

BLUE SKIES FOR BLUEBIRDS



Once common, then increasingly rare, Montana's three bluebird species have made a remarkable comeback in recent years thanks to a growing legion of nest-box-building devotees.

BY BECKY LOMAX

They are called bluebirds of happiness for a reason. Many avian species possess lovely songs or vivid plumage, but there's something about bluebirds that inspires unparalleled joy and devotion among their fans. Bluebirders say they love the bird's bright color, enchanting song, association with the countryside, and, perhaps most appealing, tolerance for human presence. Bluebirds, considered among the friendliest of all birds (not to mention harbingers of spring), will often nest near homes and don't even mind having their nest boxes monitored. In songs, poetry, film, and literature, these seemingly carefree cousins to the American robin are associated with happiness, hope, and good times.

"Bluebirds are magical," says Bob Niebuhr, president of Mountain Bluebird Trails, Inc. (MBT), a cavity-nesting-bird conservation group based in Ronan.

It wasn't long ago that Niebuhr and other bluebird devotees became alarmed as bluebird numbers began declining. Aggressive birds, predators, and the human removal of nesting trees combined to push bluebirds from their traditional habitat. Since then, a small but growing number of bluebird advocates have been working to build and protect nesting sites and reduce threats, restoring the cobalt-colored flyers to both new and traditional sites across Montana's landscape.

Bluebird basics

Montana is one of only a few states to attract all three bluebird species: mountain, western, and eastern. Mountain bluebirds range statewide, western bluebirds are found mainly in the northwestern corner, and eastern bluebirds are confined to the far southeast. Members of the thrush family, all three species are eas-

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ily recognized by their blue color. Slightly slimmer than the other two species, male mountain bluebirds are completely blue—and the blue is lighter and more vivid—except for a pale gray underbelly. The male western has a blue throat, back, wings, and belly and an orange chest and shoulders; the male eastern looks similar except the throat is orange and the belly is white. Females of all three species are paler versions of the males.

Bluebirds nest in tree or other wood cavities made by woodpeckers. Daytime ground feeders, bluebirds frequent open areas such as pastures, golf courses, cemeteries, and treeless shortgrass fields to find insects, which comprise most of their diet. Grasshoppers are a favored food.

After wintering in Mexico or the southwestern United States, bluebirds fly north to Montana in late February and early March. (Every year, MBT awards a sweatshirt to the first member sighting any of the three bluebird species in the Treasure State.)

Similar to the behavior of the other bluebirds, the mountain bluebird male establishes his territory, usually encompassing 12 acres, then sings and performs a flight display to attract a female. Often returning to the same site each year, the female builds the nest using grass, exposed plant roots, and hair. She lines it with feathers before laying five to six light blue eggs between late March and May.

The female incubates the eggs for roughly two weeks, after which the chicks hatch. Helpless, blind, and featherless, the chicks mutate immediately into food-demanding

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monsters requiring three feedings per daylight hour. In May and June, the hatchlings fledge (grow flight feathers) and soon are able to catch their own prey. If bad weather, aggressive birds, or predators don't hinder their attempts, the bluebird pair may hatch a second clutch, which fledges by mid-July.

Bluebird threats

In the mid-1800s, house sparrows and European starlings came to North America with immigrants on ships from across the Atlantic Ocean. As these aggressive bird species spread west, bluebirds throughout the New World suffered a housing crisis. Sparrows and starlings take over tree cavities, leaving bluebirds out in the cold. Sparrows even kill bluebirds, constructing a new nest on top of a bluebird's. Starlings also threaten bluebirds by consuming the berries bluebirds eat in winter. Unable to adapt to the newcomers, bluebird populations dropped.

Unwittingly, humans worsened the blue-

“We tend to clean up our world,” says Kristi DuBois, coordinator of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Native Species Program. “If there’s a dead tree, people want to cut it down immediately.”

Other human-caused threats to bluebirds include widespread use of agricultural pesticides, which kill insects the birds eat, and rural sprawl, which replaces open countryside with fenced backyards and paved driveways.

Hawks, raccoons, weasels, bears, snakes, magpies, crows, jays, and many other predators eat bluebirds. As ground feeders, bluebirds are easy targets. And many predators can easily climb trees and snatch fledglings from a bluebird nesting cavity. Rural cats are especially troublesome. According to the American Bird Conservancy, a single free-roaming cat kills an average of 20 songbirds per year.

Bluebird recovery

Though people had been building and erecting nesting boxes for decades, help formally

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bird’s demise. Historically, bluebirds thrived in the woodpecker-carved cavities of standing dead trees, called snags. But as more and more people moving into the countryside cut down snags for firewood, those habitats soon disappeared.

arrived for Montana’s struggling bluebird population in 1974. That’s when the late Art Aylesworth of Ronan, known as “the bluebird man,” teamed up with bluebird advocates Art and Duncan Mackintosh from Alberta to form MBT. The organization pro-

motes bluebird conservation through education, nest box programs, and research. Across Montana, members monitor 6,800 nest boxes, which have produced more than 176,000 bluebirds over the past decade.

The grassroots organization relies on individuals who build their own bluebird nest “trails,” a series of at least five boxes placed 100 to 300 yards apart, depending on the species (see sidebar, page 36). The bluebirders monitor nesting and hatching activity, then report their findings to a local MBT or North American Bluebird Society coordinator. Some members oversee hundreds of nest boxes, but most monitor shorter trails of five to ten. The nest boxes are visible on fence lines surrounding open areas, usually on posts roughly 4 feet above ground.

To help promote bluebird conservation, Montana FWP has provided MBT with \$8,000 in grants over the past two years. The money helps pay for distributing bluebird house plans and building materials to county extension offices. The funds also underwrite educational videos, slideshows, books, pamphlets, and a speaker’s bureau. According to Niebuhr, the group gives several dozen presentations in Montana each year, from classrooms to grain- and stock-grower’s conventions.

“The response from ranchers and farmers has been great,” he says. “In the past three years, we’ve had 35 new members put up their own bluebird boxes or allowed others to maintain nest boxes on their property.”

As testament to how avidly Montanans are working to conserve bluebirds, Ervin Davis of Charlo was named Volunteer of the Year in 2005 by the National Wildlife Refuge System. At the National Bison Range in Moiese, Davis monitors bluebird nest boxes, bands western and mountain bluebirds, and holds education programs.

Coexisting with cattle

Tucker Hughes doesn’t build or tend nest boxes. But since 1992 the central Montana rancher has permitted Niebuhr to maintain a trail of nearly 100 of the structures on the ranch’s prime mountain bluebird habitat.

Bluebirds eat insects, which they find in open grasslands and parklands. They feed both on the ground and in the air.



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Eastern bluebird *Sialia sialis*



Mountain bluebird *Sialia currucoides*



Western bluebird *Sialia mexicana*

FROM LEFT: MASLOWSKI/PHOTO.COM; BOB MARTINKA; DONALD M. JONES.COM

“Bluebirds are an enjoyable part of the ranch,” says Hughes. “And if they eat one fly, it’s a benefit.”

Cows and bluebirds coexist well. The grazers keep grass short so the birds can find insects, and the birds gobble up annoying flying bugs. According to Niebuhr, a single family of bluebirds will eat 4,000 insects in one summer.

However, cattle can wreak havoc on nest boxes. Ideally, the structures should be placed on the side of a fencepost facing east so that spring blizzards, which usually come from the southwest, don’t wallop chicks. But on cattle ranches, the boxes must be placed in line with the fence wire to prevent cows (which rub against anything sticking out from a post) from knocking them down. Hughes laughs as he recalls how Niebuhr lost several boxes to itchy cattle. “Bob

learned the hard way,” he says.

Another way to help bluebirds, says DuBois, is to leave snags standing. “People who want firewood should cut trees that are already downed rather than felling upright snags that may hold prime nesting real estate,” she says. DuBois also urges cat owners to keep their feline pets housebound, on a leash, or within fenced cat runs.

Blue sky future

Niebuhr believes the future of Montana bluebirds looks sunny. “There’s increasing interest in bluebirds, attracting people from every walk of life,” he says. “Bluebirds are not going to become extinct anytime soon.” Membership in MBT alone has tripled in the last four years to more than 600 people hailing from Montana’s far corners and out of state. Since 1990, the group’s members have helped

Build a BLUEBIRD HOUSE

Building and putting up a bluebird box is a fun and easy project that can make anyone a bluebird conservationist. But there's more involved than just nailing together planks and mounting the box on a fencepost.

"A box that is not monitored or cleaned out is a waste of wood," says bluebird expert Bob Niebuhr of Ronan.

If dead chicks killed by spring storms remain in the box, no bluebirds will re-nest there. Droppings left in nest boxes can collect fly eggs, which also deter nesting. Boxes need to be cleaned out once each year and kept in good repair.

Anyone installing a nest box should be prepared to monitor the box once a week during the nesting season to clean the nest of blowfly larvae, which can kill chicks, and remove the nesting material once the birds have fledged.

Nest boxes should be built according to specifications established by experienced bluebirders. Most important: They must open easily for cleaning.

"I've seen some you couldn't open with dynamite," says Niebuhr. "The sentiment is right, but reality is something else."

Also, the hole size has to be small enough to keep starlings out but large enough to allow bluebirds in. Place the box in open, shortgrass areas away from trees, shrubs, wetlands, and ponds. If too close to these other habitats, wrens or swallows may nest in the box.

To make a western bluebird trail, place five nest boxes 100 yards apart. Place them 100 to 125 yards apart for easterns, and 200 to 300 yards apart for mountians.

Bluebird box

Use ¾" cedar

Roof7" x 8"

Roof cleat½" x 6½"

Front7" x 10"

Back7" x 18"

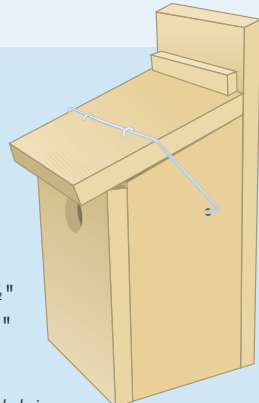
Floor5¼" x 5½"

Side5¼" x 12"
(angle to 10" in front)

Entrance hole: 1½"

(Hole size must be exact. If the hole is even slightly larger, European starlings can enter the box)

Wire to hold removable roof: ⅛" diameter.



MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD TRAILS, INC.



MASLOWSKI/PHOTO.COM

parent birds produce an average of roughly 18,000 bluebirds each year, twice what it averaged in the 1980s. Federal North American bird surveys have shown a steady increase in bluebird populations in Montana and other states over the past 25 years.

One indication of the growing energy behind bluebird conservation is the publication of an updated version of the bluebird "bible." Bluebirders consider Myrna Pearman's *Mountain Bluebird Trail Monitoring Guide* an indispensable booklet. The slim guide is packed with bluebird facts and directions on how to build boxes and maintain a bluebird trail. Pearman, an Alberta biologist, also provides contact addresses and clarifies current laws and regulations regarding bluebird trail monitoring.

"Bluebirds aren't pets," she says. "Regulations exist for what can and cannot be done legally." As is the case for other migratory birds, all three bluebird species are protected under the Migratory Bird Protection Act. Though bluebirds can become accustomed to humans, she says, it is illegal to handle them without a permit.

Pearman sees bluebird conservation as a growing grassroots activity in Montana and Alberta. "The future of bluebirds is

- Under federal permit,
- an MBT member
- measures a fledgling.
- An eastern bluebird
- female ponders which
- of her insistent young
- to feed next.

fairly secure. More and more people are getting involved, and nest box programs are helping local bluebird populations."

Considering how much joy bluebirds bring to people across this region, that's news to put a smile on anyone's face. 🐦

A \$15 family membership in Mountain Bluebird Trails gets you a copy of Myrna Pearman's guide as well as supplies for starting nest boxes. You can reach MBT at mountainbluebirdtrails.com or (406) 676-0300, the North American Bluebird Society at nabluebirdsociety.org or (866) 517-4483, and the American Bird Conservancy at abcbirds.org or (540) 253-5780.



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McCown's Longspur

Calcarius mccownii

By John C. Carlson

All prairie and plains birds have evolved unique ways of projecting their songs in the windy, open environment. But McCown's longspurs have a particularly stylish and captivating way of delivering their distinctive territorial tune. Rising from the open, dry prairie, the male pushes himself high into the sky with deep strokes of his long wings. Reaching the zenith, he pitches his wings back, locks them straight out, and begins to sing *see see see me see me hear me hear me see*. Floating downward through the wind like a feathered parachute, he continues singing until reaching the ground, when he heads back into the sky to begin the territorial display all over again.

APPEARANCE

Male McCown's longspurs are light gray with a white face, black cap, and black "moustache." They have a wide black band across the breast set off with a chestnut shoulder patch. In shades of brown, the female is a paler version of the male. The tail of both sexes is white, with a "T" formed by a black central tail feather and the black tips of the outer tail feathers.

REPRODUCTION

The males arrive in Montana in late April from the high plains of the American Southwest and begin setting up territories. When females arrive a short time later, courtship begins. On the ground, the male prances in a circle around the female, occasionally raising his wings straight into the air to flash the white lining, all the while pouring forth an ecstatic song. After the female chooses her mate, she builds a grass nest in a small depression in the ground. Usually around mid-May, she lays three or four white eggs with heavy brown or purplish brown markings. She incubates the eggs for 12 days, and the nestlings leave the nest

John C. Carlson is a wildlife biologist for the federal Bureau of Land Management in Glasgow.

10 days after hatching. McCown's longspurs primarily eat grasshoppers during the summer and feed on grass and weed seeds during the winter.

HABITAT

McCown's longspurs are birds of grasslands with very little grass. Historically, this type of mostly barren grassland was found in patches throughout the North American interior. Certain types of soils, heavy grazing by bison and locusts, periodic wildfire, and severe drought combined to create patches of short sparse grass. As bison were killed, locusts reduced, and fires tamed, most of the prairie bald spots disappeared, and with them most McCown's longspurs. However, because occasional droughts continue and the special soils remain, the birds still have remnant breeding habitat in open prairie characterized by buttes, gumbo, short grasses, and prickly pear cacti.

RANGE

McCown's longspurs historically bred throughout the prairies of the northern Great Plains, from Minnesota west to the Rocky Mountain Front, north into prairie Canada, and south to Wyoming and Oklahoma. Due primarily to the conversion of prairies to agricultural fields, the species is no longer found in Minnesota, Manitoba, or Oklahoma, and distribution is limited to the western Dakotas. Montana appears to be the species' remaining stronghold. McCown's longspurs are found throughout the state's eastern half, in appropriate habi-

tat, as well as in high, sparse grasslands in mountain valleys of Montana's southwestern region.

MANAGEMENT

McCown's longspurs are a species of concern in Montana and are on the national watch list of species that have the potential to become federally listed as threatened. Converting native prairie to cropland can reduce McCown's longspur populations. The transcontinental Partners in Flight bird management plan recommends that the best way to conserve McCown's longspurs is to preserve native shortgrass prairie, especially in areas of sparsely vegetated hills. 🐦



ALAN G. NELSON