



Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Bluebirds in Texas... and didn't know to ask

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Texas is one of the few states where all three species of bluebirds can be observed in the same area at the same time. There are many areas in Texas with appropriate habitat for bluebirds where the birds are not seen – yet!

During winter months Mountain Bluebirds that have spent the summer nesting in more northern states and Canada flock to Texas to spend the winter with their close cousins the Western and Eastern Bluebirds. These two species (which carry and "wave" the colors of our flags) are year-round residents of Texas.



photo by Bill Horn

Just as their names suggest the Eastern Bluebird is commonly found nesting in the eastern two-thirds of Texas. The less common Western Bluebird nests in the western half of the state while the Mountain Bluebirds occasionally winter from the Edwards Plateau in the east to the Davis and Guadalupe mountains to the west and north into the panhandle of Texas.

West Texas offers these birds ideal weather and habitat during the winter months! During frigid

temperatures the birds' main winter diet consists of juniper berries and the fruit from the parasitic plant of the mistletoe that festoons the branches of mesquite and oaks in this part of the state.

During mild temperatures a steady supply of insects are available throughout Texas. Natural food supplies vary from year to year and migration and wintering patterns of the bluebirds vary according to food availability. Loose flocks of 25-75 individuals are commonly reported and upwards of 500 have been seen in some areas with all three species occasionally seen in the same flock! Normally smaller family groups from the previous year are seen during winter months in or near their breeding area.

All three species are occasionally found far from their normal breeding or wintering range. Reporting these sightings to the Texas Bluebird Society (info@texasbluebirdsociety.org) will increase our knowledge of their constantly changing population trends.

EXPLANATION OF TERMS & SPELLING

While in most cases, the English language does not capitalize animal and plant names, not categorizing them as proper names, the Texas Bluebird Society has decided to follow the nomenclature used by the American Ornithological Union – the group that assigns names to birds. Since they capitalize both first and second word, we do the same.

Similarly, we have chosen to use the term "nestbox" to describe what many call a "birdhouse". Cavity-nesting birds use these structures, with rare exceptions, to hold their nests.

WHY SAVE BLUEBIRDS?

Historically bluebirds have been one of the most popular birds in North America. No other bird has been mentioned in songs, poems or appeared on greeting cards as often as the “Bluebird of Happiness”. Being one of relatively few cavity nesting birds they rely on natural cavities, abandoned woodpecker homes or concerned people who build nestboxes, place them in ideal habitat (somewhat open area; shaded from late afternoon sun; overlooking short grassy area) and then monitor the nestboxes 3 or 4 times a month.

Unlike the Bald Eagle or other rare animals that need our help, bluebirds can often be enticed to nest right in our rural or suburban backyards. An individual bluebirder has opportunity to see and enjoy the impact they have made on bluebird conservation.

No other species of birds may be observed as closely and intimately as bluebirds. You can share the joy and wonder (a miracle, actually) of these birds choosing a nestbox, building their nest, laying 3-6 sky blue eggs, incubating for 12-15 days, seeing the young birds hatch and come into the world helpless and naked but growing so rapidly that in 18 days they are ready to take their first flight into the new world!

But bluebirds have survived for possibly a million years without help! Why get concerned now?

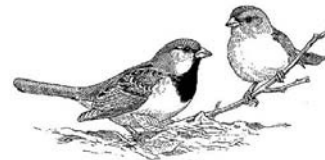
True! Before Europeans came to the America’s a fairly low human population lived as hunter-gathers and did little to alter the bluebirds’ environment. The first explorers quickly became fur brokers and within a 50-year span the coveted beaver skin hats drove trappers to virtually exterminate this creature in North America.

Beavers created the perfect habitat for many cavity nesters by girdling trees and allowing

woodpeckers to build along streams and rivers in these slowly dying trees. The beavers constantly cut brush and small trees near the water’s edge, creating park-like grassy areas in which bluebirds fed.

When the fur industry collapsed, trappers were replaced with small subsistent farmers who cleared land for crops, actually creating more and better habitat for bluebirds. Bluebirds benefited from small family-sized clearings and farmers had the benefit of these bluebirds that feed mostly on insects.

From colonial times until World War I these farmers jealously protected their small animal flocks and exterminated most large predators in eastern states and constantly waged war on “chicken” hawks and snakes. Small predators were constantly trapped, shot or poisoned to protect livestock. Reduced numbers of natural predators benefited the bluebird population.



This non-native bird must not be allowed to nest.
House Sparrow graphics courtesy of Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology / Home Study Course

In the 1850’s Americans imported the House Sparrow from England and this had the first truly devastating impact on the population of bluebirds and other small cavity-nesting birds. House Sparrows spread rapidly and by 1870 had spread from New York all across Ohio and were sweeping north and south wherever man and his stores of grain were to be found! Sparrows drove the once common bluebirds out of towns and villages and into the more rural areas.

By 1900 the imported cavity-nesting House Sparrows had become a serious pest in most areas of the country. This was also the year that the European Starling was introduced into New York

City. It was a larger and even more aggressive cavity nester and quickly began displacing the woodpeckers from their natural habitat. As woodpecker populations decline, so do the numbers of available cavities for other species.

Starlings reached California in the 1940's and many parts of Canada & South America by 1990 displacing most small to mid-sized native cavity nesting birds, especially near urban areas. Today starlings and House Sparrows have higher populations than any other bird in North America.

Between the world wars loggers still practiced selective cutting in forests. America lost 99.9% of its virgin forests east of the Mississippi River by 1930. The small family subsistent farm gave way to huge monoculture farms and long-lived pesticides like DDT and chlordane were widely used to protect crops as we neared the end of the 1940's.

All of these manmade pressures on cavity nesters came to the breaking point in the 1950's and early 1960's. Seven severe winters during this time span that broke records with cold, snow and freezing rain occurred in the eastern half of the country clear to the Gulf of Mexico. This icy covering on their winter supply of berries devastated the Eastern Bluebird population. Experts felt that by 1970 90% of Eastern Bluebirds had disappeared and the Western and Mountain species were in a severe decline.

House Sparrows and starlings survived these winters sheltered in buildings and barns while feeding on spilled grains and other crops to which bluebirds cannot adapt.

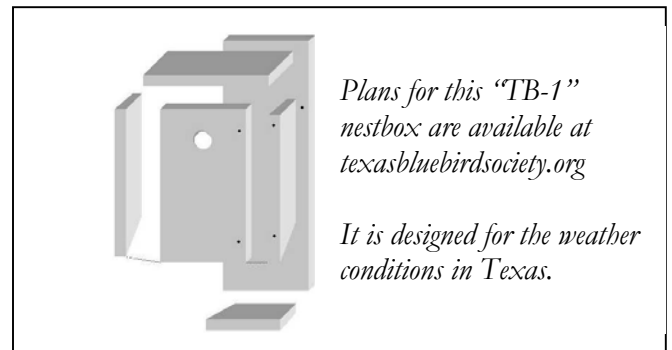
Farming and forestry practices are evolving but prime habitat for cavity nesters is rapidly slipping away. Bluebirds lose habitat whether land is covered with new water reservoirs, paved over with asphalt, plowed under for crops or dug up in search of coal or minerals!

I only have one small house lot. What difference could I make?

Bluebirds feed insects to their young and need about 3/4 acre of open ground to feed their family. They are not limited to using only to your land and often will feed in your neighbor's yard or even across the street! When you have success attracting bluebirds you should inform the neighbors and share the joy so that they can also help protect the birds.

Keeping cats indoors, providing safe clean watering areas and limiting use of pesticides within 1/2 mile of nesting birds will increase the likelihood that the population will not only survive but will increase. Active control of imported House Sparrows and starlings is best but even preventing these pests from nesting in the neighborhood is a tremendous help for native cavity nesters.

Heat resistant well-ventilated nestboxes should be installed in early fall for best results. Bluebirds move throughout the area in fall and winter and will choose a nest site by late January and often will begin nest building in mid-February. Eggs are normally laid 1-2 weeks after the nest is complete.



By placing 3 or 4 nestboxes on even a small lot you ensure that all native cavity nesters will have a place to nest in your yard. Placing these nestboxes on edges of your property, out of sight of one another can allow you to have 2 or sometimes 3 pairs of bluebirds nesting in a small yard. Each pair can establish a larger territory

utilizing your neighbor's lot and a portion of your yard.

Bluebirds lay eggs and raise young in Texas from February until mid September. Extensive bird banding research in East Texas showed that adult Eastern Bluebirds tend to mate for life. If they are successful with a nesting attempt they will normally use the same nestbox or one very close for their next nesting. They tend to return to the same area each spring to nest and they do not migrate more than a few miles in winter.

It is not uncommon for a pair of bluebirds to successfully raise four complete families in a single season but 2-3 broods a year is normal in Texas. Using quality nestboxes and predator resistant mounting poles can dramatically increase the number of bluebirds in an area.

Over 30 years ago Keith Kridler and a group of volunteers began putting up and monitoring heat resistant, well-ventilated nestboxes in East Texas. At that time bluebirds were not a common everyday sight. Tens of thousands of boxes later, East Texas has the highest wintering population of Eastern Bluebirds in the United States and among the highest in nesting population. It was done...one nestbox at a time.

Keith and others in Texas are part of a continent-wide effort to provide bluebird and cavity-nesting bird habitat across North America. A major part of this restoration is the Transcontinental Bluebird Trail – a habitat project spearheaded by the North American Bluebird Society. The Texas Bluebird Society is a proud affiliate of NABS, and urges its members to maintain dual memberships (TBS and NABS). The Texas Bluebird Society recognizes and thanks NABS for their support of our efforts.

Won't you join us? Together we can enjoy **Bluebirds** (and other cavity nesters) **Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time.**

Contact Information

To learn more about bluebirds and other cavity nesting bird species in Texas and what you can do to help, please contact the Texas Bluebird Society at:

www.texasbluebirdsociety.org
or

Texas Bluebird Society
P. O. Box 40868
Austin, TX 78704
or

info@texasbluebirdsociety.org

Individual memberships are \$10/year.
Household memberships are \$15/year.

The IRS recognizes Texas Bluebird Society as a 501(c)(3) organization.

Texas Bluebird Society is the state affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society.

www.nabluebirdsociety.org



The TBS Speakers Bureau provides programs on bluebirds and other cavity nesters.

Contact Lysle Mockler to request a date:

972.435.6271

speakers@texasbluebirdsociety.org