

“But I thought Bluebirds were supposed to LIKE that!” *by Regina Garr*

Like so many other folks, my husband Steve and I are frequently asked to speak to groups about bluebirds. We do love doing that almost as much as we enjoy being with our bluebirds! Steve’s been doing it for decades longer than me, so he is much better at fielding all the different questions and concerns. Generally, the toughest questions for me are those that involve a “mindset” about trying to attract bluebirds based on finding out what it is they “like best”. It happened to me again the other day. A nice lady came up to me after a program and told me how she had all her boxes on metal poles, five feet off the ground, with 1 1/2 inch entrance holes, made of unpainted western cedar, and spaced at proper intervals. AND YET, the bluebirds in her area chose to nest in her neighbor’s yard who did all the “wrong” things. She was frustrated because she thought she’d done everything that bluebirds are supposed to like, and yet they chose to nest in “substandard” housing!

I certainly feel for those folks who have “tried everything bluebirds are supposed to like” and still have not had bluebirds nest with them. However, I think the real problem is in forgetting, or not understanding, why most nest box designs and criteria were implemented in the first place.

It’s easy to forget that Bluebirds are just cavity-nesters—just wonderful, gorgeous little birds looking for a *cavity* in which to lay eggs and raise their young.

When habitat loss and the introduction of non-native bird species motivated early bluebird enthusiasts to “bring back the bluebirds”, they did so through man-made cavities they could monitor and use to try to help protect the bluebirds. In other words, they were trying to provide a safer cavity for the birds. Nest boxes were designed



with 1 1/2 inch entrance holes to EXCLUDE non-native starlings, yet allow access by the Bluebirds. Boxes were placed on poles approximately 5 feet high (or eye level to most people) in order to facilitate easy monitoring, which makes for a safer cavity. Metal poles could be fitted with predator baffles, while trees are the natural source many of those same predators will readily go to look for food. Even though there has certainly been MANY different styles of nest box designs over the years I

believe, for the most part, initial objectives have been to build a safer cavity for the bluebirds. Safer from the elements, from predators and from parasites. I don’t think the goal of most early nest box architects was to find the most irresistible house that would entice a bluebird to be magnetically drawn to the box.

I do believe bluebirds *like* a heated bird bath in the winter, they *like* short grass in which to hunt for food, and they certainly *like* lots of perch area. But that is a far cry from trying to figure out if the bluebirds in “our area” prefer a light blue nest box, or the one that is a chalet, or the one that is made from a PVC fence post. I would rather we concentrate on which of those boxes would keep nesting bluebirds safe and allow us to properly monitor the box. And, having said that, I **do** hope all those nest box engineers out there keep designing and redesigning nest boxes and experimenting with new ideas. We have seen HUGE improvements in nest box design over the years, and I am sure there is room for more! For instance, many of us in Missouri experienced a greater problem with heat in our nest boxes this nesting season than in years past. During incubation of the third clutch, much of Missouri was in the middle of a heat wave with triple digit temperatures. I don’t remember ever talking to so many bluebirders that had unhatched eggs in boxes, perhaps due to heat. Adapting boxes to be cooler during late summer in Missouri might be the next step in raising more bluebirds.



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