

## Chapter 13

### Keys to Being Successful with Bluebirds

Success with Bluebirds is not doing one thing 100% better but doing 100 things 1% better. Success is the sum total of small efforts repeated day in and day out. So let's get started.

I think one needs to be intentional about bluebirds through all four seasons of the year to be successful with Bluebirds. The nesting season is the absolute highlight of the year for bluebirders in all North America but if the focus is only on nests, eggs, chicks, and how many of each aren't we missing out on the other seven months of the year? We could be accomplishing so much in those months making March through July that much more productive.

Let's start with January 1st New Year's Day. In Pennsylvania the weather is usually cold, snowy, and icy. There are still three long cold months ahead before Bluebirds will return and start nesting. Here is a game plan that will shorten winter and make you smile at the same time.

#### Heated Birdbaths

Invest in a heated birdbath for your backyard. Songbirds get thirsty in the winter because the air is dry. They are trying to save heat calories so eating snow does not help them conserve energy.

If you have an old birdbath, immerse a coil heater over the side and plug it in to AC current. Most hardware stores have them for \$35. A newer birdbath model that has a heating element hidden in the bottom of the water basin is more attractive but they will be around \$100. This heated birdbath just keeps the water from freezing (about 34 degrees) it is NOT a hot tub for birds!

Bird watching in the winter is great fun and you will be amazed how your birdbath will attract many different species of birds in addition to bluebirds. In the spring, winter, and fall just unplug the cord and your birdbath is functional 365 days a year.

#### Mealworms, Fruits & Berries

Keep plenty of dried and live mealworms to feed hungry bluebirds if they decide to stay in your area and not migrate. When you read Chapter 10 and start your very own mealworm farm, after 3 months ---- you will be able to share some of your tasty darkling beetle larvae with the blues. You can watch in amazement how they can devour 50 or 60 mealworms in minutes that took you 90 days to grow!



A juvenile Bluebird feeds on Crabapple Berries

Bluebirds are not real excited about seeds so you need special treats to attract them to your winter season bird feeders. Raisins, currants, juniper berries, red mulberries, dogwood berries, holly berries, blueberries, cut-dried cherries are all a delicacy. Many of these berries can be picked and frozen in the summer or fall and then served in Jan, Feb, and March when the trees and shrubs have been stripped clean.

Jack Finch (1917-2006), a veteran bluebirder from Bailey, North Carolina, was able to keep flowering dogwood berries for extended periods. The berries are a favorite fruit of bluebirds. In the fall when the berries are ripe he carefully picked 5 to 25 pounds of berries from a single mature tree. After cleaning and sorting the damaged dark or wormy berries, he would store them in small ventilated unsealed containers at 29-32 degrees.

Jack kept some dogwood berries in a mixture of 50% wood sawdust and 50% fine shavings at just below freezing. Berries keep well in storage, maintain quality and last longer than any method. Insects will always be the preferred food, but berries can sustain bluebirds during inclement winter weather. You know that he loved bluebirds if he took the time and labor to store up berry treats for them.

If you have native plants on your property that produce fruits and berries, your birds will be rewarded with natural foods choose from. During heavy snows and ice storms these fruits and berries may not be accessible for the birds if they are still on the tree or vine.

### Winter Roosting Boxes

Winter roosting boxes are important for bluebirds. Keep your bluebird nest boxes up all winter for those times when birds need dry shelter for protection from the wind, snow, and ice.

Your regular box will make an adequate roosting box if you close off the ventilation vents and holes with strips of wood or duct tape. You could add some sawdust, wood chips, or pine needles to make it cozy inside.

If you want to get really “high-tech”, you can build a “heated roosting box” controlled with an EH-38 thermostat and warmed with a 100 watt lightbulb. Lowe’s have the EH-38 in the electrical section for about \$15. Check my website for plans: [www.bluebirdconservation.com](http://www.bluebirdconservation.com) and click on Articles then select “How to Construct a Heated Roosting Box for Bluebirds”.

They are fun to build and you will always know when the temperature outside is 38 degrees or below --- just look for the small light at the entrance hole at bottom front of the box.



Heated Roosting Box

**March 1st Deadline**  
**ATTENTION ALL BLUEBIRD**  
**ENTHUSIASTS!**

As spring approaches, a good date to remember is March 1st. This is the time to have your nest box or boxes ready for the season.

**Check the hole size:**

1½" is correct for Eastern Bluebirds and 1 9/16" for Mountain and Western Bluebirds. If it has been enlarged by a woodpecker or squirrel, fasten a cover plate to correct the size. Make sure the floor drainage corners or holes are open and check the ventilation openings. Look for wetness in the box and check for cracks in roof or warped areas that allow water into the box. Use silicone caulk on the leaks and sometimes a new roof is necessary.

Make sure all boxes have roofs, floors, and all four walls are intact. Sometimes wood pieces get rotted and the wind blows them to the ground. Check that the post is solidly in the ground and is vertical. Slanted or tilted conduit/pipe appears as if no one cares and is the first sign when a trail is not being monitored. A small wood shim will correct the pipe to vertical and prevent it from rotating in the wind.

Check the height of the box and make sure it did not slide down the pipe a few inches. Tighten the conduit clamps or put a screw through the pipe into the back of the box. Here is where good maintenance early and due diligence throughout the season will pay dividends. Attention to small details and your bluebird box or trail will be successful.

**Why Use a Nest Cup?**

A nest cup can be a 4" plastic, cardboard, or molded wood fiber, also known as, "jiffy pots" or "peat pots" in garden and nursery stores. The nest cup acts as a template for the mother bluebird to weave her soft grass or pine needle nest inside. She can complete the nest in record time as less material is

needed. The cup acts as a moisture barrier if wind and rain blows into the box. The cup does not allow an egg to get pushed up onto the brim of the nest away from incubation and prevents that egg from rolling out when the door is opened for monitoring. Eggs do not get pushed down into a spongy, bulky nest away from incubation. Nest cups are reusable from year to year.



Wood fiber nest cup with a Bluebird Nest in it.

For the monitor removing the nest for a weekly check is quite simple. The eggs or chicks in the nest cup may be lifted out, viewed, photographed and returned to the box in just a few seconds without moving one blade of grass or pine needle. By removing the entire nest cup, a good look can be made for ants and earwigs under the nest.

When monitoring bluebird boxes regularly and peering into the darkness of the box to count the number of eggs and chicks, it can be a daunting task. Wouldn't it be nice to pull out the whole nest cup and contents to examine in the light of day?

Sometimes even bluebirds make a skimpy nest and lay eggs before the nest is fully finished. The result could be that eggs fall through the loosely woven nest and possibly roll out. Or nestlings could also



fall out when the door is opened; chicks could get their legs and wings pinched when the door is closed. A nest cup precludes these problems.

The nest cup provides a circular wall that protects the eggs and chicks even if the nest is shallow. The cup surrounds the chicks keeping them free from drafts. When the nestlings have fledged the nest cup can easily be cleaned and replaced in the box. The North Carolina Bluebird Society website, [www.ncbluebird.org](http://www.ncbluebird.org), says it most succinctly in the Monitoring Tips section: #7. "Use a molded wood fiber nest cup in nest boxes to facilitate nest building as well as monitoring activities."

### Perches

Another important consideration often overlooked is that bluebirds need convenient perching places in the general vicinity of their nests. These can be tomato stakes or green metal garden posts 6 feet off the ground and within 15 to 20 feet of their box.

You may have small pine trees, fences, a swing set, or utility lines that provide this perching. But if you have a yard or pasture devoid of any type perch within 10–20 yards of the box, this is a problem for the bluebirds especially the male.



Bluebirds obtain most of their food by scanning the ground from these overhead perches. Whenever a suitable insect is spotted the bluebird will drop to the ground, seize its prey, and return to the same or another perch. At least one such perch should be within a close distance to the box.

During the incubation period particularly, the male bluebird will use such a perch for standing guard over his mate and her nest. As a sentinel for the nest box, he wants to perch close to the box within 15-20 feet to have a “presence”. He will furiously attack any other bird or animal that shows any interest in his nesting box.

I love to watch a male bluebird “dive bomb” a blue jay right off the nest box roof. The male bluebird will take on a much larger bird with a vengeance. I have seen a male bluebird swoop down and drive a squirrel off a tree 10 feet away when the squirrel was just too close for comfort.

Favorite perches are the lower dead branches of trees from about 8 to 12 feet above the ground. Bluebirds have remarkably keen eyesight and have no trouble spotting tiny insects on the ground from high perches. Mountain Bluebirds are less dependent on lookout perches than Eastern and Western Bluebirds. Mountain Bluebirds are masters of the art of hovering and they can scan vast areas of ground for food.

### **Automated Wildlife Feeders**

Bird lovers throughout the US feed millions of pounds of birdseed, nuts, and suet in their backyards each year. It is a fantastic winter hobby as they can enjoy watching birds come to their feeding stations and photograph those winter visitors. To supplement the songbirds during inclement weather and when there is an icy coating on all fruits and berries is a life-saving gift.

If you live in the northern part of the US or in Canada, don't forget to feed the birds when you

take a one or two week vacation to a sunny warm location. While you are enjoying a southern climate the birds are still dealing with harsh winter conditions.

Purchase a 5 gallon wildlife feeder (American Hunter Wildlife Feeder) that is controlled with a 12 volt battery and small motor. It has a timer that can be set for two feedings a day (9AM and 3PM) and it spins a table for 10 secs to disperse the birdseed and meal worms each day you are away. You will make a difference by helping the songbirds survive winter in your area. It will make you feel good knowing you did something extra for the birds!



Automated Wildlife Feeder



Thank you for reading this book. I hope you have gained some new ideas and techniques on how to have more fun with bluebirds.

I would like to close with the words of Dorene Scriven, author of *Bluebird Trails – A Guide to Success*, 1999.

“We hope this book will entice those who had never even thought of being “caught” by bluebirds.

Be forewarned:  
once you have attracted that first beautiful devoted pair of bluebirds,  
you are trapped! Your life will change!  
You will be beguiled by their beauty, their courtship,  
and their loving care of their young.

The “time you couldn’t spare” will be spent watching them,  
worrying about them, constantly improving your trail, moving your boxes,  
solving problems, outwitting predators,  
and boasting to anyone who will listen that you have helped bring  
“your own” beautiful blue thrushes into a better world!”

~Dorene Scriven



A pair of Bluebirds on a Dogwood Tree