

Should this nestbox be painted?

Although it is not necessary to do so, paint may be safely added to the outside of this nestbox. Only light-colored paint (to reflect heat) should be used. In addition, 1½" faux entrance holes may be painted or affixed on each side to draw attention to the nestbox from the air.

What do I do after the nestbox is up?

If possible, the nestbox should be “monitored” (opened and checked) about once a week during nesting season (February–August). Take notes of what you observe and post your data to NestWatch (www.nestwatch.org). NestWatch is a nest-monitoring project by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Your valuable nest observations will be permanently stored as legacy data along with hundreds of thousands of other nesting records. When combined, these data will provide a wealth of information about breeding birds and the factors that influence their success across different landscapes.

Bluebirds will nest 2 to 4 times per season in Texas. To prevent their nests from stacking up and getting close to the entrance hole, remove used or abandoned eggs and nests (dispose far away from nestboxes to avoid attracting predators). Between September and January, remove all nesting material. *It is illegal to retain the nest or egg of any native bird without permits.*

Watch out for threats from predators and the weather! Remove the nests of House Sparrows and wasps. For fire ants, add one or two 1" ribbons of a sticky substance, such as Tanglefoot or axle grease mixed with a small amount of turpentine, near the base of the mounting pole. For raccoons or snakes, add a Kingston predator baffle (plans on our website). For the threat of extreme heat, add a second roof with air space or a “HeatShield” (shown in front photo).

When will bluebirds find this nestbox, and what should I do when it happens?

In most parts of Texas, bluebirds begin nestbox selection in January. Their last nesting is as late as August. Occupancy might be immediate or it may take a couple of years. With luck, a bluebird could occupy your nestbox soon.

If so, enjoy watching the process of nestbox selection (as male attempts to get female to accept the nestbox he has picked out), flirtation (wing-waving), nest building, egg laying, incubation (sometimes male will bring food to female), and caring for the nestlings (both parents will bring food). If you're watching at just the right moment, you might witness a young bluebird fledging (leaving the nestbox), taking its maiden flight to a nearby tree or shrub. In Texas, a pair of bluebirds may have as many as 4 nestings in a year. In the 2nd and 3rd nestings of the season the older siblings sometimes help feed the nestlings.

Is it okay to have more than one nestbox?

Absolutely! A “bluebird trail” (nestboxes spread through appropriate habitat) is the most effective way to increase the bluebird population and experience the joy that bluebirds bring. To encourage multiple families of bluebirds, place nestboxes 100 yards apart. To encourage bluebirds plus other cavity nesters, place them closer together (5 yards apart).

Additional questions? Feel free to e-mail us at answers@texasbluebirdsociety.org.

For more information on bluebirds or becoming a member of the Texas Bluebird Society, or to purchase a copy of *The Bluebird Monitor's Guide*, visit our website at www.texasbluebirdsociety.org.

This paper is loosely based on *SCREECH OWL BOXES: The Top Ten Questions & Answers*, by Cliff Shackelford, 12/2002. Cover photo © Melanie Eastep.

Homeowner's Manual



for the owner of a Texas
Blues nestbox from the
Texas Bluebird Society



What exactly is this wooden “nestbox”?

This “Texas Blues” nestbox (birdhouse) was designed and approved by Texas Bluebird Society for native cavity nesting birds of Texas. It resembles a tree hollow or cavity. Some birds, like Eastern Bluebirds, cannot nest without a cavity. Since bluebirds are not able to excavate a hole like a woodpecker can, their natural nest location is a rotten hollow or abandoned woodpecker cavity. These are typically found in dead wood. In urban environments, however, humans remove most dead wood because it could fall on our homes or automobiles. And across Texas, there are increasingly fewer undeveloped acres with dead wood. Erecting this nestbox will provide bluebirds (and other small native cavity nesting birds) with a much needed home.

What is a bluebird?

The bluebird is a member of the Thrush Family. It is closely related to the robin with a similar shape but smaller size. Eastern and Western Bluebirds (species nesting in Texas) have a brilliant blue back, rusty red vest and white underparts. A bluebird is not a Blue Jay.

Can I provide bluebirds with food?

You can provide food for bluebirds by maintaining a chemical-free yard with short grass and berry-producing native plants and trees. Bluebirds are beneficial to humans as natural insect control; when insects are available; bluebirds eat insects, including grasshoppers. In the dead of winter when there are limited insects, bluebirds eat native berries. Bluebirds are not seed-eaters, so they will not feed on birdseed.

Since bluebirds are wild animals, don’t worry about feeding them as if they were domesticated animals. If you want to draw them close for your benefit, bluebirds are often attracted to

mealworms. In winter they will sometimes eat raisins and homemade “suet” mixtures (made of peanut butter, lard and cornmeal). Provide clean water year-round. There’s nothing quite as refreshing as the sight of a family of bluebirds splashing in a birdbath.

Where do bluebirds live?

There are two species of bluebirds that breed in Texas: the Eastern and Western Bluebird. Eastern Bluebirds are found in the eastern 2/3 of Texas. There are pockets of breeding Western Bluebirds in West Texas. Bluebirds usually nest in a somewhat open area with short grass and a few trees nearby (this includes suburban residential areas). The short grass provides an area where they can hunt for insects without cover for predators. Bluebirds appear to prefer a nesting location where they have a high “perch” nearby where they can observe their nest. An extensive dense forest will not suffice for nesting. Urban and suburban habitats that often provide adequate habitat are shaded lawns, parks, cemeteries and golf courses.

In the winter, bluebirds gather in flocks and usually stay in protected wooded areas where water is available. A group of bluebirds will sometimes enter a single nestbox for protection on a cold night. In the winter some Mountain Bluebirds migrate to Texas.

Where is the best place to put this nestbox?

Placement of the nestbox is important. Find a spot that is shaded from the late afternoon sun, overlooks an open area with short grass, and has a few trees nearby. Utility lines overhead provide an added bonus since the bluebirds will use the line as a perch. Don’t place the nestbox in a thicket or in dense vegetation like cedars, junipers or shrubbery.

How should I mount this nestbox?

The nestbox should not be mounted on a tree or post where the bluebirds would be very susceptible to predation by snakes, raccoons, squirrels, house cats, and fire ants. Mount it on a smooth pole or EMT conduit. An easy way to mount the nestbox is by attaching it to a six-foot length of 3/4" EMT conduit using 3/4" EMT brackets. Pound a 3- to 4-foot section of 5/8" rebar securely into the ground and slip the conduit with nestbox attached over the rebar.

Attempt to make the nestbox as level as possible. The roof is designed to provide both shade and protection from rain. If the nestbox is tilted, particularly upward, the weather protection is compromised. And finally, if the nestbox is to be installed near your home, position it where you can enjoy it from a window.

Will other bird species use this nestbox?

Other species—such as Tufted Titmouse, Black-crowned Titmouse, Carolina Chickadee, Bewick’s Wren, Carolina Wren, Ash-throated Flycatcher and Downy Woodpecker (all native birds of Texas)—would enjoy making a home in this nestbox. If this occurs, don’t worry; in just a few weeks the tenant will move out and once again there will be an empty cavity for the possibility of bluebird tenants.

The nestbox has a 1½" entrance hole, which will exclude many undesirable species. Unfortunately, the alien House Sparrow will fit through this hole. It is an exceptionally aggressive competitor, and its aggressive behavior includes the destruction of eggs, nestlings and adult bluebirds. The House Sparrow nest is easy to recognize; it is typically a jumble of grasses and feathers packed from floor to ceiling of a nestbox. Don’t allow House Sparrows to nest. If in doubt, though, leave the nest.