

TEXAS BLUES

The Newsletter of the Texas Bluebird Society

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Set Up a Birdbath

If you truly wish to turn your yard into a bird's paradise, you will need to provide a source of water. Sometimes the only source of water available to wildlife, your backyard source will provide the birds with an opportunity to refresh or bathe in a safe setting. Bluebirds seem to truly enjoy bathing, and it is not uncommon to see a whole family splashing vigorously in the birdbath.

A birdbath can be as expensive or elaborate as you choose. Some are truly works of art, but birds can be just as happy bathing in the saucers from the bottom of large clay pots. The major requirements are that they not be too deep—only 1-1/2 to 2 inches, perhaps with some flat stones for birds that like really shallow water—and that the water be changed frequently. Changing the water is important for their health, and may be necessary as often as daily in order to protect the birds health and prevent the development of mosquito larvae.

The birdbath should be placed near a tree or bush that will provide nearby cover, but not so near that a lurking predator can pounce on them while they are bathing or drinking. A drip of water will alert them to the presence of water, and they really enjoy trickling fountains or misters. For the winter birdbath heaters are available, either as separate units or built into the birdbath. When natural sources are frozen for several days, this can be crucial.

If you provide a source of water, you may see birds that you otherwise wouldn't, since not all birds come to feeders, while all need to drink water. You get the double benefit of providing a necessity for our feathered friends and a source of enjoyment for yourself.

For information on birdbath sources, you can search the Internet, or contact the author.

Kate Oschwald [bbnestbox@1starnet.com]

Remember 2002 Convention
Celebration of Texas Blues
October 11th – 12th, 2002
Quality Inn. San Marcos

Did You Know

While Bluebirds are heavy insect eaters during the summer months, they supplement their diet with fruit during the winter. This makes fruit trees an important consideration when planning your landscape for bluebirds. Bluebirds do not eat seeds.

Bluebird family bathing photo courtesy of "The Bluebird Monitor's Guide", Gregory K. Scott, Photographer



Happy Birthday, Texas Bluebird Society!

We were “planted” in the fall of last year. My, how we have grown! This first year has brought over 100 memberships (many of them household memberships).

It's been a year full of highlights:

- Our first undertaking was a booth in the Wildscapes tent at the **Texas Parks and Wildlife Expo 2001** ... an event that attracted close to 50,000 visitors. We'll be there again this year with a display emphasizing desirable features for a bluebird nestbox in Texas. Be sure to look for us ... it's October 5th – 6th on the grounds of TP&W Headquarters.
- Soon we were installing “TBS Nestbox Trails”. Each trail features “Texas Blues-style” nestboxes, “oversized” with wide vents and large overhanging roofs. A vital part of establishing each trail was finding a volunteer who would commit to monitor the boxes .
 - This first season the trail at **Skycreek Ranch Golf Course** in Keller produced 98 Eastern Bluebirds, 10 Tufted Titmouse and 6 Carolina Chickadees. It taught us to carefully consider mother nature when installing nestboxes. This trail was subjected to the rush of flood waters (we lost one nestbox and an incubating female bluebird).
 - Our trail at the new Lake Tawakoni State Park was installed by a Boy Scout Troop from Kaufman. The Crowders, Park Hosts, monitor the nestboxes. This trail was the highlight of the Wills Point Bluebird Festival bus tour ... with visitors exclaiming “we saw bluebirds everywhere as we entered the park”. TBS also provided a “Bluebird Info Room” at the Festival.
 - Our nestboxes at Hornsby Bend in Austin are significant as they mark our first joint venture with a local Audubon group. Travis Audubon has been a “goodly uncle” to this organization – for which we will be forever grateful
- This year we began giving presentations on bluebirds and other cavity nesters to local Audubon groups, first to Travis Audubon (who presented us with a generous check to provide encouragement and needed finances at start -up) and then to the Huntsville group. We have a talk scheduled with Collin County Audubon Society in February 2003.
- Our “Spring Event” in Sulphur Springs was a small gathering that provided education and fellowship between a core group of “bluebirders”. It gave us practice for our much larger “Celebration of Texas Blues” in San Marcos, October 11th – 12th.

The members who joined during our first year reported that in the 2001 Season they had 1,246 nestboxes that “fledged” 2,658 bluebirds and 608 other cavity-nesting birds. Nestbox Summaries for 2002 are starting to arrive. (Have you sent yours?)

Yes, it has been a good year giving us a firm foundation as we work toward “Bluebirds Across Texas ... one nestbox at a time”.

P.S. While we're talking about “Bluebird Gourmets”, planting and growing ... in my quest to attract bluebirds to my backyard, I'm making valiant attempts to provide pokeberries. I'd read that the grape-sized berries that grow in clusters on the purple stems of poke wood are irresistible to bluebirds. (Sure enough, my parents in East Texas have bluebirds in their yard now that they allow poke “weed” to grow.)

Attempts to transplant poke from acidic East Texas soil in my Central Texas alkaline soil failed (of course). I do have a healthy poke (with those berries that stay on long after other berries are long gone) growing in a pot of East Texas soil. And, I've recently planted some poke seeds that a friend gathered from the berries on a plant in Central Texas.

And, just as it is with mealworms and water, once I have pokeberries I'll have the delight of attracting other birds ... while I'm waiting for bluebirds. Pokeberries are eaten by cardinals, finches, woodpeckers, orioles, mockingbirds and other fruit-eating birds.

Pauline Tom [tbs@austin.rr.com]



Bluebird with berry photo courtesy of "The Bluebird Monitor's Guide", Harry Krueger, Photographer

**TBS Speakers Bureau
Accepting 2003 Bookings
Doug Rohde, 972 317-5500**

NATURAL FRUITS AND BERRIES FOR BIRDS

The bluebirds diet consists primarily of insects during the spring and summer months. In early fall they can often be found feeding on early ripening fruits and berries even when there is still an abundance of insects. Bluebirds have relatively soft beaks and lack the strength to peck their way into the hard fruit of pears, peaches and apples as the crows, jays and mockingbirds can. The bluebirds also lack the type of beak to allow them to shear the fleshy meat off the larger fruits, as redbirds will. Commercial grapes are too large for them to swallow whole but if allowed to dry on the vine the bluebirds can eat the natural raisins that the fruit pickers miss.

This “weak beak” has actually helped bluebirds in their popularity since they damage very few commercial fruit crops and do no damage to grain fields. Since most of the bird feeding is done in winter and consists of supplying various seeds you will not be able to actually have bluebirds eating your “bird seed” or even cracking and eating sunflower or safflower seeds although they occasionally will eat shelled sunflower seeds.

No, bluebirds are more independent and will search out wild fruits to feed themselves through even the most severe winter weather! There are many species of birds that rely on small fruits and berries to survive and bluebirds are often seen feeding with or near flocks of robins, cedar waxwings or being harassed by a mockingbird that is guarding its’ favorite fruit producing plants!

Bluebirds traditionally fed on “trash” plants or those considered down right invasive by farmers! They, like many other bird and animal species relied heavily on privet, multiflora roses, black berries, hackberry trees, Chinese tallow and red cedar trees that will spring up along fence lines in the eastern half of Texas creating a food supply and a protective barrier from predators, humans and even tractors. With the widespread use of herbicides most landowners are keeping their fence lines free of these food-producing plants.

Bluebirds seek out the shelter of woodlands in winter and normally choose an area with mature trees and near running streams or rivers. These areas provide the most fruits that they depend on and also a more abundant supply of insects that continue to hatch from the water all winter. Some of their favorite foods come from vines with the fruits found high in the treetops. Virginia creeper, the small wild grapes, green briar or “cat’s-claw” and poison ivy berries are all major food sources found on vines.

In relatively open woodlands they feast on dogwood berries. Bushes like elder berries, pokeweed, American Beauty bush and huckleberries provide early winter food. The American holly and the smaller bush, deciduous holly are good berry producing plants found in the wild and also at your landscape

centers! These provide berries that don’t ripen until early spring and are often the last plants to have berries along with the sumac bushes when late spring blizzards hit the state.

West Texas has a greatly reduced variety of berry producing plants for the bluebirds but they make up for this in sheer amounts of fruit produced with the abundant stands of cedars/junipers and vast amounts of missile-toe found parasitizing the mesquite and oak trees throughout this arid region of the state.

Whether you own one or a thousand acres consider protecting the berry producing plants on your property. Remember that hollies and cedar/junipers are some of the rare male/female plants that either produce seeds/fruit or only pollen on a separate plant! To get adequate fruit set you will need about one male plant for every 12 female plants.

Make plans to add berry-producing plants to your yard this winter! A row of blackberries and bushes of blueberries can be added along a garden edge. Trees like the ornamental Bradford pears, American and Foster holly make beautiful larger trees. Dogwoods, Yaupon holly and deciduous holly are great for smaller areas. Check with your local landscape companies and only use berry producing plants that are adapted for your region.

Keith Kridler [kridler@1starnet.com]

To Feed or Not to Feed

This is a question many birders struggle with at one time or another. Proponents of feeding maintain their feeders may be the only reliable food source for some birds during harsh times. Opponents maintain that the feeders produce unnaturally large concentrations of birds and therefore may be a source of disease spread and stress to the birds.

Whether you choose to feed or not is a personal choice, but if you do so, please do it responsibly. Clean your feeders and the areas around them regularly – if you are seeing seeds germinate in your feeders they are long overdue for some maintenance. Discard old seed. Wash the feeders regularly. Rake the area beneath the feeders carefully.

If you see signs of disease, please discontinue feeding until you have thoroughly cleaned the feeders with a 10% bleach solution.

Mark Klym kismitklym@totalaccess.net

RAISING MEALWORMS

There are a number of choices a "Friend of the Blues" can make for providing a nutrition source for bluebirds and many of the other Texas natives. One of those food choices is **mealworms**.

Mealworms are not really worms at all but rather the larval form of the darkling beetle (*Tenebrio molitor*). They are easy and inexpensive to raise. All you need is 1) a plastic container or bucket, 2) bran, 3) a source of moisture (apple, carrot, or potato) and 4) a small "starter colony".

The number of mealworms you can raise in a single cycle is a function of the surface area of the container. So the first step is to select a container and calculate/measure its surface area. Some use a 5-gallon plastic paint bucket (clean, without any residue), which typically provides 0.8 square feet of surface area. Others chose a shallow (six inch minimum) clear plastic container, such as a "stackable storage" container. A 20 x 36 inch container provides a surface area of 5 square feet. You can expect to produce up to 3000 mealworms per square foot of container.

The container needs to be well ventilated. Drilling 1/4 inch holes in the top of the container is one approach or covering the container with screen or cheesecloth is another. If there is any sign of condensation, add ventilation.

Fill the container to a depth of 3 inches with bran (wheat bran, chick starter or a combination of the two). Bran is available in large quantities at your local feed store or small quantities in the bulk bin of your grocery store. Add 1/2 apple per square foot of surface area by cutting the apple in half and putting the round side down into the bran until the flat side is even with the top of the bran. (Increase to 1 apple per square foot after the mealworms hatch.) Do not peel the apple. Check the culture weekly and replace the apples when they are completely eaten or half spoiled. Potatoes and carrots can also be used as moisture sources.

Add 30 to 40 mealworms per square foot as the "starter colony". Finally, add 3 or 4 large pieces of brown grocery bag paper on top. Store the container at room temperature or slightly above (80 degrees is optimum). A dark or dimly lit location is best (thus "darkling beetle").

The "starter colony" will go through a series of molts. After the last molt, the larvae come to the surface and metamorphose into white pupae. After 1 to 3 weeks, the beetle emerges. The beetles are winged, but seldom fly. They lay eggs for 1 to 3 weeks and then die. Egg incubation is 4 to 20 days. Then, thousands of small mealworms appear. The overall cycle is 2 to 3 months.

A slight odor of ammonia will signal the build-up of waste products. Sift the grain to separate the mealworms, clean the container and add new grain. Dry cat food can be added to enhance the protein value.

Fully-grown mealworms may be stored in a well-ventilated container with bran and a moisture source. Mealworm metabolism may be slowed by refrigeration. This will prevent them from turning into pupae for as much as six months. Remove the container from the refrigerator one day a week to allow them to feed.

Sources: "Bring Back the Bluebirds" by Andy Troyer and NABS website

Doug Rohde d.rohde@attbi.com



Bluebird pair at feeder photo courtesy of "The Bluebird Monitor's Guide", Hugh P. Smith, Photographer

Annual Membership fee remains \$10/individual & \$15/household

Texas Bluebird Society P. O. Box 40868 Austin, TX 78704

E-Mail [tbs@austin.rr.com]

Website [www.texasbluebirdsociety.org]

Pauline Tom 512 268-5678 (home)

Keith Kridler 903 572-7529 (home)

Doug Rohde 972 317-5500 (home)