



By Larry Reichenberger

On the bluebird trail

Attracting a spark of happiness to your property

Poets and songwriters have dubbed the bluebird a symbol of hope and happiness. From heralding the end of World War II from *The White Cliffs of Dover* to typifying a wonderful world *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, bluebirds provide a feeling that all is right with the world. Add that mystical power to their very real ability to pick a garden clean of insects and you see why attracting them is such a popular hobby, as well as a growing obsession.

“Bluebirding is a fascinating hobby and once you learn it you’ll be hooked,” says Robert Walshaw (aka Bluebird Bob) of Tulsa, Okla. “The poet Thoreau wrote that ‘the bluebird carries the sky on his back’ Watch a bright-blue male and you see what he meant. Bluebirds are beautiful and in most situations they enjoy living close to us,” he says.



Rebuilding numbers. Once among the most common songbirds in North America, bluebird populations plummeted 70% to 90% due to housing and commercial development that removed many of the old trees that provided the nesting cavities the birds utilized. “This problem has been compounded by the House Sparrow and European Starling, two introduced species that are also cavity nesters but more aggressive than bluebirds,” says

Jan Hygnstrom, who is an Extension project manager with the University of Nebraska.

Hygnstrom says the best way for homeowners to help bluebirds is to provide a nesting box in their yard or establish a series of them to create a bluebird trail. “Bluebird populations increase dramatically where nesting boxes and trails are put up in suitable habitat.”

Since it began in 1978, the North American Bluebird Society (nabluebirdsociety.org)

has worked to promote the recovery of bluebirds by providing educational material on nesting boxes and bluebird trails. The 2,000-member organization has also helped organize 55 state and local affiliates, many of whom

maintain data on bluebird nesting success supplied by nestbox monitors. Walshaw reports activity on the 30-box trail he monitors to the Nestbox Trails Project of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife and Conservation.

“My bluebird trail is about two miles long with boxes about 100 yards apart where the habitat is suitable. I open the boxes about once a week during the breeding season to check on the nest, eggs, or newly hatched chicks, also known as fledglings. I check more often if I’m using live traps to catch the hated sparrows that destroy the eggs and drive off the more timid bluebirds,” he says.

Large photo: Once common in North America, bluebirds plummeted in population until recent decades when volunteers began installing boxes to aid nesting.



nestbox to keep them from getting to the bluebirds.”

Bella Vista’s nestboxes are on the area’s many golf courses as well as at several cemeteries, churches, and hiking trails. These provide the open areas with scattered trees and low ground cover or mowed grass that bluebirds prefer.

“Avoid putting nestboxes in heavily wooded areas—that’s the habitat of the house wren which is also a cavity nester,” says Hygnstrom. “Installing boxes within 100 feet or so of a few trees or shrubs is a good idea because it gives birds a place to perch while searching for food [insects] and also gives the young a place to land on their maiden flight that keeps them away from predators on the ground.”

Nestbox basics. Various styles of nestboxes are available but features are similar. These include the small diameter opening to limit access, a depth adequate to keep predators from reaching in, drainage holes and ventilation, and a swing-away door that makes it easy to monitor and clean. Also, avoid the temptation of adding a perch to the box as this only tends to attract sparrows and wrens. The drawing shown here details a standard nestbox to

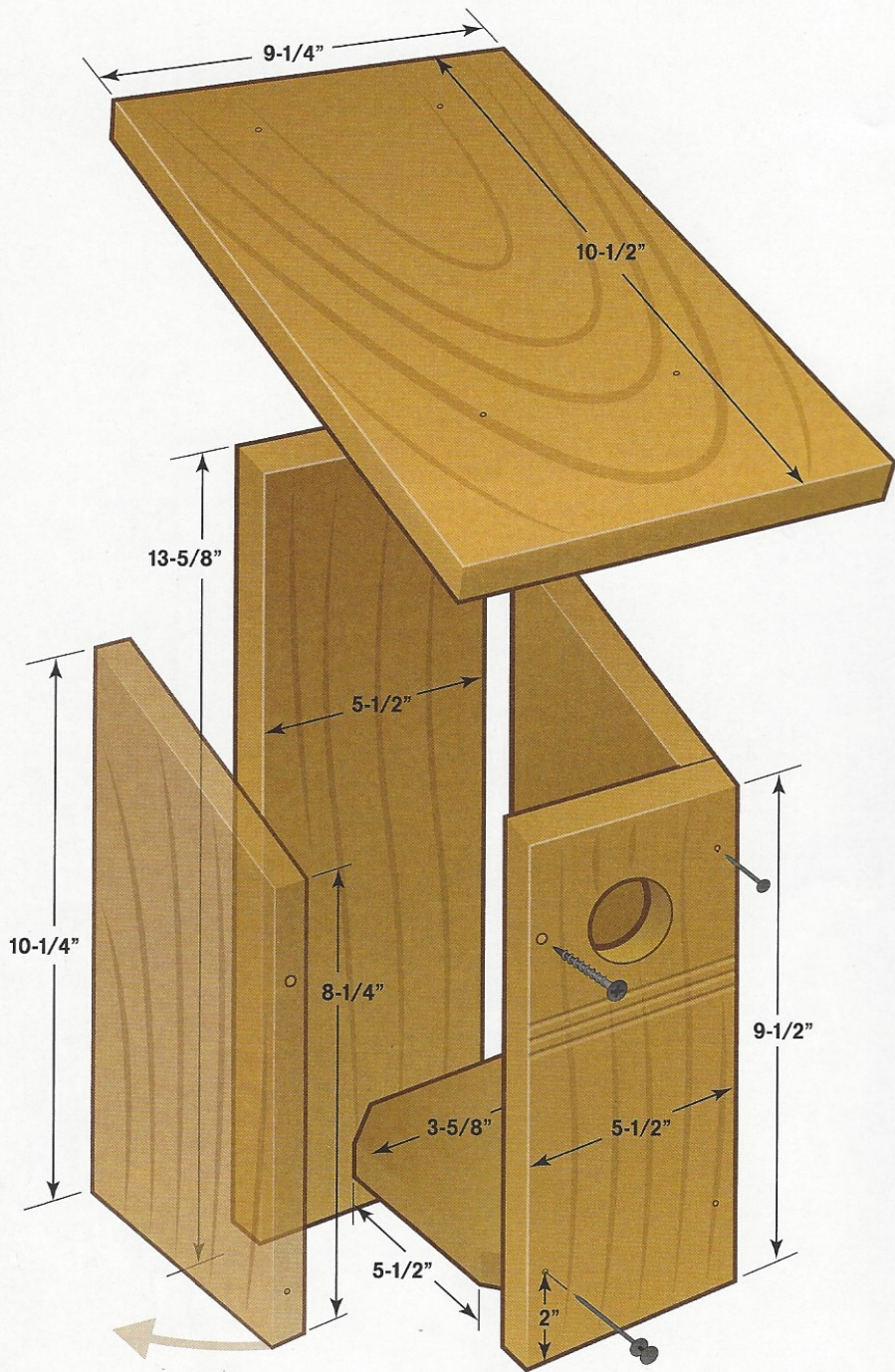
In Arkansas, Leon Wehmeyer works with 50 volunteers in the Bella Vista Bluebird Society to monitor 425 nesting boxes. “Last year we recorded 1,801 fledged bluebirds, and since 1980 a total of 39,188 have come from our nestboxes,” he says.

Wehmeyer also despises the sparrows that often invade the bluebird boxes. “The small hole (1 1/2” diameter) keeps larger crevice-nesters like the starling out, but sparrows squeeze in to drive off bluebirds and build their own nests, which must be removed so bluebirds will return.”

Wehmeyer says relocating troublesome nestboxes is one solution to this problem. “Sparrows like to hang around buildings, so you may have to move a troubled nestbox further away from the homestead. Snakes and raccoons are other predators that we fight, and we use a skirt on the pole supporting the



Right: Leon Wehmeyer checks a bluebird nestbox—one of 450 monitored by 50 volunteers in Bella Vista, Ark.



Above: Bluebird boxes, and kits to build them, are available at most garden stores.

Top right: The size of the entrance to a bluebird house is critical to keeping out invading starlings and predators.

be installed 5 feet high on a smooth pole which can be greased or skirted to dissuade predators.

The bluebird nesting season typically begins in late February or early March with the brightly colored males seeking out available nesting sites, then using song and dance (tail and wing displays) to persuade a female to adopt one as her home and him as her mate. After building her nest, the female lays four to six eggs—colors of the eggs are sky blue to occasionally white—and incubation begins.

“Depending on the weather, the eggs hatch in 10-14 days, and only 19 days later the young birds are ready to fly from the nest. Bluebirds have strong family ties, and soon after the young leave the nest you may see the whole family playing in your bird-bath. In just a few weeks the female will begin



BLUEBIRD PHOTOS: SHUTTER STOCK

building a new nest and the process is repeated, usually up to three times per year,” says Walshaw, who provides free copies of *The How and Why of Bluebirding* that he’s published (donations accepted; email contact: walshaw1@cox.net).

Richard Wells, vice president of the New York Bluebird Society, says the most rewarding aspect of the bluebird’s recent recovery is that it was the result of efforts by private volunteers without any government program or financial assistance. “It’s truly a citizen success story. The bluebird is a beautiful piece of nature that is now thriving thanks to ordinary people learning how to help,” says Wells.

Wells may be a special example of the commitment bluebird lovers have made. From his home in East Concord, N.Y., he monitors a bluebird trail that includes 80 nest-boxes. For him to check the boxes entails a 50-mile round trip. “Usually, I check them every ten days, but I’ll check some boxes every couple hours if I’m trying to trap sparrows so I can release any bluebirds I’ve mistakenly caught. The boxes are concentrated in good habitat, but are spaced at least 100 yards apart to accommodate bluebirds’ territorial nature. They’re all on land belonging to people who were glad to let me put them up,” he says.

“Nearly all my boxes are near public roads and highways. That makes them easier to check, but traffic on those roads also kicks up insects—the primary food source for bluebirds,” he says. ■