

Bluebirds

You're probably asking why he is writing about bluebirds in January when everyone knows that most of the birds don't arrive at wildwood until spring. I'm hoping that this article will peak your interest enough that you can use the slack winter months to build some bluebird boxes and have them ready to set out by early **(last week of March)** spring nesting time. The male bluebirds stake out their territory and nesting cavity about April 1 at Wildwood.

There are a number of aspects of *birding*. Many people think of birding as simply bird watching. It is a delightful hobby and I will cover that aspect in a later article as Wildwood offers an excellent environmental opportunity for bird watching for enjoyment, both for adults and children. I will primarily dwell on the more critical and beneficial aspect of attracting birds, especially blue birds, for this article. I will cover insect control with other birds in a later article.

Wildwood was quite "wild" when we purchased our property 28 years ago. It had been logged off many years prior, perhaps 40 or more years. Many of our trees were relatively young. Consequently it wasn't prime habitat for insect hunters and secondary cavity nesting birds such as bluebirds, chickadees, and nuthatches. They are referred to as secondary cavity nesters because they cannot dig out their own cavities in tree trunks like woodpeckers do. Woodpeckers are excellent insect feeders but need old trees to nest in. Large black wood ants, grass hoppers, millers, and beetles were prolific on our property. Much was being made of the infestation from the Mountain Pine Beetle on the Front Range. The forest was turning brown along State Highway 85 around Bailey and up toward Kenosha pass. I had a fairly old ponderosa pine that was dying from what appeared to be beetle activity. Faye and I used to cut a lot of firewood by permit in the area national forests. A lot of the firewood that we harvested was beetle killed. So in addition to being a nuisance, insects and beetles were doing (and still are) a lot of damage to our area trees.

I have always had an intense interest in nature since childhood. In fact my early childhood dream was to be a forest ranger. I knew that attracting beneficial birds, as noted previously, would help to minimize some of the impact that the insects were causing. Therefore some of my earliest efforts to improve our land at Wildwood were to build cavity type bird houses. Within a few years, I had built and set out 22 bird houses of various types to specifically attract the insect eating birds that I mentioned above. This included specific boxes for bluebirds, chickadees and nuthatches as well as wood peckers such as: hairy, downy, yellow bellied sap suckers, and flickers.

Water for both drinking and bathing is a very important criteria for attracting birds that some overlook. Early on, I made an oval 3'x4'x3" deep bird bath out of concrete on top of a granite outcropping that is about 2' high. I sloped the sides so that the birds can drink easily from the side and wade down into the water to bath. They only like 2 or 3 inches of water to bath in. Birds like to feel safe and often post a lookout. The height of the bath aids in the lookout effort and gives them confidence. It is not unusual at all to see a dozen birds of various types bathing together in the early morning and evening.

The combination of both the boxes and bird bath endeavors has really paid off. We rarely see the beetles and other insects that were so prevalent in the early years.

We have an ideal habitat at wildwood for bluebirds. They like open grassy spaces with a few trees and shrubs. They will sit on low branches and shrubs and suddenly fly down on unsuspecting insects. Since they cannot dig out their own nesting cavities, they are easy to attract with homemade boxes that closely mimic cavities found in old and decaying trees. However they are very territorial and need about 300' between houses or hide one box from another. They don't like competition and the male may fly incessantly at a house window or vehicle mirror if the bluebird thinks that the reflection is an intruder on its territory. About the only thing that you can do is move the box to a different location.

I believe that my beneficial bird population reached a peak about 3 years ago. Almost every house was occupied with some species of bird. After that I started noticing a decline in the number of bluebirds in particular at the birdbath. And I started to notice several specific problems. One problem was that I had unintentionally encouraged one of our most serious threats to our birds by also building boxes for and attracting tree squirrels. I started finding many of my bluebird boxes unoccupied and the entrance holes enlarged by squirrels. Some of my boxes were even being occupied by the little rascals. At the same time my boxes were starting to deteriorate. I had made most of them out of cedar and redwood but they were about 20 plus years old. A few were torn completely off their posts. Faye and I snapped pictures of black bears at our bird feeder this summer. I realized then that we have had black bear predation in the past and I didn't know what was wrecking some of my boxes.

This is so critical that I started this summer on a two year project to start rebuilding (new and refurbishing) all of my boxes. I built ten new bluebird boxes this fall (per NABS North America Bluebird Society specs) and set them out so they are ready for the bluebirds when they arrive at Wildwood in late March. Even though I have been quite successful, I wanted to get input from other birders, so that the box dimensions and placement would have the highest probability of attracting bluebirds.

During my research I found that numerous organizations are quite active in restoring the generally declining population of bluebirds. My best sources of information is my own experience as well as on the web: nabluebirdsociety.org; audubon.org; also CWLD Colorado Wildlife Division, Jena Sanchez at 719-227-5204 or e-mail her at [www.jena.sanchez@state.co.us](mailto:jena.sanchez@state.co.us). We would enjoy hearing about your bluebird experiences and/or visit us next summer at our Wildwood home, 1555 Olympic Circle (filing2, Lot 274) and looking at our bluebird trail. Establishing a bluebird trail, and monitoring it, is an important aspect of *bluebirding*.

The optimum size of the mountain bluebird box should be approximately 5"x5"x9" high-inside dimensions. The opening should be (exactly) 1 and 9/16" in diameter and 7" above the floor. It should have a roof overhang of about 3" in front and an inch or so at the sides. Drill several ventilation holes at the top of the sides under the roof overhang. A squirrel guard can be made from cutting a 1 9/16" hole in a 3/4" thick piece of wood that is 3" square. Simply line up the 1 9/16" entrance holes and screw it in place. Make the box out of cedar, if possible, for longevity, although any untreated wood will do. Do not paint the inside. I leave mine with a natural look and don't paint them at all. The front (or side) should be made to pivot or hinge outward so that you can clean the box out each fall. Do not put a perch at the entrance hole. Bluebirds can't smell so you can check out the nest as well as the fledglings and the parent birds will not abandon the nest as we have been taught to believe. It is important to place your box about 5' above the ground. It should face an open area that the parent birds can use as their own private hunting territory. From close observation you will notice that they like to return to the box by first landing on a low perch 10 or 15 feet away. I even make a perch about 3' high and 10'-15' away from the front of the box if none are naturally available. I find it best to face the box easterly away from wind and rain. Also the early morning sun is cooler than the afternoon sun as it enters the opening. You can mount them on a wood post but predators (namely tree squirrels at wildwood) then can get at the eggs more easily unless you put a metal squirrel guard (cone or metal wrap) on the post. I like to mount most of mine on a metal Tee post. You can also grease a metal post to keep the predators out. I put an extra thickness of entrance wood on all my boxes now to guard against squirrels. I have included a side pivot bluebird box plan. You can make a front pivot door also. Please e-mail me if you have any questions. (To be continued in February article, "Wildwood Birds.")

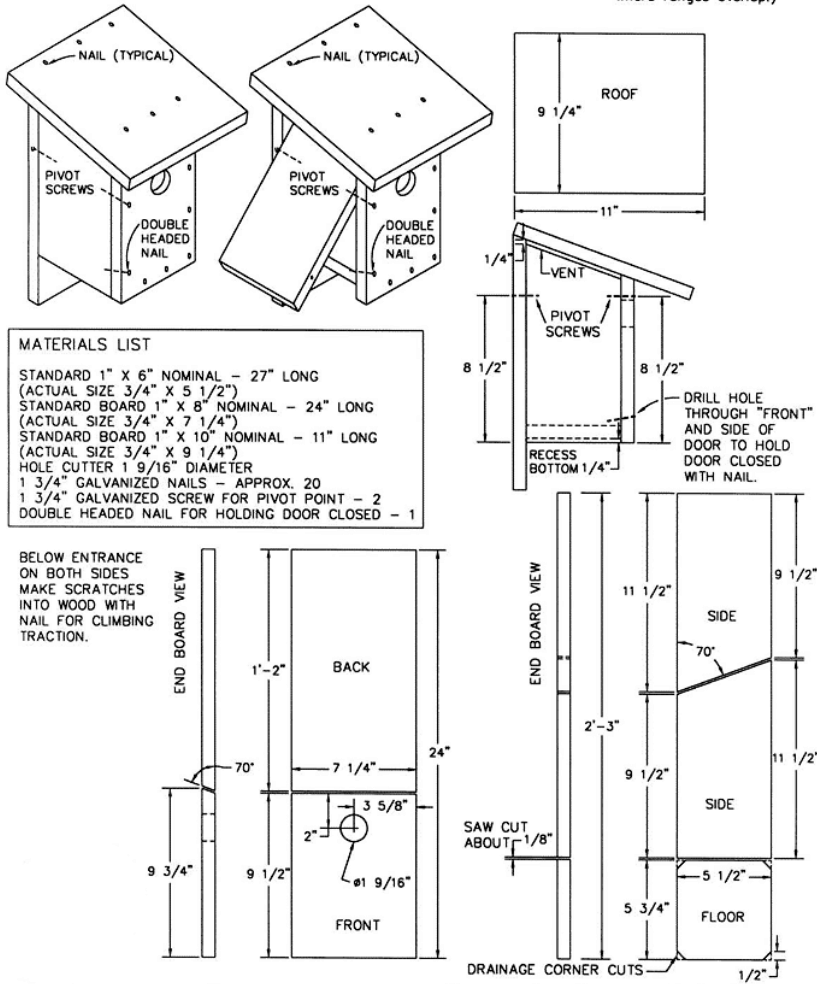
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Del and Bluebird Houses 2008

Bird Feeder and Bath

MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD NEST BOX (Western Bluebird also where ranges overlap.)



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