

Western Bluebird Nest Box Handout

By Friends of Mueller State Park



Below you will find out where and how to place your nest box, who else might use the box, and how to keep attracting Bluebirds or other desirable birds, year after year.

❖ Features of your Bluebird Nesting Box

- ***Blemishes, knots and scars:*** All of these help the box look more natural and gives each box a unique personality.
- ***What is the popped-out nail for?*** This secures the side that opens. You can replace it with a screw to make it harder to open. You will want to open this door at the end of Summer to clean out the old nest. In the early stages, it's okay to peek in on the nest to see how many eggs or young there are. Just be quick, and don't do it when the baby's get close to fledging (leaving the nest).
- ***Gaps at the top edge:*** Those are not an accident, they are for air flow, especially if the box is placed in the open sun, which it should be!
- ***Long backboard:*** This allows you to easily mount the box on the side of a tree, or on the side or top of a wooden post. It can also be mounted on a metal post using self-tapping screws.
- ***Holes at top and bottom:*** These make it easy to mount the box on a tree or pole. Tree mounting does not harm the tree. Do not over-tighten the screws or you might crack the backboard, but you want it tight enough that it doesn't wobble. If mounting on top of a wooden post, open the door and drill a screw through the bottom.
- ***There is no finish on the box:*** Never paint or stain a Bluebird nest box, it will actually deter them from using it. Let it age naturally.

(If you have any questions or problems trying to attract bluebirds, or any problems with the box: Email Linda Groat at towhee1@live.com and she can either help you directly or forward your issue to me. Be sure to include your contact information!)



❖ **Where do Western Bluebirds like to nest:**

Nesting habitat for the Western Bluebird is open woodlands where they are usually observed hunting insects. The male and female search for nest sites together, inspecting holes in trees to see if they are suitable. Natural nest cavities can be in living trees, or dead snags. Many kinds of trees are used, including pine, oak, aspen, willow, cottonwood, and sycamore.

Western Bluebirds are among the birds that nest in cavities – but cannot carve them out on their own. Look at their bills — they’re not equipped to dig out their own holes. An old woodpecker nest is often used as well as natural tree holes. Western bluebirds readily take to nest boxes and they occasionally nest inside buildings or in the mud nests of swallows.

❖ **House Placement:**

Bluebirds start checking out potential nesting sites as early as March. So you’ll want your bird house cleared out by then. It’s actually better to let it “age” a little over the Winter. Check your box in late February or early March to make sure it’s clean and not inhabited by mice.

Look for a mostly open field with a few scattered trees. Fence posts often make great locations. The box should be between 4 and 6 feet off the ground, and generally face east to southeast. This has to do with helping to regulate the summer heat. If you have more than one box, they should be about 200 feet apart. I’d also suggest you place it where you can view it from your home if possible, but you don’t want the box too close to your home. I have a box that is about 50 feet in front of our living room window. It’s particularly fun to watch the parents repeatedly visiting the box when they are feeding young.

❖ **How to Mount your Bird House:**

The bird house can be mounted on a wooden or metal post, or on a tree. Posts on a fence row are ideal.

A wooden post or tree is the easiest mount. The box can be mounted on the top of the post, or on the side like a tree mount. Screw through the bottom. Don’t use nails as it will be hard to get them out if you want to move the box later. This won’t hurt the tree at all.



For a tubular metal post – Using the pre-drilled holes at top and bottom of the backboard drill a self-tapping screw through the wood into the pipe. You don't want it to wobble. Use a third screw at an angle if necessary. You can also use a bolt and nut.

For a T-post – pass a wire through the holes at top and bottom, hold the box 5 to 6 feet off the ground, and twist the wire around the T-post. This is probably the least desirable method because it will be hard to keep the box from moving and takes a bit more work.

❖ **Bird House Maintenance:**

Once you're sure the birds have finished raising their young, clean out the old nest. Warning, they are messy tenants. You will want to scrape off all the poo from inside the box and remove the old nest – take it away from the nest box so you don't give away the nest location. At the end of the nesting season you can spray bleach inside the box to kill off any parasites.

❖ **About the nest:**

The females do almost all of the nest construction, gathering grasses, straw, pine needles, moss, other plant fibers, and fur from the ground and carrying it to the nest. She lines the nest cup with these, rootlets, feathers, horsehair, and sometimes bits of plastic.

She may take 2 weeks to build her first nest of the season, but is much quicker when building a second nest of the year, completing it in under a week. However, in our area they typically only have one brood per season.



- Clutch Size: 2-8 eggs. 5 is average.
- Incubation Period: 12-17 days
- Nestling Period: 18-25 days
- Egg Description: Pale blue and unmarked, sometimes white.

❖ **Nesting habits of the Western Bluebird**

Western Bluebirds have a gentle look, but territory battles can get heated. Rival males may grab each other's legs, tumble to the ground, and then pin their opponent on the ground, stand over him, and jab at him with his bill. They will also defend their box from other species of birds.

Occasionally, Western Bluebirds have helpers at the nest. Most of the extra birds attending nests are helping their presumed parents, some after their own nests have failed. Western Bluebirds appear to be monogamous — one male pairs with one female to raise young each year.

An adult Western Bluebird weighs about an ounce. It needs about 15 kilocalories per day, or 23 kilocalories if raising young.

❖ **Natural History of the Western Bluebird**

During Summer, Western Bluebirds mainly eat insects; in Winter they switch to eating mostly fruits and seeds, supplemented with insects. They typically catch ground-dwelling insects such as grasshoppers, caterpillars, beetles, ants, wasps, and pill bugs, as well as eating spiders and snails. Winter foods include many kinds of berries, particularly elderberry, grapes, mistletoe, raspberries and blackberries, serviceberry, sumac, chokecherries, juniper, and even poison oak berries!

Western Bluebirds tend to perch fairly low to the ground on prominent limbs, fence posts, and signs. They also tend to stay low to the ground when flying. They forage for insects by scanning the ground from a perch, then abruptly drop to seize something they've spied. Outside breeding season, Western Bluebirds are quite social, forming flocks up to approximately 100, sometimes with Mountain Bluebirds, American Robins, and Yellow-rumped Warblers.

Western Bluebirds live in open woodlands and at the edges of woods. They are less frequently seen in large meadows than Mountain Bluebirds. They live in evergreen and deciduous woods, particularly ponderosa pine but also pinyon pine-juniper, mixed conifers, and aspen stands. They thrive in disturbed areas such as burned forests or logged areas that still contain dead trees suitable for nesting and perching. During Winter they inhabit pinyon-juniper woods, stands of mesquite, oak, streamside woods, coastal chaparral, and even some deserts.

Bluebirds leave breeding grounds in the northern parts of their range to winter in the southeastern U.S. or Mexico. Populations in the northern part of their range are entirely migratory, spending winters in the southeastern United States or Mexico.

❖ **Other birds that might use your nest box**



The size of the nest hole on your box is about 1 ½ inches. The size of the hole is what determines which birds will be attracted to it. Western Bluebirds prefer the 1 ½" hole although adults that are 3 or more years old tend to be slightly larger, brighter in color and are often more successful at nesting attempts. Like all things, experience matters.

Other birds that can use that size hole are Tree Swallows, Violet-green Swallows, and less desirable birds such as House Wrens, and in suburban areas House Sparrows.



Tree Swallows and Violet-green Swallows both like open fields and catch their food in mid-flight. In that respect they don't compete with bluebirds for food. *Recent experiments show that you can*

place nesting boxes within 15 feet of each other so that swallows can use one box and will defend it from other swallows, while bluebirds will use the other, defending it from other bluebirds.

House Wrens, on the other hand, will fill a nest box with small twigs that will prevent any other bird from using it. They will fill several boxes in the same way to keep other wrens or birds from nesting too close.

If you get wrens and don't want them, try moving the box into a more open area.

House Sparrows have proven to be a mortal enemy of all bluebirds by stealing their nest sites, and even killing the adult bluebirds or their young. House sparrows can be difficult to beat. One method is to drill a second nest hole next to the original which allows the bluebirds to defend their nest easier. Using clear tops, hardware cloth, or even no tops at all, have all been used to discourage house sparrows since they don't like open tops. Bluebirds will often use open tops of tree cavities, and fence posts. Those solutions require extra holes in the bottom to allow for drainage.



❖ Who are the Friends of Mueller State Park and how you can help us?

We are people, just like you! We love Mueller State Park and want to do what we can to help make it even better. Colorado State Parks are limited by their budgets and options for making improvements. All donations and grant money we raise supports youth programs and Mueller State Park projects. All members are volunteers and the FoMSP has no paid staff. Thank you again for your donation! Please check out our website to find out more of what we do!

