



PHOTO: ISTOCK.COM/STEVBYLAND

A pair of Eastern Bluebirds.

Bringing Back Bluebirds

WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF European starlings and house sparrows in the 19th century, Eastern bluebirds faced fierce competition for food and shelter that led to population declines until the development of bluebird trails in the 1960s and 1970s.

“When I came to Barrington in 1974, one of the first things I did was to nail a bluebird nest box to a small oak in our front yard at the edge of a Cook County Forest Preserve,” said Conservationist Wendy Paulson. “Others told me that it was for naught: bluebirds had left the area years before.”

Contrary to the naysayers, a pair of Eastern Bluebirds found the box and began to raise a family until a raccoon tore off the roof and took the brood. “It was several years before bluebirds showed up at our place again,” Paulson said, “but those were the years when a movement was growing to re-establish the Eastern Bluebird east of the Mississippi!”

Citizens for Conservation (CFC) began monitoring bluebird nesting boxes over 30 years ago and continues to maintain bluebird trails at Flint Creek

Savanna, Grigsby Prairie, and Baker’s Lake Savanna. “Volunteers walk each trail at least weekly from April through August, taking inventory of nest activity, from observing parent bluebirds scouting for nest sites in the early spring to nest building, egg counting, and observing the fledging of the young bluebirds,” CFC’s Barbara Laughlin-Karon explained. Because bluebirds may have more than one brood per season, monitors must be vigilant.

At the South Barrington Conservancy, volunteers began monitoring 10 bluebird nesting boxes about two years ago and have successfully hosted two bluebird families amid neighboring tree swallows.

“What is especially encouraging 45 years after we first welcomed bluebirds to a nest box is that many are now nesting in natural cavities,” says Paulson. “I see more and more Eastern Bluebirds active where there are no boxes nearby, often entering and exiting holes in trees and fence posts.” While it was the invasive species introduced by humans that threatened their future, the continued recovery of this gem of the skies depends on us. 

Helpful Tips

- Learn from hands-on experience as a bluebird monitoring volunteer. Contact Citizen for Conservation 847-381-SAVE or Diane Bodkin at bodkind@comcast.net.
- Make or purchase an untreated wood house designed specifically for bluebirds or leave standing dead trees or decaying fence posts (when safe to do). Avoid houses with an entrance opening greater than 1½.” (According to NestWatch, starlings can fit into holes 1 9/16”!) Wendy Paulson replaced the bluebird nest box that had been sabotaged by a raccoon with a Peterson house on a pole encased in a PVC sheath to deter future predators, then added more boxes over time.
- Limit the use of yard chemicals for the removal of invasive trees and shrubs, as insects are a primary source of food for bluebirds.

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