



## Nest Box Pests: House Sparrows, Insects & Other Predators

Procedure #3  
Updated Aug 2021

This procedure deals with animals and insects that cause injury or even death to chicks in the nest. The insects include ants, lice, bird mites and blowfly larva. Other predators include house sparrows, raccoon, snakes, squirrels and cats. Luckily these are not everyday occurrences, but it's important to know how to deal with them if they do occur. (See also our [Troubleshooting Guide](#).)

The proposed solution to many of the insects is a white powder known as diatomaceous earth (DE) that your trail boss will apply. See the last page of this procedure for more information on DE.

### HOUSE SPARROWS

House sparrows will destroy bluebird eggs and will kill baby and adult bluebirds in the nest. They are the most difficult pest we face with bluebird trails, and since they are a non-native, invasive species, **they must not be allowed to fledge their chicks in our boxes.**

If you have evidence of house sparrow activity in your nest box, contact your trail boss. He/she can do the following:

- replace a hole box with a slotted entry box
- if a slotted box is already being used, make sure the slot opening is 1 1/8" and replace the box if the opening is too large
- if a slotted box has the correct size opening, staple fishing line to the front of the box overhanging the opening. Page 4 of [The Bluebirder, Summer 2019](#) has an article on using fishing line to stop house sparrows.

### ANTS, LICE, MITES **NEVER spray a pesticide in a nest box**

If you have any of these pests when eggs and/or chicks are in a nest, treat the nest as follows:

- 1) Monitors, contact your trail boss for assistance.
- 2) Carefully remove the old nest with eggs/chicks in it. Check to see if ants are in the nest itself. If not, reuse the nest. If they are, use a clean nest which you have saved. (If you do not have a clean nest, check with others in the BVBBS to see if anyone has one.)
- 3) Transfer the eggs/chicks into the new nest. Use caution if the chicks are 12-14 days old to be sure they don't try to fly away.
- 4) Dust the infected box with diatomaceous earth (DE) and wipe out all the insects, and put some DE at the bottom of the box. If the box is too overrun with insects, you may have to replace the box (see the last page for more on DE).
- 5) Put some of the DE at the base of the pole to keep the invading ants away.

### BLOWFLY LARVA

Also known as maggots. We have not had any indication that we have blowfly larva problems, but they can easily go undetected as they are usually at the bottom of the nest. For these insects, which work from inside the nest itself, start checking your nests closer, especially when cleaning out a used nests. Maggots burrow themselves below the nest during the day, then come up at night & feed on the baby chicks.

For information on blowfly larva and treating them in the nest, go to

<http://www.ambassadorforthebluebirds.net/lets-talk-bluebirds/parasitic-and-blowfly-larva-solution>.

## **WASPS**

Wasps do not harm bluebirds, but a bird will not make a nest in a box that has a wasp nest in it.

**If you are allergic to wasp stings, contact your trail boss. Do not take a chance on getting stung.**

- 1) When checking your boxes, always look at the ceiling. If a wasp nest is started, use your scraper/putty knife or a stick to scrape away the wasp nest from the ceiling. **NEVER spray a pesticide in a nest box.**
- 2) After the nest is out, rub a bar soap (Ivory is said to be the best choice) on the inside ceiling and sides of the box to keep wasp nests from sticking to the wood. You may have to apply it several times throughout the season.

## **OTHER PREDATORS**

Includes raccoon, snakes, squirrels and cats.

- Bluebird boxes should not be attached to trees or under branches that predators can easily jump from to the box.
- Leave cats indoors especially around the time that chicks are due to leave the nest. Baby birds can't fly far when they first leave the nest. If they land on the ground they are easy prey for cats.
- Make sure to clean out old nests before the birds get a chance to build another one. Birds might make up to three nests in a box in one season, and each nest brings eggs & chicks closer to the box hole or slot, and easier for a predator to reach.
- There are wire guards that make it difficult for raccoons, squirrels, and cats to reach eggs and chicks. Pages 5 & 6 of [The Bluebirder, Spring 2019](#) has an article on building a wire guard.
- Snakes can climb pretty much anything. If you have a PVC baffle on the post, coating it with car wax or petroleum jelly to make it slick, can help prevent a snake or raccoon from climbing.

## **HOUSE WRENS**

House wrens will destroy eggs and kill chicks in the nest. They are however a native, protected species so we must let them nest in our boxes. To discourage house wrens, a nest box should be approximately 10' from wooded areas, the preferred setting for house wrens.

When we moved nine nest boxes out of wooded areas on a trail at Dogwood the end of the season in 2019, we went from 0 fledglings in 2019, to 38 fledglings in 2020!

## **HUMANS**

In 2020 for the first time we had evidence of humans removing nests intact with eggs. We replaced the nail closures with screws. At most locations that solution worked. Where it did not work we had to remove the boxes.

## **DIATOMACEOUS EARTH – BVBS Monitors, contact your trail boss when DE is needed.**

You can purchase diatomaceous earth food grade locally at farm supply stores, Lowe's or Walmart (check online first for availability). It is used in feeds as an anti-caking agent or pelleting aid. When mixed with the feed in amounts not to exceed 2%, it is consumed by cows, goats, poultry, horses, swine, dogs, etc.

We have safely used it to control the insect pests that invade our nest boxes, although we usually have had to apply it more than once.

To see a video of how to apply it to the nest, go to

<https://www.facebook.com/WoolwineHouseBluebirdTrail/videos/1667221223293840/>

Putting the video into words, follow these steps:

- 1) At about ½"-1" above the floor of the nest insert a mustard/ketchup type container about ½ full of food grade DE and point the tip down to keep the dust from going up into the nest and give 1-2 puffs. Do this in the front center of the nest and repeat on both sides.
- 2) Brush off excess DE dust outside of the nest to make sure no DE gets on the eggs.
- 3) Check the eggs for DE dust. If there, simply blow it off. After the chicks have fledged remove the dirty nest and sweep out the box.
- 4) If a second set of eggs are deposited, repeat the above process.