



BAYOU BLUEBIRD NEST NEWS

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WELCOME! NESTING SEASON 2016!!





From The Perch

By:

Emily Winners
President

Photo By:

Emily Winners

Recently, while checking wood duck boxes, I realized that the original locations I had chosen for them were not so ideal anymore. Small trees and vines not there six years ago had grown up with limbs overhanging the boxes, leaving them vulnerable to climbing predators. While we all mount our nestboxes with obvious predators like cats, coons, and snakes in mind, there are a few things many of us may overlook when deciding on box placement. Below are a few things to consider when erecting your boxes.

Try to place your boxes away from crops or areas that are sprayed for pests. While this may not be a problem early in the nesting season, it could affect subsequent nestings. If spraying your own yard, consider the use of an alternate form of pest control. Only one of the boxes on our trail has been affected by poisoning, but how heartbreaking it was to find the box full of dead nestlings.

If it is necessary to place boxes near a roadway, do not face the entrance hole toward the road. Both adults and fledglings first leaving the nest are at risk of being hit by passing motorists. Do face the entrance away from or parallel to the road.

Nestboxes should be placed 100 to 125 yards apart and out of sight of each other. Each pair needs this much space to forge on to feed their young and food for themselves. They will compete with each other.
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Welcome New LBBS Member

LBBS welcomes Tesa McManus, Rayville, LA as our newest member. She is a great lover of birds and I've watched her follow the posts on the NABS and Bluebird-L Face Book Forums. She purchased a two year membership and received two boxes that she installed and is ready for the season to begin. Good luck, Tesa!

A Nestbox Restrictor as a Management Tool for Eastern Bluebirds

Theodore W. Gutzke

Introduction

The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) is probably one of the most studied and managed passerines in North America today. Literally thousands of nestboxes are provided for not only the eastern species, but the Western Bluebird (*S. Mexicana*) and Mountain Bluebird (*S. currocoides*) as well. Nestboxes are commonly situated along a trail so that many can be monitored in a short time. (Lane 1980; Musselman 1934; Zeleny 1976)

Bluebirds will usually fledge 18-20 days after hatching (Pinkowski 1974a); however, this time can be reduced to as little as 15 days if nest disturbance occurs. Problems arise when a nestbox is checked or nestlings are banded at the wrong time, i.e. 15-20 days after hatching. Nestling bluebirds may fledge prematurely when disturbed prior to attaining enough development to fly adequately. This often results in young birds spending the first few days on the ground, which increases the chance of mortality from adverse weather conditions or predation (Pinkowski 1974a; Zeleny 1976).

An established way of reducing the possibility of premature fledging is to inspect nestboxes and band nestlings at 12-14 days of age. At this time, sex can be determined by the amount of blue on the remiges (Pinkowski 1974a) and the young are usually not developed enough to fledge. However, this time is not always possible and visits to an active nest after 14 days often occur, resulting in a high potential for premature fledging and mortality.

While conducting studies of the Eastern Bluebird during 1981 nesting season, I made daily visits to active nests, aware that these visits would eventually create enough disturbance to cause premature fledging. In an attempt to keep the young in the nest until they were developed enough to fly,

various devices were experimented with to inhibit exit yet not obstruct parental feeding. A small portable nestbox restrictor that fulfilled both of these criteria was developed.

Materials and Methods

A nestbox restrictor is constructed using a 2 inch (5 cm) square piece of 1/4 inch (6 mm) plyboard. A 1 inch (25 mm) hole is drilled in the center, and holes are drilled at each corner to accommodate 1/2 inch x No. 3 wood screws. The device is attached to the outside of an active nestbox entrance hole when nest disturbance may cause premature fledging. Nestling bluebirds are inhibited from exiting the box until the restrictor is removed by the trail operator, usually after the age of 16 days when the birds are developed enough to fledge properly.

Results and Discussion

The nestbox restrictor worked very well, not allowing enough clearance at the entrance hole for nestlings to pass through. The device was attached to nestboxes when nestlings were 16 days old (hatch date being day 0). At day 19, the restrictor was removed and the young allowed to fledge, which usually occurred within one-half hour.

The nestbox restrictor was used on 11 active boxes containing a total of 41 nestlings during the spring and summer of 1981. Eight of these boxes with 30 nestlings were visited daily and were used as experimental nests. The remaining three boxes had nestbox restrictors attached after the banding of nestlings was completed and the birds were more than 15 days old (Jung 1979). The restrictors were left on nestboxes for a minimum of one and a maximum of three days and were then removed. In each instance the nestlings had developed enough during their confinement so that they were able to fledge without difficulty. Initial

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flights covered linear distances of 50 meters or more, but vertical flights were directed to an adjacent tree to a height of about 10 meters. These flights were very strong compared with those of prematurely fledged birds, which often fall to the ground or fly short distances of only one or two meters.

I observed the reaction of numerous adult pairs to the restrictor; their behavioral characteristics were all similar. The initial response was confusion, followed by a temporary reduction in feeding frequency.

Typically, the male and female would land separately on the front of the nestbox with food, look around for approximately 10 seconds, then attempt to enter. They would struggle for two or three seconds, rest, and try again. After two or three attempts, they would fly to a nearby perch or the top of the box. Occasionally, they would flutter around the entire nestbox, observing all sides as if looking for the proper entrance, then attempt to enter the box again. Eventually, the food item was passed through the restrictor either by the adult sticking its head into the box or by the nestling putting its head out.

Nest sanitation was not a serious problem. The restrictor did not allow adult birds to enter the nest and remove the fecal sacs. However, the nestlings would defecate in the corners of the nestbox rather than throughout the nest, which tended to keep the nest uncluttered. This is similar to the situation with undisturbed nests, where adults may neglect nest sanitation the last day or two prior to the fledging of the young (Zeleny, pers.comm.).

A weight loss was noted for most of the 30 nestlings that were in experimental boxes. This ranged from 0 to 4 grams (mean 1.6 SD 0.97). Part of this loss was probably due to the existence of the restrictor, which tended to reduce the feeding frequency of the adults. However, a weight loss was noted *before* the restrictor

was attached. Pinowski (1975) observed a similar decline in weights of unrestricted nestlings after day 12 and up day 16, but did not weight nestlings thereafter.

A natural weight loss may take place prior to fledging as a result of reduced feeding. A lighter fledgling is probably better adapted for its first flight than a heavy one. Less bulk would make flight easier. The weight loss may also be due to the fact that nestlings have attained 90% of their adult weight by day 12 yet feather development rather than body weight. This is quite possible as Pinowski (1975) observed feather development up to 35 days of age.

I must stress that the best procedure is not to disturb nestling bluebirds after day 14. However, when this becomes necessary, a nestbox restrictor is an excellent device for preventing premature fledging. In most cases the device should remain on the box no longer than one day. My experience has been that removing the restrictor the next day, after the young have settled down, will lead to a resumption of normal nest activity. Trail operators must be very careful when using this technique. A restrictor left on a nestbox too long has a very high potential for nestling mortality, defeating the purpose of its use. Extreme care must be used at all times.

Summary

A simple nestbox restrictor was developed and used successfully to inhibit nestling bluebirds from exiting boxes prior to attaining adequate flight feather development. Restrictors were attached when nestlings were 16 days of age or when age was estimated at 15 days or more and were retained for one to three days or until and estimated age of 19 days. Although parent birds continued to feed
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nestlings, a slight weight loss was noted. This did not hamper eventual fledging, which was stronger in birds from restricted boxes than from those fledging prematurely.

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Sialia The Quarterly Journal About Bluebirds, Volume 5, Number 1, Winter 1983

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other and the fledging rate is not as successful.

4) Placing your boxes in high traffic areas may draw unwanted human attention. Boxes may be destroyed with baseball bats, shot at, or stolen. Place your boxes off the beaten path, away from parking areas, road intersections, or dirt bike and ATV trails.

sometimes go a long way when dealing with vandals. Distributing flyers, explaining why trails are important, encouraging people to “adopt” a box, or having local media such as newspaper or radio do a story on your efforts can all have a positive impact on your bluebird trail.

Please feel free to e-mail me at emilywinners@msn.com with any stories, comments or suggestions. Wishing you all a productive 2016 nesting season!

Emily

A Bird in the Bush

Recently, a reader from North Carolina wrote to tell us of a planting of Bush Honeysuckle, also known as Tatarian Honeysuckle (*Kibucera tataruca*). She reported that when the red fruits appear, “the bluebirds love to feed them to their newly-fledged babies.”

Tatarian Honeysuckle, a native of southern Russia, is often recommended for wildlife plantings, and it has been widely planted in the United States for this purpose. However, in *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K Terres, a discussion of poisonous plants notes that birds have been known to be poisoned by consuming the fruits of Tatarian Honeysuckle. Apparently, a substance in the fruit, saponin, acts as an anesthetic and muscle poison. Although deaths of birds which have fed on these fruits are reportedly uncommon, saponin is capable of killing by cardiac paralysis. More often, birds that have consumed quantities of this fruit are described as being “inebriated” or “stupefied”, leaving them vulnerable to predation. It is not known how common such problems are, and surely birds have eaten small quantities of the fruit without suffering ill effects; however, we

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would like our readers to be aware of the potential for problems.

Article used with permission from *Sialia*, The Quarterly Journal Of North American Bluebird Society, Volume 10, Number 1, Winter 1988

Dealing With House Sparrows



The Sparrow Spooker is one of the best things invented since sliced bread. The one pictured above is a home made one that we made in a big hurry. Often times, that is when they are needed most. We made several to have on hand for just such a situation.

The Sparrow Spooker is not intended as the only tool to be used for House Sparrow (HOSP) control, but to protect eggs, parents and babies while they are in the box until you can manage to make your nestbox site HOSP free.

The Sparrow Spooker is placed on the box *after* the first egg is laid. It is rare for the female to abandon as she has bonded with the egg. In most cases, the HOSP will not come near the box and the female and male will quickly accept it. When babies fledge, take it off and wait until the next clutch is started and repeat. That keeps te HOSP from getting used to it being there.

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Tips For Landlords Dealing With Competition From Bluebirds And Other Cavity-Nesting Birds

Paula Ziebarth

1) ALL Purple Martin (PUMA) compartments should be blocked off or stored for the winter when PUMA are in South America. The reason this is important is because other birds may remain in your area during winter months and establish themselves in the PUMA housing. House Sparrows and European Starlings (both non-native) are a bigger problem for me than our native cavity nesters, but Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows and even House Wrens can claim housing if you leave it open. I don't know if you have all these birds nesting in southern or any other states, but we do here in Ohio. Different species have different territory requirements and tolerance of other birds within that territory. An aggressive Eastern Bluebird can easily chase your PUMA off if you let them.

2) Keep track of PUMA migration at: <https://www.purplemartin.org/research/8/scout-arrival-study/>

Only put your housing up or open up compartments when PUMA arrive back in your area. If you are starting a new colony, you will be attracting the later arriving birds (subadults) a couple weeks after the first mature adults arrive in your area. Those first mature adults are just coming through, on their way to the nest site they used last year (if successful). Don't jump the gun and open up compartments too soon.

3) Purple Martin Conservation Association recommends "For bluebirds and Tree Swallows offer a single-unit gourd or nestbox with a 1-1/2" opening. Place the housing 30-50 feet away from the martin housing on a post with a predator guard. Place the housing so that the entrance is about 5' above ground, with the entrance facing the martin housing." Good advice. Since Eastern Bluebirds will defend a territory roughly 100 yards from their nest box in all directions, enticing these birds to nest in sight of your rig (or rigs) will keep other Bluebirds out of your PUMA housing as the established pair will chase off any competitor Bluebirds that come within 100 yards of their nest box, effectively keeping all other Bluebirds out of your PUMA rig. They will also help as sentinels to guard PUMA rig from depredation by mammals or avian threats.

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Purple Martin Landlords Dealing With Bluebirds and Other Cavity-Nesting Birds

4) After Eastern Bluebirds have accepted nest box, THEN open your PUMA housing. If Bluebirds show up after PUMA housing is opened up and you see them going in there, block off all PUMA entrances, effectively driving them to use that nest box. Then open PUMA housing when they are established.

5) Proper monitoring of your PUMA racks every 5 - 7 days will allow you to easily tell if a bird is starting a nest that is not a PUMA. You can place Bluebird nest start in your nest box and block the gourds/housing until they accept new box (should accept it right away if you have properly designed nest box).

6) If you are dealing with House Sparrows or European Starlings, and House Sparrows take that nest box, I would recommend active control of these non-native birds as they will take over a PUMA rig and often kill native cavity nesting bird adults/young/eggs.

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Dealing With House Sparrows

There are many versions of the home made Sparrow Spooker and you can use your imagination. Anything that is shiny and dangles above the roof top will work. You can order one at: <http://www.sparrowtraps.net/cgi-bin/shopper.cgi?preadd=action&key=USS>

Rebecca Perere's , Walker, LA, home made Sparrow Spooker on the right was made in a huge hurry out of a coat hanger and strips of foil. She was diligent in her work to make it safe for the female and her eggs and it worked beautifully.



Rebecca and Robert Perere, Walker, LA picture of the home made Sparrow Spooker they constructed in a hurry. The coat hanger attaches in the vent underneath the roof and did the job!



Photo: By Bet Zimmerman Smith's website used with permission. Photo of a purchased Sparrow Spooker.

Bet has a wonderful website addressing all aspects of monitoring native-cavity birds. The site below gives wonderful information addressing the use of the Sparrow Spooker:

<http://www.sialis.org/sparrowspooker.htm>

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