fledging of the young, the nest should be removed from the box. If a bluebird nest was successful, re-nesting in the same box will be encouraged if the first nest is removed. This should be done when all chicks have left the nest.

WHAT TO MONITOR

Whenever you monitor a box you should determine what species is using it by examining the nesting material and eggs. You should record the date, and the number of eggs or young that you have observed. Knowing when the eggs were laid will help you determine if they are infertile, or when they should hatch and when the young would be expected to leave the nest. In the case of bluebirds, the eggs are laid one each day until the entire clutch is complete. Incubation will then begin and will last approximately 13-14 days. After hatching the chicks will remain in the nest for 17-18 days. Your monitoring should be limited to viewing from a distance after the 13th day or the chicks might fly from the box prematurely.

HOW TO MONITOR

Nest monitoring should only be done during calm, mild, and dry weather conditions to reduce the chance of chilling the chicks or eggs. Open the nest box being careful not to allow the eggs to fall out or chicks to jump out. Songbirds have a very poor sense of smell and will not abandon the nest due to your handling the nest, eggs, or chicks. If chicks are in the nest, look under the nest for signs of blowfly larvae. The chicks themselves should be examined for small scars, particularly under the wings which indicates blowfly parasitism. Sometimes you may observe the larvae attached to the chick. These are easily removed by hand. Complete the monitoring as quickly as possible to minimize disturbance. When handling the chicks or removing them from the nest they should be placed in something that will protect them from the sun or wind while preventing their escape. Avoid disposing used nest material near the nest site or predators may be attracted to the site. Always be certain to close the box door securely before leaving. Record what you observed.

HOW TO IDENTIFY NESTS AND EGGS BY SPECIES

Eastern Bluebird: The 1-4 in. tall nest is built with fine grasses or pine needles with a fairly deep nest cup. Eggs (4-6) are powder blue or occasionally white, 21 mm in length.

Tree swallow: Their nest is also made of grasses but they may use somewhat coarser fibers than a bluebird. The nest generally has a flatter cup than the bluebird's and is usually lined with feathers or occasionally scraps of paper. Eggs (5-7) are white and smaller than those of a bluebird.

House wren: Wrens fill a nest box with sticks and line the deep nest cup with fine plant fibers or feathers. "Dummy nests" without the nest cup are often built in all other cavities within the male wren's territory to reduce competition for resources. The eggs (6-8) are tan, speckled with brown and quite small.

Black-capped chickadee: Chickadees build a nest of moss and plant down with the nest cup lined with hair. They lay 5-8 white eggs covered with brown speckles. Eggs are often covered with moss when the female leaves the box.

House sparrow: House sparrows build a tall nest of coarse grasses, often with pieces of scrap paper, cellophane, or other garbage. The nest forms a canopy with a tunnel-like entrance to the 5-7 cream-colored eggs with brown markings.

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Above information excerpted in entirety from the North American Bluebird Society.

This information has been provided to you by the North American Bluebird Society. Be a part of the conservation solution. Join NABS, The North American Bluebird Society! Contact the NABS headquarters:

North American Bluebird Society
The Wilderness Center
P.O. Box 244
Wilmot OH 44689-0244

Please include a self-addressed stamped envelope for more information.

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BLUE BIRD FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: "OK, I've got my box mounted. Now what?"

A: Monitoring your box on a regular basis is very important, as it will enable you to collect important scientific information (e.g., the number of eggs, nestlings, fledglings etc.), and it will also help you take the necessary steps should problems arise. Because bluebirds and other songbirds have a very poorly developed sense of smell and they are not able to detect human scent, they will not abandon their box if you open it. To learn more about monitoring, go to:

<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/monitor.htm>.

Q: "Everything seemed to be going fine with my bluebird family, but today I've only seen one bluebird parent at the box. What should I do?"

A: If the male bluebird is killed, the female can—as long as there is plenty of food - take care of the young herself. Since only the female has a brood patch (a bare patch of abdominal skin), she is solely responsible for incubating the eggs and keeping the young warm (called brooding) during their first week of life. If she is killed during these two critical stages, the nest is doomed unless the nestlings can be moved to a foster box or delivered to a wildlife rehab center. If the nestlings are older than about seven days, they are sufficiently feathered to stay warm at night, and the male can (again, as long as there is adequate food) take care of them.

When you notice that one parent is missing, check the nest to see what condition the nestlings are in. If they have succumbed, clean the box out. If they are still alive, make your decision based on the information, below.

To locate a nearby wildlife rehabilitation expert, go to:

<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~devo0028/contact.htm>

<http://www.livingwithwildlife.com/hospital.html>

You might also try contacting your area or regional NABS affiliate group:

<http://www.affiliates.nabluebirdsociety.org/affiliate.htm>

Q: "Something isn't right because I don't see the parents around and the babies look hungry. What should I do?"

A: If neither parent returns after an hour has passed, then check the box to see if the young are alive. If they are begging vigorously, they are hungry. If they are listless, they are in a weakened condition and will likely perish if they are not immediately warmed up and fed. In either case you should contact your local wildlife rehabilitation expert as soon as possible. Not all of the nestlings will necessarily survive, but the sooner you get them to a licensed wildlife rehabilitation expert, the better their chances. See question above for contact information.

Q: "I checked the nest box and found broken eggs on the ground outside the box."

A: House Wrens, which are protected migratory birds, will enter a nest box, poke small holes in the eggs and sometimes turf some or all of the eggs out onto the ground. Remove all the pecked eggs from the box, pick up all eggs and shells from the ground and dispose of them. If there are intact eggs still remaining in the box, the female—depending on the stage of incubation and her temperament—may return. Leave the nest for a day or two to see what happens. If it is abandoned, remove the nesting material and move the box to a more suitable location for bluebirds. House Wrens are less likely to use a box that is placed at least 200 ft. away from wooded or brushy areas.

Q: "I came out to check my babies, and found several of them dead and strewn out on the ground. Others were still in the box, but looked like they had been battered on the head and eyes. HELP!"

A: House Sparrows, which are exotic pest species, will enter a box and peck the occupants to death. Clean out

the box and either take steps to either eliminate the sparrows or move the box to a more suitable location. House Sparrows are found only around human dwellings, in cities and around farm buildings. To minimize competition from this aggressive predator and competitor, place your boxes where sparrows are not likely to be a problem.

For specific hints on House Sparrow control, go to:
<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/sparrow.htm>.

Bluebird-L Mailing List

Thanks to the generosity of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, an e-mail mailing list has been established for persons interested in bluebirds and other North American cavity nesters. Communicate with other bluebirders and share your bluebirding experiences.

To subscribe, send an e-mail message to:

listproc@cornell.edu

Type your name in the message area where it says "Put your name here." Leave subject line blank.

Please read the information below before subscribing to Bluebird-L.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Please visit the North Carolina Bluebird Society for more monitoring and care information: <http://www.ncbluebird.com/>

SUBMITTING DATA

Please enter nesting information by September 30th to:

http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/data_gateway/index.html

Please use the following when adding the location of nest boxes:

Latitude for Research Triangle Park, NC: 35.897 degrees N

Longitude for Research Triangle Park, NC: 78.861 degrees W