



*Fences make great places to attach boxes.*



*Assembling bluebird box.*



*A glimpse of young bluebirds during a routine check.*

# Create homes so

*By Jacelyn Downey*

Spring may seem a lifetime away, but here is a fun project you can start this winter that will yield entertaining results in the months to come. The arrival of bluebirds typically promises that spring has arrived, and, when you see that first mountain bluebird appear in February, you'll be glad you created a bluebird trail!

Installing bluebird houses along a trail – the bluebird trail – is an easy and great way to provide a place for bluebirds to lay their eggs and rear their brood of nestlings. A bluebird trail can be created as a family project then be a source of amusement and hands-on learning everyone can enjoy.

## **Step 1. Scout an area for a bluebird trail**

Bluebirds need ground cover that is low, sparse, or both for foraging. Open, sunny areas at least 200 feet from dense woods or brush with a few scattered trees or saplings for perching are ideal. If there is a trail you like to walk or drive along, that's probably a good place to choose.

## **Step 2. Determine length of trail**

Decide the length of the trail.

With smaller acreages, only one or two boxes may be placed within the property. If considering extending the trail beyond the property line, be sure to get permission from surrounding landowners.

## **Step 3. Calculate how many boxes you'll need**

Starting with about five nest box locations per mile in open country works well. Space bluebird nest boxes at least 300 feet apart because bluebirds are territorial. If closer, only one male will win the territory leaving nearby boxes empty or utilized by other birds. Some birds, such as wrens and tree swallows, are usually harmless. Others, like house sparrows and starlings, can be detrimental to bluebirds. The idea is not to encourage them to nest, not only because they will take over a bluebird trail but because they are non-native invasive species.

## **Step 4. Choose a box**

If making the nest boxes, use any standard plans (see link below for plan information). If purchasing

pre-made boxes, be sure the nest box is well-ventilated, well-insulated, predator resistant, and easy to clean, but does not have a perch. Bluebirds do not need a perch and installing one will encourage other, less desirable, birds to your box. Many box plans are designed for eastern bluebirds, which are smaller than the mountain bluebirds of Wyoming. To accommodate mountain bluebirds, use or make a box with a 5-inch by 5-inch interior, and a 1 9/16-inch round entrance hole. See [www.mountainbluebirdtrails.com/](http://www.mountainbluebirdtrails.com/) for plans and other useful information.

## **Step 5. Make the box**

Old barn wood or scraps left from other projects can be used to make boxes. If using new material, make sure it is raw, untreated lumber. Treated lumber contains chemicals that may make birds sick. A table saw, circular saw, or jigsaw will make the job easier to cut the pieces necessary for the box, and a jigsaw or hole saw can be used to cut the hole for the entrance. Follow the plan directions remembering to make a 1 9/16-inch entrance hole.



*Cleaning each nest box in the fall is important.*



*An example of a side opening box.*



*A top access box.*

# bluebirds come your way

## **Step 6. Place and attach boxes**

The nests should be placed at least 4 feet high, although 5 feet high is best. Many people in Wyoming have had luck with mounting boxes on fence posts, but individual posts can be staked out along a trail. Boxes with east-facing entrance holes are used most frequently, but be sure to consider prevailing wind direction when orientating the box. Birds will likely choose a box that does not have wind blowing inside the nest box.

## **Step 7. Monitor each box**

Once the bluebird nest box is in an ideal location, monitoring is most important during the upcoming spring. Bluebirds will appear in late February so checking the boxes at least once a week from early March through August is important; record observations, and make necessary changes. Write down important details such as when nest-building activities began, how many eggs were laid, when hatching occurred, number of surviving chicks, and fledging dates. It is also important to note problems such as predation attempts or successes, empty boxes, boxes occupied by

another species of bird, and parasite infestations. For troubleshooting help with parasites, predators, and other common problems, go to <http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/monitoring.htm>.

## **Step 8. Clean boxes in the fall**

Clean out all the nest boxes in the fall. This will ensure the bluebird males that appear in the spring will once again visit the nest boxes and, hopefully, use them.

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## **Did you know...**

**Mountain bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) are found in open areas with scattered trees and bushes, such as prairies or agricultural land. They spend the spring and summer in Wyoming and other Rocky Mountain states and extend into Canada and Alaska. They migrate south in the fall toward Mexico. Western and eastern bluebirds are similar species but tend to stay to the east and west of Wyoming so the bluebird most often seen is the mountain bluebird. Bluebirds mainly eat insects, so they are usually found perched on a fence post looking for the next meal. To learn more go to:**

**[http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Mountain\\_Bluebird.html](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Mountain_Bluebird.html)**

