

Nest Boxes for Bluebirds Can Be Fun



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: The bluebird nest boxes at the Extension Center have predator guards both below and above.

Fred Q. Vroom, M.D. is a retired physician and the Volunteer Director of the Master Gardener Wildlife Program with the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu> Send your gardening questions to Ask-a-MasterGardener@leoncountyfl.gov

For Thursday, November 24, 2011
Tallahassee Democrat

Thirty years ago I nailed a bird nest box to a tree thinking I was doing a good thing. I might as well have been taking helpless chicks out of the nest and giving them to a raccoon or snake to eat alive. Ornithologists will tell you if you put up a nest box without protection, you are part of the problem.

If you like birds and want to help, then never nail a nest box to a fence post or to a tree. It should be mounted on a pole, and there should be a predator guard on the pole to stop climbing predators. My preference is a stove pipe type of guard with the top 4 ½ to 5 feet above the ground. Ideally there should even be predator guards on top of the nest box to discourage flying predators.

A rat snake is an excellent climber and can reach two-thirds of its body length, so a six-foot rat snake can reach up four feet. A cat can jump five feet. A raccoon that reaches the nest box can reach inside a nest box eight inches. An excellent reference for more detail is <http://www.sialis.org/baffle.htm>.

You can put up nest boxes for many different birds, however my favorite is the bluebird. Why? Well, a bluebird is beautiful and they are helpful in that they eat insects. A bluebird can spot a grasshopper at a hundred yards. They are entertaining with their antics of wing waves with their mate. They will battles with other bluebirds over their territory. They have a good personality. And they are patriotic, being one of the few birds that is red, white and blue.

An ideal location for a bluebird nest box is over a grassed area so insects are easily seen. Morning sun is good to warm up the nest, but protection from the afternoon sun is preferred also. Try to locate the nest box so that a fence, bushes or trees are within twenty to fifty feet for the first flight of the new fledglings. The chicks may have trouble gaining altitude, may even lose altitude and crash land, in which case they will need something on which to climb while trying to avoid being eaten.

I like using paired boxes, with two boxes twelve feet apart. This doubles the chance of getting a nesting pair of bluebirds. Bluebirds will tolerate another species such as a Carolina chickadee being in the neighboring box, but they will drive off another nesting pair of bluebirds within a hundred yards.

I do nest checks weekly during the baby season, from March 1 until September 1. Early in the season, checks are just keeping an eye on the box until bird activity occurs and nests are being built. A bluebird makes a neat cup-shaped nest out of pine needles. A couple of bluebirds can build a nest in a couple of days to a couple of weeks. After nest building begins, I look inside the nest once a week. The eggs are usually a light blue, although about three percent remain white.

When you do nest checks, look in the nest between 10 AM and 2 PM and during good weather. You do not want to disturb the female while she is laying an egg. Egg laying occurs around dawn for an hour or two. Disturbing her during this time can result in the egg breaking before it is laid which results in a painful death for the female. Do not look in during cold or wet weather; you do not want to cause hypothermia, which can kill the birds. Bluebirds commonly have two, sometimes three and even four broods a year, between March and September. In our bird boxes at the UF-IFAS Leon County Extension Center in 2011 the last brood was in July.

Incubation takes twelve to fourteen days. If you put a camera in a next box, you will see some bluebirds start incubation promptly, presumably by the more experienced females. Others seem a little confused, incubating for a few minutes to an hour or more, then leaving. These often take a day or two to settle down to almost continuous incubation. After the new chicks hatch, their first flight should come in eighteen to twenty-two days.

Nest checks can be done with direct inspection up to day twelve after hatching. Around noon, approach the nest box from the side so as not to be in the way if a bluebird leaves the nest in a hurry. Talk so they can hear your voice. Many monitors of nest boxes wear the same clothes in order to be more easily recognized by the birds. Tap on the nest box. Wait a few seconds and then look in from the side or top which should allow opening and inspection. During the first

week, any sound or activity results in the hungry mouths of chicks flying open to be fed. This is a wonderful sight for you, a thrill for other adults and magical for a child or grandchild. After a week, the chicks often remain motionless to avoid attracting the attention of a predator.

Bluebird chicks are featherless with closed eyes at hatching, covered with fuzz at three days. By day eight, they have feathers coming through the skin, looking like black pins. Eyes are fully open at eight to eleven days and they look like little birds covered with feathers on day twelve. After day twelve from hatching, it is best not to open the nest box. Doing so then may frighten the chicks into jumping.

Providing safe nest boxes for bluebirds is not only helpful to the birds. It's also a lot of fun. If you want to learn more about bluebirds, consider joining the Master Gardener program. For more information about the 2012 Master Gardener program in Leon County, visit http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/lawn_and_garden/MG/MasterGardenerProgram.shtml

###