

Susan Selects Special Sites So *Sialia sialis* Succeed!

By Susan Tartaglio.

For the last four years Susan has been monitoring bird nests on her 200+ acre home in Alvord, Texas. In that short time 135 bluebirds plus a variety of other species have fledged. Susan shares her success stories for selecting bluebird nestbox locations in a variety of habitats on her acreage located northeast of Ft. Worth. Of course, if you live in another part of the state, your selection criteria can vary depending on your local environment.

Bluebirds can make do with all sorts of unsuitable nesting areas, and sometimes they have no choice. But with your help, they can raise their chicks in the perfect spot, or a very good spot, or at least a not-so-bad spot. Here are some considerations:

Your own convenience. Along a pathway or a road will make the box easier to monitor, or visible from your house for your own enjoyment. Start with this and then think about the following:

Aesthetics. Best ignored! One of my first boxes was next to a lovely shaded lake set amidst a cluster of flowering plums. Oops! Both the nearby water and the plums attracted all sorts of predators. Fortunately, the bluebirds seemed to know that too and never used it. I've since moved it to a better spot.

Orienting the entry hole. Consider the direction from which the spring and summer storms come, and orient the entry hole away from it. For example, in North Central Texas the summer winds and storms come in from the south. I lost one brood of chicks after a big



THE NW GATE BOX. Box faces east. A large fledge tree at about the right distance and a fence line for additional good perching. This combination of open meadow/oak trees is ideal.

storm. The entry hole, which faced south, allowed the strong winds to blow rain into the box; the chicks got wet and died.

In Texas, west-facing is also a bad idea. In the long hot afternoons the summer sun will shine into the entry hole and raise the temperature in the box.

That leaves east or north. Our winter storms come in from the north. This is a consideration because bluebirds and other birds will use the boxes for shelter during severe winter weather. That leaves east as ideal, with northeast or north as a second choice.

The fledge tree. A few days before fledging, young bluebirds start spending time looking out the entry hole. This gives them a head start on that brand new world into which they must soon fly. If there's a big tree such as a post oak within their range of vision, it will begin to look familiar to them and they will usually fly directly to it. Their parents will gather all the chicks together high up in the tree and feed them there until gradually they make their way lower down in the branches and finally start feeding themselves on the ground.

How close should the fledge tree be to the nest-box? Too far, and the fledglings can't fly there easily, too close and predators can use the tree to get to the box. About 15 to 20 feet would be a good place to start. Lacking a fledge tree, a large shrub or fence line will work in a pinch. But what if there's only grass within the chicks' range of vision? They'll fly out into the grass and their parents will have to coax them into a large nearby tree. I've watched a pair of bluebirds do this and it took them an entire day, a day better spent feeding those hungry mouths. One chick never made it. Still, you may have no other option. The bluebirds can deal with it. Just make sure there are some large trees nearby.

Perches for parents. The fledge tree works, but even better are telephone wires, which allow an unobstructed field of view around the area of the nestbox.

An open area. My 29 nestboxes are spread over more than 200 acres. There's all sorts of terrain:

dense woods, open meadows, ravines, hills and hollows. One day I stumbled upon what seemed the perfect nestbox site. It's a small meadow (about an acre) off a much larger meadow, surrounded on two sides by woods and on the other side by a few big trees. I call it Hidden Meadow. As I was preparing the PVC pole a beautiful male bluebird landed on the box to check it out, even though it was still lying on the ground. This turned out to be my best-producing box of last summer. Three broods, five eggs each, every egg hatched and every chick fledged.



THE HIDDEN MEADOW BOX. The most popular box ever. Almost surrounded by large trees but still in an open area, away from game trails. Entry hole faces east. Box was immediately occupied and very successful!

But not too open. A box on the high point of a large hill with a single tree (a good fledge tree, however) was not occupied till late spring.

Shade. I don't worry about it any more, although I do consider it. Trouble is, trees and shrubs near enough to provide afternoon shade can also allow predators to jump or drop onto the box, especially snakes and squirrels.

Distance from other boxes. I consider 100 yards a minimum unless the boxes are out of sight of each other. My two 'home' boxes are only about 90 feet apart but the house is in between them so the bluebirds can't see each other. I often have two pairs simultaneously raising chicks.

Safety from predators. What are the usual nestbox predators in your area? Squirrels? Raccoons? Snakes? Cats? Or aerial predators like the House Sparrow?

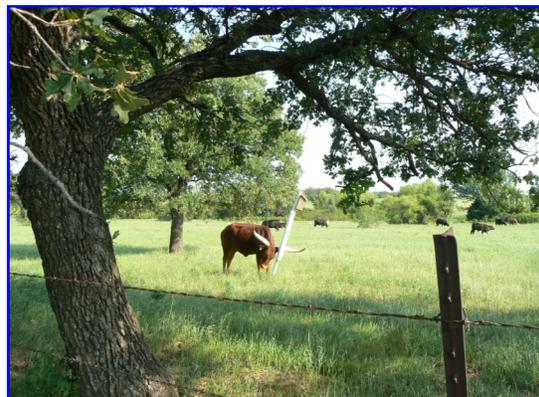
In my area, which is out in the country, raccoons and House sparrows are the big problems. The House

sparrows I deal with by placing my nestboxes more than ¼ mile away (most are ½ mile away) from their main food source, which is a hobby farm down the road with horses and poultry. (Make sure you're not feeding them yourself.)

The raccoons I deal with by placing the nestboxes away from the cow paths and game paths - even 15 feet off the path is helpful, along with active control when needed. For the same reason, stay away from water edges. Predators follow the easiest path. If you put a nestbox right next to a path, they're going to investigate.

People tell me that the raccoons need to eat too. To them I say, like Marie Antoinette, "Let them eat House Sparrows."

Good feeding areas. This is what makes your backyard so attractive! That short, mowed grass makes finding bugs lots easier. But open patches of dirt and road margins (quiet country roads preferably) also work well.



THE 5 TREES BOX. The cattle can get to all my boxes but only this one has gotten this sort of treatment, probably because the cattle like to hang out here (good shade and extra-good grass). Box has not been used by bluebirds yet, and is about to be moved to another area with a stouter T-post.

Lastly, get that box up early! That means in the fall, or at least during the winter months, where the local bluebirds can find it and get accustomed to it. Having said that, I'm usually late with new boxes, and even those I put up after the first broods are out often get used.

Remember to record your nestbox activity at
www.nestwatch.org