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# The Bluebird Flyer

Newsletter of the Michigan Bluebird Society

## "Bluebird-Scaping" Your Property

By Kurt Hagemeister

Whenever I do bluebird talks for groups, I always try to explain the concept of creating a habitat that will attract bluebirds – potentially year-round. This means coming up with a comprehensive approach that provides everything bluebirds may be looking for in our yards. Sure, I spend a lot of time talking about nest boxes. They are still the fastest way to get results and attract bluebirds in most situations. But that is just one of the things bluebirds are looking for.

Bluebirds, like all birds, are searching for four main things in their daily lives: **nesting sites, water, food, and shelter/protection.** If your goal is to have bluebirds around all the time, these are the four



elements you must provide. From the time I moved into our current home on 2½ acres 18 years ago, I've been trying to "bluebird-scape" our yard. In this article I'd like to share some of the experience I've gained over that time. Some lessons came the hard way, but the birds have taught me a lot!

**Nest Boxes** – This is still your #1 way to attract bluebirds quickly. I've tried almost every kind of nest box and have gotten the best results from the Gilbertson PVC box, Gilwood box, and Peterson house, but this doesn't mean these are the only boxes that will work.

The most important factor is the specific location of the box in your habitat. Bluebirds are looking for a place to nest where they will be successful.

One tip is to not overdo it with the number

of boxes. More is not better. More boxes can encourage additional competition from wrens and House Sparrows. Keep in mind that bluebird pairs typically need one to two acres of open habitat to raise their young. If you have ¾ of an acre, you are not likely to have more than one pair of birds nesting at a time.

**Water** – Bluebirds are part of the thrush family (like robins), and this family of birds loves to drink and bathe in water. Therefore, you need to put out one or more birdbaths that have a flat bottom with a rough surface. Water depth should not exceed 1½ inches. If the bath is deeper than that, place some large, flat rocks in it to vary the depth.

Bluebirds, if in your area during winter, will come to baths during the cold months, too. You can put out heated birdbaths to keep the water ice-free. No matter what time of year it is, though, make SURE to clean the bath frequently and keep it filled with fresh water.

**Natural Food** – Planting shrubs, trees, and other plants that provide food for bluebirds is an important way of bringing them into your yard and keeping them around. Natural food can be berries or insects. Bluebirds eat both in quantities that depend upon the time of year. The key here is variety. The greater variety of plantings you provide, the greater variety of insects that will be attracted. Insects, in turn, will attract many species of birds.

*(Continued on page 6)*

Plan to Attend  
Our  
**FALL  
FESTIVAL**

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**Saturday,  
October 15**

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See page 8 for details

**We Need Your  
2016 Nesting  
Data**

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See page 3 for details

**Don't Let Your  
Membership  
Expire!**

Please note that your MBS membership expiration month/year is indicated on the address label on this newsletter. Make sure to send in your renewal payment by that date. Remember, your membership dues support bluebird education and conservation.

## From the President's Perch

By Kurt Hagemeister



I hope everyone has been having a very good nesting season and that you've been keeping cool during this hot summer.

My property here in Ann Arbor has seen a relatively good bluebird season. With only five boxes, I've produced three broods of young bluebirds plus one large family of Tree Swallows. As I write this in early July,

the last brood of three has just hatched. It's also been a very prodigious year for House Wrens, something I'm not as excited about. Fortunately, though, they have managed to "behave themselves" pretty much this year and left the bluebirds and swallows alone.

Even though it's well into the summer now, don't assume that all your bluebirds are done with nesting. You should still be checking your boxes for active nests. Although it is highly unlikely bluebirds would start any nests this late, it's very possible they are still finishing up raising young. Once the bluebirds are done, it's best to clean out nest boxes for the season. I believe in washing them with a garden hose and brush before storing them for winter.

After you're done with nesting season, make sure to fill out your **End-of-Season Nesting Report** and send it to the MBS. It's fast and easy and helps us to see trends in bluebird nesting so we can make better determinations of where people may be needing help in managing their nest boxes. We've inserted the report form in this newsletter. You can also download a PDF copy of the report from our website. Finally, a new innovation this year is an Excel form you can fill out on your computer and e-mail to us – using no paper at all!

As an addicted bird nut, I get lots of bird-related publications. One of the best is *Living Bird* from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. In the summer issue, there was a very interesting article titled "The State of North America's Birds." The article tells about a new study of compiled data from a variety of different conservation groups that assess the relative abundance and status of all 1,154 bird species in Canada, the continental U.S. and Mexico. The report categorizes birds into main breeding habitats and assigns a "Concern Score" for each species that is a relative level of that bird's conservation status. The scores range from five (Robins and House Wrens) to 20 (California Condor).

In assessing the report data, it's noted that 37% of the 1,154 bird species are on the watch list as being in need of urgent conservation. Generally, these were birds with concern scores of 14 or higher. Naturally, I went to look at the three bluebird species to see their respective scores: Eastern (7), Mountain (12), and Western (9). We should all be happy that bluebirds are doing relatively well compared to other species, right? Not really. It wasn't that long ago that bluebirds were solidly on that watch list, and it has taken decades of work by all of us and many other dedicated bluebirders to bring them back to where they are today. But things constantly change. We must all be diligent and continually strive to help bluebirds as well as threatened species to ensure they are around for our children's children and beyond.

To view the report, go to [www.stateofthebirds.org](http://www.stateofthebirds.org).

Have a great rest of the summer!

## A Bluebird Quiz!

The following quiz was created by Kyle Carlsen and published in Birdwire, a free bi-weekly newsletter from Birdwatcher's Digest. You can subscribe to Birdwire at [www.birdwatchersdigest.com/bwdsite/about/publications.php](http://www.birdwatchersdigest.com/bwdsite/about/publications.php).

- 1. How many bluebird species exist worldwide?**
  - A. one
  - B. three
  - C. eleven
  - D. twenty
- 2. The breeding range of which bluebird species extends north to Alaska?**
  - A. Eastern Bluebird
  - B. Western Bluebird
  - C. Mountain Bluebird
  - D. None of the above
- 3. Bluebirds belong to which family of birds?**
  - A. Sparrows
  - B. Thrushes
  - C. Flycatchers
  - D. Warblers
- 4. Which of these is likely to attract bluebirds to a backyard or park?**
  - A. Native, fruit-bearing plants
  - B. Feeders offering mealworms
  - C. Human-supplied nest boxes
  - D. All of the above
- 5. Which bluebird species has no rust or red color in its plumage?**
  - A. Eastern Bluebird
  - B. Western Bluebird
  - C. Mountain Bluebird
  - D. None of the above
- 6. Putting up nest boxes is an effective way to attract bluebirds to your yard.**
  - A. True
  - B. False
- 7. Bluebirds migrate incredibly long distances, wintering as far south as Argentina.**
  - A. True
  - B. False
- 8. A typical bluebird clutch contains how many eggs?**
  - A. One to three
  - B. Four to eight
  - C. Six to ten
  - D. More than twelve

\*\*\*You can find the answers on the next page.\*\*\*

# About The Michigan Bluebird Society

**Our Mission: To improve the nesting success of the Eastern Bluebird and other native cavity-nesting birds in the State of Michigan through education of our members and the general public, as well as promoting active nest box management and habitat improvement.**



*The Bluebird Flyer* is a publication for the members of the Michigan Bluebird Society. It is published four times a year: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Contributions, including articles and photos, are very welcome and can be e-mailed to: [newsletter@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:newsletter@michiganbluebirds.org) or mailed to: **The Michigan Bluebird Society, P.O. Box 2028, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-2028.** Articles must be related to bluebirds or other cavity-nesting birds. The MBS retains the right to refuse article submissions. Non-profit, nature-related groups are encouraged to submit press releases of events and every effort will be made to find space in *The Bluebird Flyer*. Advertising is NOT accepted at this time. No reproductions of any material in this newsletter are permitted without permission from the MBS.

The Michigan Bluebird Society (MBS) was founded in 2001 and organized in 2004 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the state of Michigan. The MBS is an affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society.

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## “Bird-Scaping” Your Property

*(Continued from page 1)*

Try to plant shrubs and trees that produce berries that ripen at different times of the year. Some berries (like Poke-weed) ripen very quickly in late summer while others gradually soften over time (like Mountain Ash), providing food later into fall and winter (see the MBS website page on **Planting for Bluebirds** for a list of native shrubs, vines, and trees).

**Bluebird Feeders** – Although bluebirds don’t eat many seeds, they can be enticed to a variety of other foods. Live mealworms are their favorite. These can be put into simple glass, plastic, metal, or ceramic dishes (to keep them from crawling out) or into special feeders to restrict larger birds from getting at them. Bluebirds will also eat suet doughs or suet/cornmeal mixtures during cold weather when other food is scarce. Rarely, they will eat hulled sunflower – usually when other foods are scarce or unavailable (see the MBS website page on **Feeding Bluebirds** for more information).



**Perches** – Bluebirds find their food by sight. Since their food is often on or close to the ground, bluebirds require some higher vantage points from which they can see their prey and fly down to snatch them up. Small, young trees work well. You can also put up simple stakes or poles with cross pieces at the top for them to perch on. I’ve seen them sitting on tomato plant cages or plant stakes, for example.

**Shelter** – Cold and/or wet weather is hard on all wild birds, and they will often seek shelter in densely covered areas of your yard. Evergreens, spruces, and other conifers should be part of every bluebird-scaping plan. Creating a deep, dense area is better than a linear row of trees or



shrubs. You can also create brush piles in a corner of the yard that can be used by birds and other wildlife during winter months.

Sometimes roosting boxes will be used by bluebirds. These are somewhat larger boxes with multiple perches inside

for small groups of bluebirds to sit on during cold nights. The boxes are sealed well to keep out cold air. You can also put out individual bluebird nest boxes for roosting as well. Make sure to face the box entrance holes away from the north and northwest, the directions from which many winter storms blow.

**Predator-Proofing** – Try to make your bluebird habitat as safe as possible from predators. This means mowing the area around your nest boxes in at least a five-foot radius to eliminate hiding places for potential predators. Always put climbing predator guards on bluebird house poles. Bird-

*(Continued in next column)*

## THANK YOU!

The MBS is grateful to the following people who have recently joined, renewed, or donated money.

### WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

Marvin Bonkowski - Lake Orion  
Robert Brewer - Athens  
Laurie Church - Tecumseh  
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Carla DeMan - Marine City  
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Chuck Walters - Jackson

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Barbara & Mark Roche - Berrien Springs  
Wabigon Gardener’s Club - Dowagiac  
Wild Birds Unlimited - Novi

*(Continued from previous column)*

baths should either be out in the open or high enough off the ground to keep cats from getting close to the birds. And most importantly, discourage or eliminate House Sparrows from your habitat as much as possible. This can entail reducing the feeding of low-quality birdseed, plugging up any crannies or nesting cavities on the exterior of your house or outbuildings, or live trapping.

Hopefully, this will give you some ideas for how to bring more bluebirds into your yard in the future. The best part is, there are things you can do any time of year as you work on your bluebird-scaping plan!

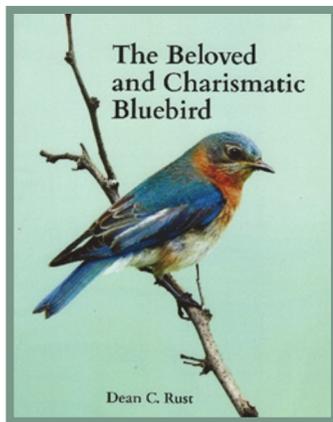
## It Is Time to Report Your Nesting Results

With the 2016 nesting season winding to a close, MBS is asking all those who are monitoring nest boxes (even just one) to send in an End-of-Season Summary report. The report is fast and easy to fill out (assuming you have your box results written down somewhere). We've included the form in this newsletter that you can fold up, seal, and mail in. You can also download the form from the website by going to [www.michiganbluebirds.org/EndofSeasonForm2016](http://www.michiganbluebirds.org/EndofSeasonForm2016).

### \* Book Review \*

#### *The Beloved and Charismatic Bluebird*

By Dr. Dean C. Rust



If you enjoy books on bluebirds, you'll want to pick up a copy of this wonderful and informative new book by Dr. Dean Rust. This 151-page book has excellent information about how to help bluebirds, as well as many high-quality color photos and diagrams. It is organized and written in a very logical manner that makes it easy for beginning bluebirders to get started.

There is also enough in-depth information that will satisfy those people with some years of attracting bluebirds under their belts.

The book covers topics such as bluebird basics, how to choose and install nest boxes, monitoring boxes, how to protect the box from predators, planting for bluebirds, the all-important section on how to deal with House Sparrows, and much more. The Q&A section is particularly informative, but some of the questions (written by people other than the author) are a bit lengthy. As a result, you'll need to read them in full to find the questions embedded within their narratives.

This book is a great addition to the limited number of bluebird books on the market – many of which have become a bit dated. *The Beloved and Charismatic Bluebird* contains some very useful newer information on sparrow control, successful nest box designs with easy-to-build diagrams, mealworm feeding, and online resources. The book can be purchased on Amazon.com for \$19.95 in paperback form. It's not available currently in a download option.

Dr. Dean Rust is president of the Pennsylvania Bluebird Society and is a member of the Michigan Bluebird Society. He has many years of experience as a bluebird landlord and currently monitors 16 trails with a total of over 300 nest boxes.

## Answers to Quiz from Page 2

- 1. B - Three.** The bluebirds include the Eastern, Western, and Mountain Bluebirds, all found in North America.
- 2. C - Mountain Bluebird.** This species breeds in wide-open country throughout the western United States and Canada and in parts of Alaska.
- 3. B - Thrushes.** All North American bluebird species belong in the genus *Sialia* of the thrush family (Turdidae).
- 4. D - All of the above.** Bluebirds eat mainly insects in summer but supplement their diet with berries at other times of the year. They do love mealworms, as many backyard bird watchers know, but please remember to limit your offerings to about a handful a day, as overeating mealworms can be harmful. Nest boxes placed in open habitats are almost certain to attract bluebirds' attention.
- 5. C - Mountain Bluebird.** The adult male is pale turquoise blue overall; the female is gray below and pale blue on her wings and tail. If you see a bluebird with any rust coloring at all, it is not a Mountain Bluebird. It is probably an Eastern or Western Bluebird.
- 6. A - True,** especially if your yard includes some large, open, grassy areas for foraging. The proper nest box entrance hole for Eastern and Western Bluebirds is 1½ inches in diameter. For Mountain Bluebirds, the hole should be 1 9/16 inches in diameter. Always use a nest box baffle to protect nesting bluebirds from hungry predators.
- 7. B - False.** Bluebirds may form feeding flocks that move south or to lower elevations in winter, but they stay mostly within North America. The most migratory of the three bluebird species is the Mountain Bluebird which leaves its northernmost breeding areas to winter in the Rocky Mountains, some as far south as Central America.
- 8. B - Four to eight.** Clutch size varies slightly by species, but typically a female will lay four to eight eggs and incubate them for about two weeks.

Learn more about North American bluebirds, including how to attract and identify them, in the booklet *Enjoying Bluebirds More* which can be purchased at the MBS online store. Go to [www.michiganbluebirdsociety.org/mbs-store](http://www.michiganbluebirdsociety.org/mbs-store).

Join the bluebird discussion!



[www.facebook.com/michiganbluebirdsociety](http://www.facebook.com/michiganbluebirdsociety)

# County Coordinator Corner: Helping Students Go “Green”

By Gene Wasserman,  
Coordinator for Ingham, Eaton, & Clinton Counties

Last year a middle school parent contacted me to help some students put up bird houses. The school was working on becoming a Green School. They needed to complete 20 projects that involved things such as eliminating toxins, using resources sustainably, creating green spaces and a green building, serving healthy food, and teaching stewardship. I met with two parents, the principal, and two fourth-grade teachers to determine how I could help them. The school already had a small group of interested honor students that were members of the school’s Earth Watch Club. These students were going to learn about the birds, put up the nest boxes, and then report to the other students what they had learned.



One of the four boxes put up at the school

During my initial visit, I determined they had a few good areas for nest boxes and possibly bluebirds. On my next visit, after a short presentation to the four students about nesting birds they might have at the school yard, I helped them build four nest boxes. Then we headed out to put them up.

As we approached a group of evergreen trees, we saw a pair of chickadees on one of the branches. When I pointed them out, one of the boys said that was his favorite bird and that’s where he wanted to put up the nest box he had built. We put two more near some trees at the edge of the schoolyard with the hope of attracting bluebirds. The other was put into a landscaped area

near the front of the building.

The students monitored the boxes and reported the results to me. The one boy got his nesting pair of chickadees just like he wanted. It doesn’t get much better than that! Unfortunately, the two boxes did not get bluebirds and remained empty. At least they did not get taken by sparrows. The other box did have a successful wren nest.



The chickadee chicks that so fascinated the young boy

This was a rewarding and fun project, as projects always are when working with enthusiastic youngsters that may someday become birders. I know there are other schools that are working to become Green Schools that could probably use some help from our MBS members. If you are interested, I suggest contacting your county coordinator. You will be greatly rewarded.

To find out more about the National Green Schools Initiative, go to [www.GreenSchools.net](http://www.GreenSchools.net). To get information regarding Green Schools in Michigan, go to [www.MichiganGreenSchools.us](http://www.MichiganGreenSchools.us).

(As a postscript to this article: the young boy who was so excited about getting a nest of chickadees did his science fair project on birds. I think we may have recruited another birder!)

## Please Join Us in Our Efforts to Help Michigan’s Eastern Bluebirds to Thrive.

Now is the perfect time to help by joining the MBS or renewing your membership.

### Here are some easy ways to join MBS:

- Fill out this form and mail it with your check.
- Phone our membership chairman, John Harville, at (269) 473-2667.
- Join online by going to [www.michiganbluebirds.org/join-mbs](http://www.michiganbluebirds.org/join-mbs)

Please indicate your preferred membership:

- One-year individual or family—\$15.00
- Three-year membership—\$40.00
- Business membership—\$125.00

- Lifetime membership—\$300.00 (includes free MBS logo shirt)
- I will make a donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_
- I have time to volunteer.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Mail your check, made payable to Michigan Bluebird Society, with this completed form to: Michigan Bluebird Society, P.O. Box 2028, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-2028

# A Fantastic Bluebird Story

By Papa Blue

Hello and Happy Summer! It's me, Papa Blue.

Mama Blue and I had a tough start to our summer. After building a lovely nest, Mama Blue laid five pretty blue eggs. After keeping them warm, all five of them hatched right on schedule. When the hatchlings were five days old, I was out hunting for food and returned to the nest with some grubs to find Mama outside the nest box and all the hatchlings on the ground. Mama had survived a House Sparrow attack but our nestlings were not so lucky.

Mrs. Peterson helped clean up the mess. She emptied our nest box and cleaned it so we could start fresh. Old Man Peterson set himself about the task of controlling the local House Sparrow population. It is pretty funny watching that guy get excited about chasing and trapping sparrows, but he does. And it sure helps us to have fewer of them around.



Artwork by Elaine Morton

After Old Man Peterson finished his work, Mama built another nest and laid five blue eggs that all hatched. While those hatchlings were growing, we would get regular visits from Old Man

Peterson who would open the box, peek in, close the box and leave. It only took a few moments and it wasn't very stressful, but I couldn't resist the urge to dive bomb him every time he approached our nest box full of hatchlings. Those five hatchlings have now fledged—a much happier result than earlier in the summer.

Old Man Peterson came and cleaned out the nest box, and Mama and I thought we would try for a third brood since the weather has been so warm and dry. Mama made a nice nest and deposited just one egg before another House Sparrow attacked and chased us off. We survived but our egg didn't. We are now very nervous about the House Sparrows.

We still fly by to see Old Man Peterson, and he keeps working to control the House Sparrow population. It makes us certain that we will have a safer place next spring to raise more baby bluebirds.

Enjoy what remains of summer, and say "Hi" when you see us.

Papa Blue



## Bluebird



&

**Q. In the later stages of raising young in the box, I've noticed bluebird parents not being around as often. Why is this?**

A. Bluebird landlords sometimes get alarmed when they don't see the parents at the box as frequently in the days just before the young fledge. There are several reasons for this. One is that the young birds are now covered in feathers and are larger in body weight so they no longer need to be brooded (kept warm) by the parents. This frees up the female to go out for longer periods of time to search for food. Another reason is that as the young get bigger, it takes more food to satisfy them. This means the parents must spend more time searching for insects. Finally, once fledging time is at hand, the parents will often withhold feeding as one method of coaxing the young out of the box (the other is calling to them from a nearby tree).

**Q. I had a terrible problem with House Sparrows this nesting season. Are there certain nest box designs that deter sparrows so I can try one next year?**

A. Yes. Given a choice, sparrows prefer nest boxes with large cavities (like traditional designs) because they like to fill the available space with large masses of mixed sticks, grass, fibers, plastic strips, etc. Nest boxes with small cavities, like the Gilbertson PVC box, Gilwood, and Gilbertson Slot box, have shown better results (see the MBS website under **Nest Box Plans** to see what these boxes look like). Note that these boxes by themselves don't always deter sparrows. The location of the nest box can be a big factor as well. The MBS recommends a comprehensive strategy of discouraging and eliminating House Sparrows from your habitat (see the MBS website page on **Problem Solving** for more information).

## Important Member Information

Members: If you do not have your e-mail address on file with MBS, please consider doing so. We are increasingly communicating with our membership via e-mail. Contact the membership director, John Harville, at [membership@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:membership@michiganbluebirds.org).

You can help us save money, paper, and resources by receiving only an electronic version of *The Flyer*. E-mail us at [membership@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:membership@michiganbluebirds.org) to receive the electronic version. You will need to provide a working e-mail address where we can send you a link to download a PDF file of *The Flyer* each quarter. To do this, you must have the Adobe Acrobat Reader program installed on your computer. The program is free and can be downloaded at [www.get.adobe.com/reader](http://www.get.adobe.com/reader).

# Plan to Attend Our Fall Festival

Saturday, October 15, 2016

10:00 a.m.—3:00 p.m.



**Bunker Interpretive  
Center**  
at Calvin College  
1750 East Beltline Avenue SE  
**Grand Rapids, MI**



You do not want to miss the Michigan Bluebird Society's Fall Festival! Please join us in Grand Rapids for an exciting day filled with speakers, exhibits, a panel discussion and, of course, our MBS store.

This year's event will be held at the Bunker Interpretive Center in Grand Rapids. It is part of the Calvin College Ecosystem Preserve. The Center itself was designed and constructed with many features that make it environmentally friendly and energy-efficient. The Preserve includes 40 acres of land open to the public with a one-mile trail for people to explore and enjoy different habitats and ecosystems.



## The day's events will include:

- ⇒ A featured bluebird speaker
- ⇒ A panel of bluebird experts to answer your bluebird and birding questions
- ⇒ End-of-season sale on MBS merchandise
- ⇒ Your favorite bluebird exhibits
- ⇒ Opportunities to meet and talk with fellow bluebirders and birding experts

As always, this event is **FREE** and **open to the public.**  
Be sure to invite your friends to accompany you!

You will be able to purchase **lunch** at a modest cost.

For additional details as they become available, go to [www.michiganbluebirds.org/FallFestival](http://www.michiganbluebirds.org/FallFestival) or watch our MBS Facebook page.

For directions to the Bunker Interpretive Center, go to [www.calvin.edu/academic/bunker/](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/bunker/)

