

IS YOUR BACKYARD BLUEBIRD NEST BOX A TRAGEDY IN THE MAKING?

Is the lawn-loving, urban-friendly bluebird visiting your yard to forage for insects or seek a tree hole in which to nest? Installing a nest box can be beneficial and a source of much entertainment. But problems can develop when proven methods of helping them are not followed. Emergency calls received by the North American Bluebird Society and its 58 State-wide affiliates leave experts to believe that millions of people who provide nest boxes for bluebirds do more harm than good. Here's what you need to know.



Male Western Bluebird using one suitable box design

The right box in the right place is key.

A safe box for bluebirds is about 10" tall with an inside floor dimension of 5" by 5." The wood should be about 3/4" thick and the hole should be 1 1/2" or 1 9/16" in diameter. It should have a door that opens for easy cleaning and have no perching post. [Here's a link to a good box design for bluebirds.](#) Small, thin, decorative birdhouses that do not have a door that opens, are placed low to the ground, and in direct sunlight, can lead to tragedy. If these unsuitable boxes must be placed in the landscape, it's best to remove the bottom or plug the holes to prevent them from being used. Did you know that native [House Wrens](#) commonly occupy decorative boxes? Their highly territorial aggression during the nesting season is often deadly to other nesting songbirds. Placing bluebird boxes in House Wren habitat can set the former up for failure.

A pair of breeding bluebirds needs about two acres of low grass. If your lawn and those nearby

collectively provide approximately that amount, bluebirds have a good chance of successfully breeding.



Decorative boxes near bluebird nest boxes can spell tragedy



*House Wrens take over boxes and kill bluebirds nesting nearby
Sandrine Biziaux Scherson*

Two non-native birds harm bluebirds.

[The European Starling](#) is less of a problem when the right box design is used because the starling is too large to fit through the recommended size hole. The second bird, the [House Sparrow](#) (*Passer domesticus*) easily fits the size hole needed by bluebirds. Sadly, it often kills bluebirds or destroys their eggs. Birdhouses for bluebirds should not be used if House Sparrows reside nearby.

Outdoor cats and nest boxes are a deadly combination.



Most birds killed by cats are not discovered Hilde Gay

Cats are not native American wildlife and native birds have not evolved with these excellent predators. Millions of birds are killed annually by cats. Locations where feral or pet cats roam are no place for a nest box. If a parent bird is killed some chicks will likely die because a single parent cannot feed a full clutch. Baby birds just out of the box and learning to fly are especially vulnerable to cats.

Shaded locations can be life savers.



Use ventilation holes and light-colored paint in hot regions

In areas where spring and summer temperatures can get very high, it is important to place the box in a well-shaded area because the internal temperature of the box can be substantially higher. Prolonged high temperatures can affect the health of parents and kill nestlings. Side-ventilation holes are beneficial. Painting boxes a light color to reflect heat is also recommended.

Busy feeders near nest boxes are risky



Bird feeders near nest boxes add stress and draw predators Sue Robinson

Having a nest box in your yard while also enticing as many birds as possible with seed, mealworms, nectar, suet, bread, etc. increases stress for the nesting bluebirds. This is especially so if your yard is small and the feeder is nearby. (House Sparrows are shown here.) Feeders also draw snakes, rodents and hawks. 'Intruders' and potential predators require parents to divert a lot of energy to defend their nesting area. It is safest to have no feeders if nest boxes are present, but if you feed birds in the nesting season (generally February through August), consider using niger and safflower seeds. They do not appeal to House Sparrows. Mealworms can be offered exclusively to bluebirds if safely done.

Be aware of other dangers.

These include all kinds of string, frayed blue tarps, ribbon, Easter grass and yarn. When birds weave these materials into their nest, strangulation or

trapping can occur. Raccoons and snakes are frequent predators in many places and methods to deter them are necessary to bird survival in nest boxes. Likewise Argentine and Fire ants are ubiquitous and must be kept out of boxes because they also kill birds. Other dangers include chimneys and vertical pipes. When the latter are 1-10 inches in diameter they attract songbirds looking for a cavity. The straight, smooth sides of the pipe traps birds. Options include removing the pipe, capping, screening or filling them with dirt, rocks or concrete.



Man-made materials entangle birds James Emmett Rogers

Explore the following websites for suggestions for predator guards and other resources for nest box owners: www.socalbluebirds.org, www.sialis.org, and www.nabluebirdsociety.org.

If a bird is injured or a baby bird has fallen from the box [here's a link](#) to find a certified wildlife rehabilitation center that works with songbirds.

More ways you can help bluebirds.

Did you know you can also help bluebirds by volunteering to monitor an existing trail of boxes that is already used by bluebirds? Bluebird Societies frequently need to fill the shoes of retiring monitors. These trails are usually in highly suitable habitats which ensure greater breeding success long term. Your nearest Bluebird Society likely has a trail calling your name!

Audubon societies may also provide a list of fruit-bearing plants that benefit bluebirds (and other insectivorous songbirds) in fall and winter.