

TECHNICAL NOTES

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The information in this technical note is a condensation of an article by Alfred G. Larson entitled "A Gift of Home" which appeared in the January/February 1982 issue of Idaho Wildlife. This article is used with the permission of the editor of the Idaho Wildlife Magazine.

This article discusses the ecological needs and nest box construction for the Mountain Bluebird (Sialia currucoides) which is the Idaho State bird and the Western Bluebird (Sialia mexicana). This information can be used to provide assistance to schools (outdoor classroom), scouts, 4-H wildlife groups and interested individuals.

A GIFT OF HOME

By Alfred G. Larson

Bluebirds need a lot of help from people, but one of the more important things is concentration. Maybe it's the bird's personality - shy, pacific, soft spoken - that makes people wait most of their lives before they take any kind of active interest in them.

Basic descriptions of Idaho's two bluebirds are not hard to find. The mountain bluebird is the Idaho state bird, a good choice for it is found throughout the state. It is about six inches long, bright blue on the back and powder blue on the undersides. The female is grayish brown with some blue shading on the wings and the tail.

A close relative of the mountain bluebird is the western bluebird. This bluebird is slightly smaller than the mountain. The male is about five and a half inches long. It has a dark blue back and rusty colored undersides and upper back. Unlike the eastern bluebird, the western species has a blue throat. The female is browner than the mountain bluebird and displays some rust color on its breast.

Both the mountain and western species have a preference for habitat that goes with their names. The mountain bluebird will generally be found in high country and the western sticks closer to lower elevation habitats. However, their ranges overlap, and one of these overlap areas is Smith Prairie in Elmore County.

The easiest way to find bluebirds in a field guide is to remember they are members of the thrush family. That makes them close relatives of the more familiar robin. If you look closely, you will notice the two birds have a similar shape. However, that is where the similarities start breaking down. For example, robins are much more aggressive than bluebirds, defending their territory from most other threatening species. Bluebirds will defend their homeground from others of their own species, but will not take on other major competitors for nesting spots. Birds such as starlings, swallows and house wrens will take over a bluebird nesting hole or box very quickly. Many consider this submissiveness as one of the traits leading to the decline of the bluebird over much of the United States.

The bluebird, as a secondary cavity nester, will move in and occupy those cavities the woodpeckers build, use and abandon. Bluebirds have a lot of company when it comes to competing for these nesting spots. Wrens like them. So do chickadees, swallows and others. All these species use the same nesting cavity year after year.

Habitat for cavity nesters has been decreasing steadily. Woodcutters and forest management have been cleaning up the woodlands by removing dead and dying trees. Rotting snags are being felled. Orchardists are removing dead wood and farmers are turning to steel fence posts. In general there are fewer and fewer places where the primary nesters can build holes for the secondary nesters to inherit.

Over time the competition for these dwindling nest sites has become fierce. Two notorious immigrants - the European starling and English sparrow - will occupy every available hole in their adopted territory. They crowd out the more desirable species, especially the mild-mannered bluebirds.

The nest boxes I put up for bluebirds resemble mail boxes to a degree. Some boxes designed for wrens have a slotted instead of a round hole. Since bluebirds can produce large broods, ample space must be provided. My bluebird boxes are made of 1 x 6-inch scrap lumber. The roof slopes to the front. The front of the box is 10 inches high and is hinged near the top for easier cleaning. The hole is placed six inches above the floor, which is 4 inches by 5 1/2 inches.

The size of the entrance hole is a controversial topic among bird lovers. Most published specifications for bluebird houses call for a 1 1/2-inch entrance hole. This is fine for the western bluebird. The mountain bluebird, however, is slightly larger. It can get into a 1 1/2-inch hole if it struggles, but a 1 5/8-inch hole is more to its liking.

The reason the hole size is controversial is that starlings can get into a 1 5/8-inch hole but cannot enter the 1 1/2-inch one. Most bluebird house plans call for the 1 1/2-inch hole for this reason - one less bird for the bluebirds to compete with. The best way to resolve the problem is simply to use the larger hole if you live in country where starlings are scarce. Use the smaller hole if there are a lot of starlings around. The starlings can enter the 1 5/8-inch hole but not the 1 1/2-inch one.

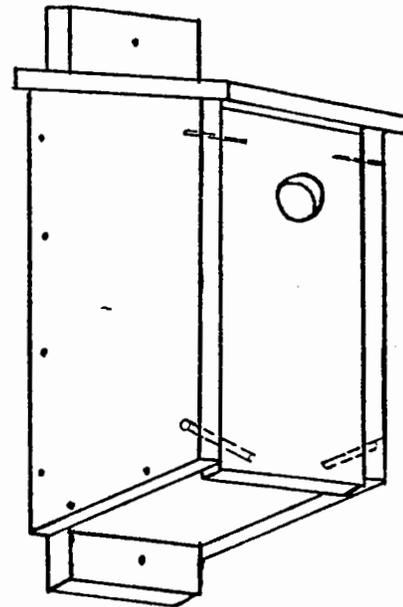
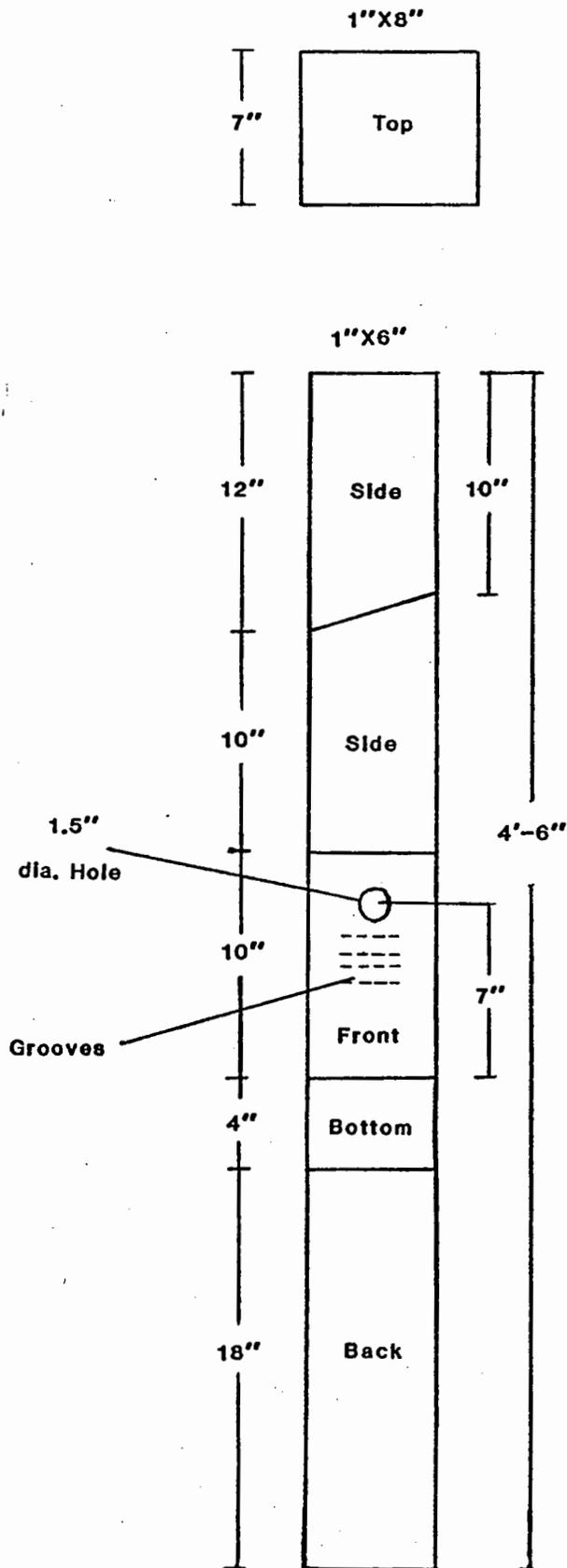
Once a person has the bird boxes built, where does he put them? Bluebirds are found in the higher country. They seem to prefer woodland areas with large clearings and open hillsides. Boxes are placed near the woods and facing the open areas. Avoid brush patches; these are wren favorites. Height above the ground seems to make no difference to the bluebirds, so I place most of the boxes at eye level or near the top of fence posts.

Once you have the boxes up, bluebirds can be expected in Idaho about the first week of March. They will start building nests in April and are incubating the eggs in May. Most of the second broods are fledged before the end of July. They migrate to their winter quarters in late fall. An occasional bluebird has been seen in the Boise Valley as late as December, but this is the exception to the rule.

Nest material varies with what is available around the nest box. Grass seems to be the most widely accepted medium, laced at times with pine needles. In juniper country, fine strips of bark form the bulk of the nest. The average clutch size is four to five blue eggs. There may be as many as seven. Done mostly by the female, incubation takes about 14 days. The helpless nestlings are cared for by both parents and will leave the nest in 14 to 18 days. Bluebirds maintain family groups and it is not unusual to find the young of the first brood bringing food to the second brood.

The main food item seems to be grasshoppers and other insects. Bluebirds also enjoy a bit of fruit now and then. They can be seen hovering like a kestrel as they search for food on the ground. They also will dart out from a perch and catch insects on the wing the way a fly-catcher would.

A Little Help...



The front of this nest box swings open to allow easy cleaning. The hinge nails should not be driven in too tightly and should be directly opposite each other so the front does not blind when lifted up. The bottom of the front is held in place by nails inserted at an angle into drilled holes. Leave ¼-inch openings at the top under the eave for ventilation.

Materials are scrap 1-inch by 6-inch lumber. A plank four and a half feet long will build one nest box. Galvanized or coated nails hold better than smooth nails. To avoid splitting the boards with nails, use a drill bit slightly smaller than the nails to start the holes.

The roof of the box should be beveled slightly so that there is a snug fit against the back of the box. Bluebirds use a 1½-inch hole cut six inches above the floor. (Remember, the 1⅝-inch hole is preferred if there is no problem with starlings.) Grooves should be sawed beneath the hole on the inside. This gives birds a toe-hold for easy exit.

A non-toxic paint such as latex should be used and only the outside of the box should be painted. A light colored paint or stain is best and will add years to the life of the box.

Place the nest box on posts, snags or tree trunks between four and 15 feet from the ground. It gets hot inside the box in summer, so select a spot that is shaded from the afternoon sun. Boxes should not be placed closer than 100 yards. Bluebirds are extremely territorial and prefer open areas near the nest. House sparrows will be discouraged if the boxes are set up away from farm buildings. Fewer wrens will take over boxes if they are away from thich brush.