

# TOP TEN TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL BLUEBIRDING



Photo by Lois Nissen

*Sustaining Bluebirds for  
Future Generations!*

## 1) COMMITMENT

Commit to opening and checking the contents of your nest boxes AT LEAST once a week during the nesting season. Keep written records of what you find. Weekly checking identifies problems and determines the success or failure of each location to attract and fledge bluebirds.

**DO NOT INSTALL NEST BOXES IF YOU CANNOT MAKE THIS COMMITMENT.**

## 2) HABITAT

Select habitat in an open area, at least 300 feet from brush. Place the nest box in **short** or **mowed grass** with nearby perching sites: overhead wires, pasture fencing, or a standing dead tree. Bluebirds prefer high ground rather than wetland areas.

## 3) THE RIGHT NEST BOXES

Select a durable, waterproof nest box. The ideal size for a round entrance hole is 1 9/16 inch. The box **must** be easy to open for regular checking and cleaning. The Bluebird Recovery Program of Minnesota (BBRP) recommends the Gilbertson PVC, Gilwood and the Peterson boxes. All boxes should be installed with proper mounting.

## 4) PROPER MOUNTING

First, have the site checked for underground utilities. BBRP recommends mounting nest boxes on 1/2" metal electrical conduit over 1/2" rebar. The entrance hole should be 5 to 6 feet above the ground facing a tree, **not** a road or highway. To eliminate climbing predators, **never** mount on trees, fences, wooden posts or steel fence posts without baffles.

## 5) SPACING

Place nest boxes at least 1000 feet apart. Overloading an area with nest boxes may result in increased populations of competitive birds such as house wrens and tree swallows. This can cause problems in future years.

## 6) WELCOME CHICKADEES AND TREE SWALLOWS

Allow nest boxes to be used by native cavity nesters, such as black-capped chickadees and tree swallows. If tree swallows are competing with bluebirds, try **pairing** two nest boxes 10-15 feet apart, with at least 1000 feet to the next pair.

## 7) Dealing with house SPARROWS & HOUSE WRENS

The nests and eggs of **House Sparrows** **must** be removed. House sparrows are not native to this country and are an enemy of the bluebirds. **If you cannot deal with house sparrows, do not install bluebird nest boxes.** Avoid placing boxes where house sparrows are abundant—near livestock farms or within cities. The PVC nest box is the most sparrow resistant. **To avoid possible retaliation, do not remove the sparrow nest if bluebirds are nesting in the paired nest box until bluebirds have fledged.** **House wrens** have become a problem for all cavity nesting birds. These sweet-singing little birds poke holes in other birds' eggs, carry out nestlings and take over nest boxes by filling them with sticks. Even though they may not be desirable, wrens are protected and should not be harmed. Avoid brushy areas where house wrens are likely to reside.

**DO NOT PLACE BLUEBIRD NEST BOXES IN HOUSE WREN HABITAT.**

## 8) NEST CHECKS

Open the nest boxes weekly to check contents until the nestlings are 12 days old. Check after a heavy rain for wet nests, which can be replaced with dry grass. Keep blowfly larvae out of the box. Remove a dead nestling immediately. Remove old nests after young have fledged, and before the second nesting begins. After the nesting season, if house sparrows are in the area, leave the door of wooden boxes open and close the entrance hole of PVC boxes. This practice also eliminates mice from inhabiting the boxes during the winter months. Mice can carry the Hantavirus that can be a deadly viral infection to humans. In spring, open PVC holes and close doors on wooden boxes mid to late March in Minnesota.

## 9) KEEP BLUEBIRDS SAFE

Volunteer to help move, remove or remount boxes that are poorly placed and/or improperly mounted. **This may be as important as installing new boxes to help the bluebird population.** Boxes mounted on trees, wooden posts or steel fence posts without baffles provide easy access for raccoons and cats. Boxes in trees, in wetland areas and by livestock farms produce mostly competitors of bluebirds such as house wrens, tree swallows and house sparrows.

## 10) REPORT YOUR RESULTS

Send your nesting season's results to the Bluebird Program of MN at [www.bbpMN.org](http://www.bbpMN.org) who will share the year-end results on its website. Share your experiences and encourage others to follow these **TOP TEN TIPS** so bluebirds will be here for **future** generations. Become a member and support the Bluebird Program of MN at [www.bbpMN.org](http://www.bbpMN.org).



Descriptive  
nesting histories  
of possible  
bluebird nest  
box occupants



Photo by Lois Nissen



Photo by Pat Ready



Photo by Pat Ready



Photo by Dick Peterson



Photo by Pat Ready

	Nesting	BLUEBIRDS	CHICKADEES	TREE SWALLOWS	HOUSE SPARROWS (enemy of the bluebird)	HOUSE WRENS (enemy of the bluebird)
Dates	Earliest arrival —Southern MN	Late February	Permanent Resident	Mid March	Permanent Resident	Late March
	Earliest arrival —Northern MN	Early March	Permanent Resident	Mid—Late March	Permanent Resident	Late March
	Peak Arrival	Mid—Late March	Permanent Resident	Mid—Late April	Permanent Resident	April--May
	Breeding Season	Early April—Early Aug.	Late March—Mid May	Mid May—Late June	Late March—Early Aug.	Late May—Mid July
	Peak Departure	Late Sept.—Nov.	Permanent Resident	Mid Aug.—Sept.	Permanent Resident	Early Sept.
Nesting Habitat:	Location of nests (in natural habitat)	Open country with scattered trees to wood borders, near mowed or sparsely covered ground	Forests & woodlands in holes made by themselves or a woodpecker. Commonly only a few feet off the ground.	Partly open country with old or dead trees, often near water	Holes and crevices anywhere, especially by buildings	Open woodlands, wood borders, shrub-lands, farmlands and suburbs up to 200 feet from cover
	Male claims nest with	Grass (1-6 weeks before nesting)	Moss, plant fibers or hair	Grass and feathers	Grass, feathers or his feces	Twigs with spider egg cases
	Nest building material used	Dry grass, weed stems, occasionally pine needles, lined with finer grass, maybe a fine small feather	Hair, fur, soft plant fibers, cocoons, moss and feathers	Dry grass, occasionally straw, cattails or pine needles, lined with feathers (usually white)	Long coarse grass stems with seed heads. weeds. feathers and or trash	Twigs with spider egg cases occasionally stems, leaves and fibers lined with fine grass, feathers, hair or bark strips
	Size / Shape	Neatly built with 2-3 inch cup	2-3 inch cup with moss base (incomplete clutches are covered with hair)	Loosely built with large shallow cup, feathers upright curving over eggs	Large untidy dome with side entrance to deep space with little or no bottom	Bulky base of twigs, nearly filling box with small deep cup at top rear
	Builder & days taken to build	Female In 4-11 days male giving little help	Female In 3-4 days male giving no help	Female In 14-21 days male giving little help	Male In 1+ days female giving little help	Male base in 8-10 days female lining in 4 days
Eggs	Color	Blue or sometimes white Glossy	White with brown specks	White Non-Glossy	Cream with brown spots	Pink with rust specks
	Total Number Laid	3 - 7	5 - 13	4 - 8	3 - 8	5 - 12
	Incubation period	12 - 18 days	12 - 14 days	13 - 16 days	10 - 14 days	12 - 15 days
Do Not Disturb After	(disturbing could cause premature fledging)	12 Days	12 Days	15 Days	Remove & destroy eggs before they hatch!!	9 Days
	Total Days in Nest	17 - 18 (15 - 20 possible)	15 - 16	20 - 21 (16-24 possible)	15 - 16 (14-17 possible)	16 - 17 (12-18 possible)
	Number of broods	2 (3 possible)	1 (2 possible)	1 (2 rarely)	2 - 3 (4 possible)	1 - 2 (3 possible)

Information originally compiled by Rosanne Pankonin & Dan Newbauer. Revised 2004 by J. Ahlgren to add Chickadee information. Revised 2012 Fern Vesledahl



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