

Songbirds of Missouri

Eastern Bluebird

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The eastern bluebird, *Sialis Sialis*, belongs to the bird family Turdidae, a group of species commonly known as the thrushes. This family, which has 304 species, consists primarily of songbirds with large eyes, slender bills and strong legs. Besides the eastern bluebird, North America is home to the western bluebird and the mountain bluebird. Neither of these species is found in Missouri.

Missouri's state bird has always been a colorful sight in this region. Now, thanks to bird lovers throughout the eastern United States, it's becoming a more common one.

The bluebird's bright color and clear, distinctive song have made it a long-time favorite of humans. This fondness has been expressed in poems and songs, including Art Mooney's "Bluebird of Happiness," — one of the top-selling songs of 1948.

Ironically, however, the bluebird population was in a steep decline at the same time it was rising on the music charts in the mid-1900s. To understand what happened to bluebirds, and why the population appears to be recovering, let's find out a few things about the bird first.

Bluebirds are year-round residents in this area and can frequently be spotted perching on fences or trees lining pastures and grasslands. Food choices for bluebirds are seasonal. In spring and summer, they mostly eat insects. But when fewer insects are available during fall and winter, they eat fruits, seeds and the vegetable matter of various plants.

Throughout most of Missouri, bluebirds arrive at nesting sites in February or March. The male selects the nest location, which consists of some type of cavity. These can be naturally occurring tree holes or man-made structures. Bluebirds lay a clutch of three to seven eggs in March or early April and incubate the eggs for 13 to 16 days. Fledglings leave the nest 15 to 20 days after hatching. Female bluebirds often have two or three broods per year.

As the 1900s progressed, it became increasingly difficult for bluebirds to have one brood, let alone more. Although several factors contributed to the bluebird's decline in North America, biologists agreed one of the main reasons was nesting competition from European starlings and house sparrows. These two exotic species were intentionally introduced into North America in the late 1800s and their populations exploded. As these birds took over many of the cavity-type nesting sites — some-

what limited in the natural world to begin with — there were fewer left for the eastern bluebirds. The reduced nesting sites resulted in fewer bluebirds. By the early 1980s, bird experts estimated the bluebird population had been reduced by 90 percent in the past six decades.

To restore the bluebird population,

numerous conservation efforts began in Missouri and elsewhere. The most noticeable project — and some biologists say, the most effective — was the construction of thousands of bluebird nesting boxes throughout the bird's range. Bluebirds liked the man-made structures and adapted easily to using them as nesting sites. Over the ensuing decades, birding surveys and nest box studies indicated the eastern bluebird was finally making a comeback.

Because of the bird's early nesting activity, February is a good time to put up bluebird boxes or clean out existing ones. People interested in making their landscape bluebird-friendly can improve habitat by planting dogwoods, sumacs, cedars, hawthorns or similar plants that provide natural winter foods.

Information about bluebirds and bluebird nest boxes can be found in the Missouri Department of Conservation's free booklet, "Bluebirds of Missouri." Instructions for building a bluebird box can also be found in another free booklet, "Woodworking for Wildlife." These two publications are available at most Missouri Department of Conservation offices.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4)



Be a Bird Watcher!

Look...

Eastern bluebirds are year-round residents in the southern half of Missouri. Their winter range stretches from mid-Missouri south to the Gulf of Mexico. In summer, their breeding and nesting range extends north into Canada.

Bluebirds can usually be seen around rural grasslands with scattered trees that can be used for perching and nesting. They also can occasionally be found in grassy urban settings such as cemeteries, golf courses and parks.

...and Listen

Bluebirds have different songs for mating, establishing territories, and other purposes. Their most common call sounds like "chur-wee" or "chur-lee."

