**Springtime Strategies for Bluebirds- updated for 2023**

Written by Jane Brockway

It’s almost time to ‘Hit the Trails” again, so I thought a few reminders/tips/ ideas would be helpful!

**The biggest complaint is swallows using nest boxes Here are a couple of strategies.**

1. HABITAT! Get your boxes away from water bodies! If your boxes are close to rivers, lakes, ect, you will attract swallows! Bluebirds like open spaces with short grasses. Get the box away from your house and barns.
2. Try pairing your boxes. You can space a second box about 15-20 feet away. This works in some areas, but not all.
3. Give bluebirds space; don’t put your boxes too close together. Space them at least 100 yards apart—or even more. Approximately 4-5 boxes a mile or even fewer depending on habitat. Remember that as the season waxes and wanes, so do the bugs. Not enough insects, no 2nd clutches (at least on my trails).
4. Elongate the roof of the houses, about another 4-5 inches and cut another piece of wood about an inch wide/thick and place in un under the roof edge to act like a ‘lip’. Swallows like a ‘straight shot’ into the box They do not like flying under then up. Bluebirds don’t seem to care.

**Snow in the early spring, freezing temperatures. Mother Nature can be harsh.**

1. Early spring snows, freezing temps are tough and can be deadly to chicks and adults. If you live in an area that subject to these types of spring, consider rebuilding your boxes so that they have more insulation by using thicker lumber*. Do NOT add insulation inside the box.*
2. Disposable hand warmers…. I have been known to drive around to my boxes during a snow storm and place disposable handwarmers under the nests of chicks. I make a couple slits in the plastic covering so that it lets a little air into the package to activate them and they can stay in place until you clean the box.
3. Mealworms - these can be ordered from many sources. If you are a member of NABS some sites offer a discount. (Another benefit of NABS) I always have some during nesting season. Try putting them on the roof or in a little plastic cup that has been cut down to about an inch and thumbtacked to the roof. You can also take a pair of tweezers and feed them to the chicks in the nest if needed.
4. Pray for a lovely spring!

**Sparrows and Starlings**

1. They are non-native. They need to be ‘un-alived” or relocated to bird heaven’. Be sure of their identity by looking at books, guides, websites, and there are many birding apps that will help with bird identification.
2. There are a couple of Facebook groups that are dedicated to eliminating non-natives from their areas. “Managing House Sparrows and Starlings” and “House Sparrow Control” Both Facebook pages have a lot of information suggestions and how-to’s, including various traps, and dispatch methods. There is also great information on the sialis.org website. By sometime this summer, (or possibly sooner) that website will be redesigned and configured so that it is easily accessible per your cell phone or other mobile device Very handy when you are out on the trail. (Another project financed by NABS -*shameless plug on my part*).
3. If there are Bird Rehab centers for Raptors in your area, they may be interested in the English Sparrows and Starlings that you dispatch. It’s worth giving them a call. It’s the ultimate way of recycling!

**Racoons and Weasels**

“I HATE COONS!!” (Quote from Charlie Vaughn!) And so do I! I have had luck trapping using a dirty tuna can with cat food, marshmallow’s, and maraschino cherries (when I have them)……. Racoons then go to Racoon Heaven (or HELL depending on your point of view!) If a racoon discovers your trail, it will hit every box in the line. Relocating racoons will not work, they are smart and will return with their friends and families. You may need to take boxes down for a season or two but try trapping before the nesting season starts. Racoons are smart and they will keep coming back unless they are killed. Over the years, I have gotten pretty good at trapping racoons but I wasn’t as lucky with the weasel. I talked with Johnny Denton and Erv Davis, and they told me to relocate those boxes. Weasels do not like being out in the open. I relocated my boxes about 100 yards away from the site and haven’t had any more trouble. Thank heaven.

**Finding wet/ crappy nests**

Most bluebird mothers are great housekeepers. They usually keep the nestbox free of fecal sacs, however, I have encountered a few that were just breathtaking…. Literally! The smell was awful! Five chicks that were dirty, and the nest was ½ inch thick with goo. Poor little chicks standing in that stuff. I always carry a box of clean dry nests when I am out on my trails. I replaced the nest and checked on them in an hour and then the next day. They were as happy as could be and fledged successfully. A few years passed and in talking with other bluebirders in the East, and in reading in some of the NABS journals, I finally figured out that those chicks had been fed earthworms. The parents probably didn’t have the abundance of the usual insects, so they resorted to worms. The pair did not try a 2nd clutch in that box that year. Fortunately this has been a rare occurrence on my trails.

**Hornet and Yellow Jacket nests in boxes**

You need to check your boxes once a week and remove them when you find them. *Do not apply* *insecticides inside of the boxes*! You can also try taking a bar of soap and rubbing the ceiling of the box. One of the benefits of checking your boxes once a week is that you can remove them early—usually before they are a problem in the nestbox. Some years are worse than others years with larger populations of Yellow Jackets and Hornets. 2022 I had about 5 boxes with yellow jackets and hornets starts, but I removed them before they got large, and the pests didn’t return to those boxes!

There is an old bait trick that works well too. Take a trash fish or freezer burned meat then suspend it over a bucket of soapy water (use Dawn soap) and wait for them to eat, then fall in the soapy water and drown. It works pretty well! And if you have grandkids around, you’ll get the anticipated: *EWWWWW!!* from the girls and fascination from the boys! It’s environmentally safe, so it’s all good!

**Wrens**

As with swallows, think habitat. . .Don’t place boxes near thickets or thornapple, brushy, chokecherry, wild roses or the juniper clumps found in drier areas of the state as this is house wren habitat and they will claim the houses in their territory. House wrens are *very* territorial. They will **not** tolerate any other birds-even open nesters (like robins) in their territory. They are native, so protected by the Migratory Bird Act. There is a lot of information and choices of action listed on the [www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org) page. Lew Melby is going to try a new alteration to his nestbox entrances this year and will give us a progress report in the fall. His trail in Makoshika Park is located in the Eastern area in Montana. Hot, dry, and lots of brushy areas, so actually habitat for wrens. There are some Canadian monitors that are using a cardboard wren guard. With some success.

**Ants**

Remove old nests as soon as the chicks fledge. Erv Davis was my Mentor. He ALWAYS cleaned his boxes out after every fledging (unless they were very clean). So, I do too. Every once in a while, I will miss one, and when I come back in the spring to check everything out again, I almost always find the ‘missed’ boxes with mice in them. Yuk! Really don’t like mice either. And mice WILL claim boxes with eggs in them. They are persistent unless killed or disrupted every darn day! Sometimes I’m quick enough to get them in the box, but usually the little devils slither out the drainage holes or jump out of the top! Comical if it doesn’t happen to you of course! The remains of the discarded bugs, and fecal sacs may attract ants. If you notice ants in the box on the nest, you may want to change the nest out if the infestation is heavy. Those red ants will kill the chicks the small little black ones may not, but I’d get rid of them anyway. Cinnamon in the bottom of the box between the bottom and the nest helps deter ants. If you notice a lot of ants in the area of your box, try the cinnamon trick. Use it after the nest is made. Lift up the nest and sprinkle it on the bottom of the box. Replace the nest, and it’s good to go. If there are a large number of ants in and around the box, you will want to use a Q-tip dipped in Terro and tacked/stapled to the outside bottom of the box. Also staple a few to the pole that the box in on.

There are other methods listed on the Sialis webpage, but I haven’t tried them on my trails. The cinnamon and Terro have worked well for me.

***Happy Trails to you for 2023! Be sure to note on the fall fledgling report your observations and comments! We want to hear about your weather, insect population, as well as your bluebirds and anything that you have taken notice of! Enquiring fellow bluebirders want to know!***