

Eastern Bluebird

Sialia sialis

If you spot “the bluebird of happiness” in the morning, luck follows you the rest of the day, the saying goes. Years ago that was easy—the Eastern bluebird with its regal blue plumage and sweet song flourished in North Carolina. Then populations plummeted in the 1950s and 1960s. People responded by building nest boxes and instituting other conservation efforts, and today the Eastern bluebird can easily be spotted again.

History and Status

More than a century ago, the Eastern bluebird was one of North Carolina’s most common songbirds. They flocked around farms as thick as sparrows and starlings now. They made nests in dead trees, between wooden fence posts and in mailboxes without flaps.

In the 1800s, the starling and house sparrow, two of the bluebird’s fiercest nest competitors, were introduced in the United States. Then in the early 1900s, small farms began to grow into bigger ones, and huge fields replaced the mixed habitat bluebirds required. Cities spread into suburbs. People bought metal fences and mailboxes that closed. Dead trees were cut for firewood.

But a series of harsh winters in the late 1950s and early 1960s hit the Eastern bluebird the hardest, leaving only 10 percent of a once-prolific population. Shocked, bird-watchers, garden clubs, school children and conservationists began placing wooden bird boxes where bluebirds might

nest. These efforts had a beneficial effect on Eastern bluebird populations, boosting their numbers and lifting the species out of danger.

Description

The male Eastern bluebird has bright blue upper parts, a rusty throat, breast and sides, and a white belly. The female’s coloring is similar, but duller. The bluebird’s average length is 7 inches.

Habitat and Habits

Eastern bluebirds prefer open or semi-open habitats with grassy areas and nearby woods. Farmyards, groves and even some residential areas provide suitable habitat. Bluebirds perch on trees, posts, power lines and even television antennas to search for insects, dropping to the ground to capture their prey. Occasionally they catch an insect in the air.

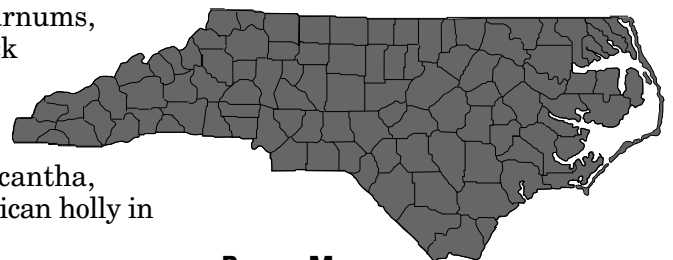
Bluebirds eat snails, spiders, earthworms and grasshoppers. They supplement their diet with berries, eating the fruits of plants such as viburnums, dogwoods, and black and pin cherry in the summer and fall; they eat berries of sumac, pyracantha, bayberry and American holly in the winter.

During winter, bluebirds roost in small flocks in pine tree stands

and nesting cavities to keep warm. They must eat constantly during the day to survive cold nights. When food is covered by snow and ice, as in the 1950s and 1960s, thousands die.

Around mid-February, bluebirds begin to return to breeding sites. As early as March, a male locates a nesting site and establishes a territory around it. Bluebirds are cavity nesters, building their nests in holes left by woodpeckers, or in a dead tree, a bird box or even a gourd.

Cavity nesting offers protection from weather and predators. The bluebird’s main predators are raccoons, cats, opossums and snakes. Members of the thrush family, bluebirds compete for nesting sites with other birds such as the house sparrow, the Carolina chickadee and the white-breasted nuthatch. During nesting, other birds raid bluebird nests for eggs and a place to raise their young. Bluebirds, too,



Range Map:
Found statewide ■

may banish chickadees and other species from their nests.

Once a male finds a suitable site, he flutters and sings "chur-wee, chur-wee" to attract his mate for the season. Once she arrives, she must accept the site. If she does, she begins to build a neat cup of dry grasses or pine needles. Nest building takes about 10 days.

After the young have hatched, the mother bluebird stays in the nest for the first few days to keep her young warm, and the male feeds them. Later, both parents feed the nestlings with soft insects, then coarser foods as they grow. The young grow quickly, leaving the nest 17 to 18 days after hatching. The parents care for the young and teach them how to catch their own food. The male takes over this job when the female begins her next nest. Young bluebirds from the first brood may stay and help with subsequent broods.

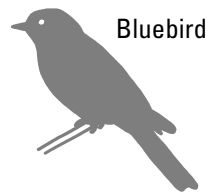
After the nesting season, bluebirds leave the area as a flock, then roam the region for food. The majority of North Carolina's Eastern bluebirds do not migrate, but are joined by migrant bluebirds from the north in the fall.

Range and Distribution

Eastern bluebirds can be found throughout North Carolina. However, they are rarely seen along the barrier islands or in higher mountains. In North America, they breed from lower Canada south to Florida and Texas, and are found from the Atlantic Coast west to the base of the Rocky Mountains in Montana, Wyoming and Colorado.

People Interactions

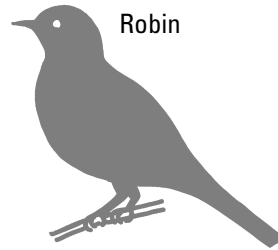
Development and habitat changes continue to threaten this delicate songbird. Once, DDT and other insecticides killed the insects that bluebirds fed on and, in many cases, killed the birds, too. (See the profile of the peregrine falcon,



Bluebird



Warbler



Robin

in set 6, for more about the effects of DDT on birds.) Farms continue to become housing developments, leaving bluebirds less room to breed. Many birdwatchers, aware of the bluebird's plight, have been active across the state in establishing nest boxes. Their efforts, and those of other groups, have helped maintain healthier Eastern bluebird populations in recent years.

References

Ehrlich, Paul; David S. Dobkin and Darryl Wheye. *The Birder's Handbook* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1988).

Potter, Eloise F. et al. *Birds of the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Credits

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EASTERN BLUEBIRD

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Average Size

7 in. long

Food

Insects and berries

Breeding

Male selects site in an existing cavity, female approves it and builds nest. A pair mates in early spring and remains together throughout the season, producing two or three broods. The first brood appears between April 15 and May 15. A second hatching takes place between June 1 and July 25. And often a third occurs from August 1 to 15.

Young

Average clutch size is three to four eggs. Incubation period is 13 to 14 days. Nestlings remain in nest about 17 days after hatching. Fledglings stay with parents a short time and sometimes help with subsequent broods.

Life Expectancy

As other songbirds, about 2 years.