Bluebird Boxes

The Game Commission maintains six region offices.

**Northwest Region**
Butler, Clarion, Crawford, Erie, Forest, Jefferson, Lawrence, Mercer, Venango and Warren counties
814-432-3187

**Northeast Region**
Braddock, Carbon, Columbia, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Montour, Northumberland, Pike, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming counties
570-675-1143

**Southwest Region**
Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Somerset, Washington and Westmoreland counties
724-238-0523

**Southcentral Region**
Adams, Bedford, Blair, Cumberland, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Mifflin, Perry, Snyder and York counties
814-643-1831

**Southeast Region**
Bucks, Berks, Chester, Dauphin, Delaware, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lehigh, Montgomery, Northampton, Philadelphia and Schuylkill counties
610-926-3136

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A typical bluebird nesting cycle:

1. Mid-March to mid-April the male locates a nesting site, female arrives, accepts male and builds nest. Nests are neat cup-shaped structures made of fine grass.
2. Late April: female lays one pale blue to bluish-white egg per day until there are three to six (typically five) eggs in the nest.
3. The female incubates the eggs for about two weeks, the first young hatch during the second week of May.
4. By the end of May, the young bluebirds leave the nest. The male and female feed and protect the young for about another week or two. During this time, the female may start to build a new (second) nest.
5. By the second week in June, the nesting sequence is ready to repeat.

**Box Placement**

Farmlands and other large herbaceous openings are good bluebird habitat. Place boxes in meadows, old fields, pastures, lawns, along fence lines between fields, cemeteries, golf courses, reclaimed strip mines or along wide rights-of-way. It is best if grass and weeds are short or sparse, mowed or grazed areas provide good habitat. There should be structure to provide feeding perches in the vicinity of the grassy area, these can include power lines, fence posts or scattered trees. Boxes should be placed 4 to 6 feet above the ground and spaced about 100 yards apart. The entrance hole should face north, northeast or east, to prevent sunlight from shining into the hole and overheating the box interior.

Boxes placed too close to buildings, streams and non-forested wetlands, or brushy areas often incur persistent competition and predation. If this happens, moving the affected box may be the best solution.

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**Public Enemy #1: House Sparrows**

Adult male (left) and female (right) house sparrow.
House sparrows are invasive species with short stocky bodies, a large head, and blunt bill. They were introduced to the U.S. in the 1800s and compete with bluebirds for nesting locations. House sparrows may attack adult bluebirds and destroy eggs and nestlings. House sparrow nests are often “messy” containing loosely packed grass, twigs, feathers and other litter. Nests are large, nearly filling the box. Bluebird nests are neat, cup-shaped nests, woven of fine grasses or pine needles. Other materials may be incorporated in the nest, but it will not look “messy.”

House sparrows and bluebird eggs are similar in size. House sparrow eggs can be cream, white, blue or greenish colored, with irregular brown or gray speckles. Bluebird eggs are blue or white, but lack brown speckling. Remove all house sparrow nesting material immediately and increase monitoring of that particular nest box.

Tree Swallow

With iridescent blue upperparts and a contrasting white belly, the tree swallow is a jewel of a bird common throughout most of the state. Tree swallows are fast, agile fliers commonly seen swooping after insects over meadows and fields and are especially common where there’s also a lake or pond nearby.

Tree swallows are one of the most common birds that compete for bluebird nest boxes placed in open habitats. Nest boxes should be mounted on fence posts or poles, about 4 to 6 feet above the ground. To reduce competition and provide nest sites for both bluebirds and swallows, landowners can either space nest boxes 100 to 150 feet apart or use a paired design by placing two nest boxes within 10 feet of each other with additional nest box pairs at 300-foot intervals.

House Wren

The house wren is one of Pennsylvania’s most common and enjoyable backyard birds. Its beautiful bubbling calls are a joy to hear during the spring and summer.

House wren boxes are likely to be used if they are 5 to 10 feet above the ground and located under the eaves of a building or in a tree. This and gourds for purple martins are the only types of bird boxes that can be free-hanging. All other bird boxes need to be firmly anchored. House wren holes are too small for house sparrows and European starlings to use. Don’t put a perch on the nest box, which invites sparrow problems. If you have a perch on a wren house, take it off.

As soon as one family of wrens leaves a house, clean it out so another brood of young can be raised.

Tufted Titmouse

The titmouse prefers boxes in wooded locations. Wood shavings in the bird house will simulate conditions in a natural cavity. Titmice seem to prefer boxes located 6 to 10 feet above the ground. Attach the box to a tree trunk where it will be shaded and orient it to face small clearings. Like the chickadee and nuthatch, the titmouse overwinter in Pennsylvania. By day they grace our winter feeders. At night they may seek shelter in the same boxes they nested in earlier in the year. For that reason, the entrance holes should face towards the east and south, away from prevailing winds.

White-breasted Nuthatch

The white-breasted nuthatch is well known at winter bird feeders. It hangs upside down to eat suet and probe for insect larvae under the bark of trees. It nests in mature hardwood forests in habitats similar to those used by chickadees.

As soon as each brood of young leaves the nest box, clean it out so more birds can use it. Boxes should be 12 to 20 feet above the ground.