

## Bluebird Nesting Boxes – Spruce up your old boxes (and make some new ones) in preparation for spring



*Mountain Bluebirds are regular summer residents in our area.*

The 26<sup>th</sup> annual Spring Conservation Fair is fast approaching! The popular bluebird nesting box building project will again be a featured activity at this April 18th event. Each year, Curlew Job Corps Carpentry students provide precut pieces for bird boxes and assist children in assembling them. Over the years, hundreds of kids have gone home from the fair with bluebird houses they can proudly say that they built themselves.

While the ease of construction makes this activity a natural and fun choice for a children's activity, the resulting nesting boxes also address an important conservation issue. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, populations of all three North American Bluebird species, Eastern, Western and Mountain, were undergoing a steady decline, largely as a result of habitat loss. As the

human population had grown, land was being cleared at an ever-increasing rate. This, in turn, had reduced the supply of natural snags available for cavity nesting birds, including bluebirds. In addition, the bluebird population had been severely impacted by competition from the non-native house sparrow and European starling.

This decline in the population of bluebirds started to turn around in the latter part of the century, after bird conservationists began promoting the placement of nesting boxes in areas inhabited by the three species. These boxes, built to the proper specs, mounted as recommended, and properly maintained, replaced natural cavities, providing a place for increasing numbers of bluebird mating pairs to lay and incubate their eggs, and raise their chicks.

Every year, dozens of bluebird boxes assembled at the Fair are mounted in back yards and on the "back forty". Many of them host bluebird families year after year. However, for the nesting boxes to continue to function properly over time, some maintenance is required. Periodic inspection may reveal missing or splitting roof or side panels. Some boxes may be found on the ground, knocked down by a predator or by the elements. Usually, a broken or missing piece is easily replaced, a dislodged box quickly remounted with longer nails or screws. The entrance hole may be chewed out by a squirrel or woodpecker, allowing access by predators or larger nesting birds. To permanently maintain the proper size hole (1 9/16-inch diameter for bluebirds) a metal entrance protector (available at <https://www.treehelp.com/birding-wildlife/>) may be screwed over the existing opening.

Perhaps the most important maintenance task is cleaning out the last year's nest material. This is best done in March or early April, before the birds start nesting. With a paint scraper or similar tool, remove as much of nest material as possible (be extra careful not to breathe any of the resulting dust). The clean nesting box provides a safe and attractive nesting option for a pair of bluebirds about to start a new family.

Is the nesting box empty when you first open it? If it has not been used for several years, it might be time to consider moving it. Was it used by bluebirds or by another cavity nesting species? Look closely at the nest material and refer to a nest guide book or to the internet to determine if it might have been used by house sparrow, starling, swallow, or wren families.

If rain and air vents were not incorporated into the original nesting box design, consider making this simple alteration during your annual inspection. Drill a few holes near the top of the sides to cool the box on hot summer afternoons. Drill in an upward direction, so that water is less likely to infiltrate. A few small holes in the floor piece will allow moisture to drain from the structure.

Whether or not you already have bluebird nesting boxes on your property, there is always room for one or two more. Put the Spring Conservation Fair on your calendar (Saturday, April 18 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM) and bring the kids. They will love constructing another box and the bluebirds will thank you. And please don't forget to take the time each spring to put the old boxes back into good shape.

For more detailed information on bluebirds and bluebird nesting boxes, visit <http://sialis.org/>. This website served as a major source of information for this article. For more information on conservation issues visit the Ferry Conservation District (FCD) office (84 E. Delaware, Republic, above the Credit Union), call (509-775-3473) or visit our website ([ferrycd.org](http://ferrycd.org)). The FCD is a non-regulatory agency. Our services are available to all without discrimination.



*Annual cleaning and maintenance are essential to keep bluebirds returning.*

