

# Burlington Blues: Bluebirds About Our Town

Everyone loves bluebirds because they wear the color of the sky and sing a melodious song. These cousins of the American robin are not uncommon in our town and can even be seen in winter, for example in small flocks in trees at the edges of fields. Soon spring will be upon us and bluebirds will be looking for suitable nesting sites in hopes of finding places to raise families. Not only are these attractive residents, but they also help keep the insect population in check, as insects are a mainstay of their diet in the summer.

Even if you don't own a chunk of wilderness you can invite blue-feathered families to take up residence on your property. With only three-fourths of an acre, my wife and I managed to have them move into our Burlington yard. It has been fun to see the parents bring nest materials to the house, and then constantly bring insects once the eggs have hatched. The babies let mom and dad know they are ready for a snack: chirps (requests for food) can be heard every time one of the parents approaches the nest. The babies are loud enough that

we hear them from within the house! Mom and dad remain hard at work bringing enough insects to keep all the babies fed, and clean your yard of these insects while doing so.

Plans for a bluebird nest box can be obtained from the state Department of Environmental Protection or from *The Bluebird Book* by D. and L. Stokes. Nest boxes have to be a particular size, have a certain diameter door and are given their own post. The post must have a tubular collar, a piece of PVC pipe, along part of its length to keep raccoons, snakes and other predators from dining on the bluebird eggs. If cats frequent your yard you may want to hold off on having your own nest box.

Another hazard is the occupation of nest boxes by house sparrows, a species brought by people to North America from Eurasia. These highly aggressive birds must be evicted (by removing their nest before they lay eggs) if they claim a box intended for bluebirds. This is the frustrating part, in that you may have to remove partially made nests several times. Although destroying a bird's nest just doesn't seem right,

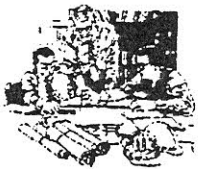
it is competition for nest sites by these aggressive birds (and the starling, another introduced species) that caused the large scale decline of our native bluebird.

Bluebirds need grassy areas nearby, with or without scattered trees, in which they can feed. An area of a yard can be converted to a bluebird feeding area by alternately mowing (at the highest setting) half of the area about every three weeks, and applying no weed killers or herbicides of any kind. If you get hooked on having bluebirds as your neighbors you will want to plant shrubs, trees or vines to provide the birds with berries and the like. Numerous different kinds of plants can be planted to provide small fruits, their most important winter food. Certain feeding plants hold on to their fruits into the winter, and then give you the added bonus of seeing bluebirds in your yard when many of our other colorful birds have migrated to warmer regions. A fine and inexpensive (\$5) book entitled *Enhancing Your Backyard Habitat for Wildlife* by P. Picone is available at Sessions Woods on Route 69, and you may want to register your bluebirds with the good folks who work there as well.

The bluebird was in decline for many years but now is making a comeback. This conservation success story is due to a building boom of bluebird housing by concerned citizens in Connecticut and other eastern states.

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