



Eastern Bluebird

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Geoff Cantrell

Eastern Bluebird

Sialia sialis

If you spot “the bluebird of happiness” in the morning, luck follows you the rest of the day, the saying goes. Years ago spotting one was easy — the Eastern bluebird with its regal blue plumage and sweet song flourished in North Carolina. Then populations plummeted in the 1950s and 1960s. Then in the 1970s, pesticides were better regulated and people responded by building nest boxes and instituting other conservation efforts, and today the Eastern bluebird can easily be spotted again.

Description

The male Eastern bluebird has bright blue upper parts, a rusty throat, breast and sides, and a white belly. The female’s coloring is similar, but duller. The bluebird’s average length is 7 inches.

History and Status

More than a century ago, the Eastern bluebird was one of North Carolina’s most common songbirds. They flocked around farms as thick as sparrows and starlings now. They made nests in dead trees, in wooden fence posts and in mailboxes without flaps. In the 1800s, the starling and house sparrow, two of the bluebird’s fiercest nest competitors, were introduced in the United States. Then in the early 1900s, small farms began to grow into bigger ones, and huge fields replaced the mixed habitat bluebirds enjoyed. Cities spread into suburbs. People began using metal fences and mailboxes that closed. Dead trees were cut for firewood. But a series of harsh winters in the late 1950s and early 1960s hit the Eastern bluebird the hardest, leaving only 10 percent of a once prolific population. Shocked, birdwatchers, garden clubs, school children and conservationists began placing wooden bird boxes where bluebirds might nest. These efforts had a beneficial effect on Eastern bluebird populations, boosting their numbers and lifting the species out of danger.

Habitats & Habits

Eastern bluebirds prefer open or semi-open habitats with grassy areas and nearby woods. Farmyards, groves and even some residential areas provide suitable habitat. Bluebirds perch on trees, posts, power lines and fences to search for insects, dropping to the ground to capture their prey. Occasionally they catch an insect in the air.

Bluebirds eat insects, snails, spiders and earthworms. They supplement their diet with berries, eating the fruits of plants such as viburnums, dogwoods, and black and pin cherry in the summer and fall. In the winter, they eat berries of sumac, pyracantha, mistletoe, bayberry and American holly. During winter, bluebirds roost in small flocks in woodlands or sometimes huddle in nesting cavities to keep warm. They must eat constantly during the day to survive cold nights. When food is covered by

Bring the beautiful bluebird to a feeder by offering mealworms.



Male and female bluebird (Photo: Commons Wikimedia)

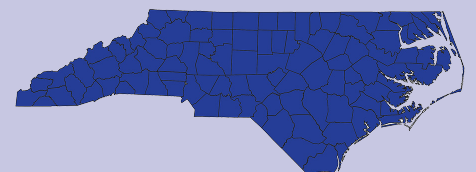


Bluebird (Photo: Andrea Shipley)

Range and Distribution

Eastern bluebirds can be found throughout North Carolina. However, they are rarely seen along the barrier islands or in higher mountains. In North America, they breed from lower Canada south to Florida and Texas, and are found from the Atlantic Coast west to the base of the Rocky Mountains in Montana, Wyoming and Colorado.

Range Map



■ Eastern Bluebird Range Map

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snow and ice, as in the 1950s and 1960s, they will die unless they have the energy to fly farther south to a warmer site.

Around mid-February, bluebirds begin to return to breeding sites. As early as March, a male locates a nesting site and establishes a territory around it. Bluebirds are cavity nesters, building their nests in holes left by woodpeckers, a natural knot-hole, a bird box or even a gourd. Cavity nesting offers protection from weather and predators.

The bluebird's main predators are raccoons, cats, opossums and snakes. Members of the thrush family, bluebirds compete for nesting sites with other birds such as the house sparrow, the Carolina chickadee and the white-breasted nuthatch. During spring and summer, other birds raid bluebird nests for eggs and a place to raise their young. Bluebirds, too, may banish chickadees and other species from their nests.

Once a male finds a suitable site, he flutters and sings "churwee, chur-wee" to attract his mate for the season. Once she arrives, she must accept the site. If she does, both the male and female build a neat cup of dry grasses or pine needles. Nest building takes about 10 days.

After the young have hatched, the mother bluebird stays in the nest for the first few days to keep her young warm, and the male feeds them. Later, both parents feed the nestlings with soft insects, then coarser foods as they grow. The young grow quickly, leaving the nest 17 to 18 days after hatching. The parents care for the young and teach them how to catch their own food. The male takes over this job when the female begins her next nest. Bluebirds can raise two or three broods of young each year if not disturbed by predators. Young bluebirds from the first brood may stay and help with subsequent broods.

After the nesting season, bluebirds leave the area as a flock, then roam the region for food. The majority of North Carolina's Eastern bluebirds do not migrate, but are joined by migrant bluebirds from the north in the fall.

Human & NCWRC Interactions

Development and habitat changes continue to impact this delicate songbird. Once, DDT and other insecticides killed the insects that bluebirds fed on and, in many cases, killed the birds, as well. Farms continue to become housing developments, leaving bluebirds less room to breed. Many birdwatchers, aware of the bluebird's needs, have been active across the state in establishing nest boxes. Their efforts, and those of other groups, have helped maintain healthier Eastern bluebird populations in recent decades.

N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission biologists survey bluebirds, along with other songbirds, through the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), which is the largest standardized survey method for breeding birds in the world. Routes have been surveyed across the continent for decades. Each 25-mile route is surveyed at least once each breeding season. A point count (location where all birds are identified by sight or sound) is taken every 0.5 miles. Data are analyzed over the decades to help determine bird population levels and changes over time.

References

Ehrlich, Paul; David S. Dobkin and Darryl Wheye. *The Birder's Handbook* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1988).
Potter, Eloise, James Parnell and Robert Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1980).

Credits

Written by Sarah Friday, updated by David Allen, 2020. NCWRC

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Average Size

Length: 7 in.

Food

Insects and berries

Breeding/Young

Male selects site in an existing cavity, female approves it and both adults build the nest. A pair mates in early spring and remains together throughout the season, producing two or three broods. The first brood appears between April 15 and May 15. A second hatching takes place between June 1 and July 25, and often a third occurs from Aug. 1 to Aug. 15.

Average clutch size is four to five eggs. Incubation period is 13 to 14 days. Nestlings remain in nest about 17 days after hatching. Fledglings stay with parents a short time and sometimes help with subsequent broods.

Life Expectancy

About 2 years



Bluebird eggs (Photo: Nicole White Owens)



Bluebird fledgling (Photo: Jodie Owen)