Bluebird Nest Box

USDA Forest Service Hoosier National Forest 11/2007



The eastern bluebird is a brightly colored bird that adds a splash of color to Indiana's landscape. The bird is a sparrow-sized cousin of the robin. Males are dark sky-blue with a reddish chest. As in most birds, the female is duller in color.

Bluebirds raise two or three families each year between March and August. The female builds a neat, cup-shaped nest of grass. She lays one sky-blue egg daily for three to six days then incubates them for two weeks. Both adults will feed the young for two and a half weeks. When the young birds are ready to leave the nest, the male will teach them to find insects. The female rests, then prepares to nest again.

At one time bluebirds were plentiful in Indiana. Woodpeckers whittled holes in decaying trees and fence posts looking for food. Today many of the decaying trees and fence rows are gone. European introductions such as the starling and house sparrow compete for both food and nest sites. Bluebirds need our help if they are to flourish again.

On being a Landlord

Ideal habitat for bluebirds is a mix of hardwood forest and grasslands. It is best if the grass is short or sparse. Powerlines, scattered trees, or fenceposts provide feeding perches along the open areas. Normally they avoid built-up areas because of competition with house sparrows. If more than one bluebird box is provided, they should be 100-150 yards apart.

A box built for bluebirds may be inhabited by other birds such as wrens, swallows, chickadees, or nuthatches. Competition is natural, and it is not uncommon for one bird to evict a prior tenant by destroying their eggs, and building their own nest on top of the old nest.

Nest boxes may also be "burglarized" by predators looking for eggs or young birds. Racoons, cats, opossums, fox, and snakes may snack on the occupants of your nesting box. Hardware cloth placed under a box helps prevent snake predation. A pipe mounting or chassis grease liberally applied to the pole willl also discourage predators.

Once constructed, the box should be inspected once a week with a penlight and a mirror. Old nests should be removed after a brood leaves the box. This improves the chances the box will be reused and reduces parasites. However in August, leave the last nest in the box till spring. Bluebirds may take refuge in the box during extreme cold and the residual nest will provide added insulation.

Constructing a Bluebird Box

The entrance opening of the box should be 1½ inches in diameter and about 5 feet above the ground. Ventilation holes may be drilled near

For More Information:

Hoosier National Forest offices are open 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday - Friday.

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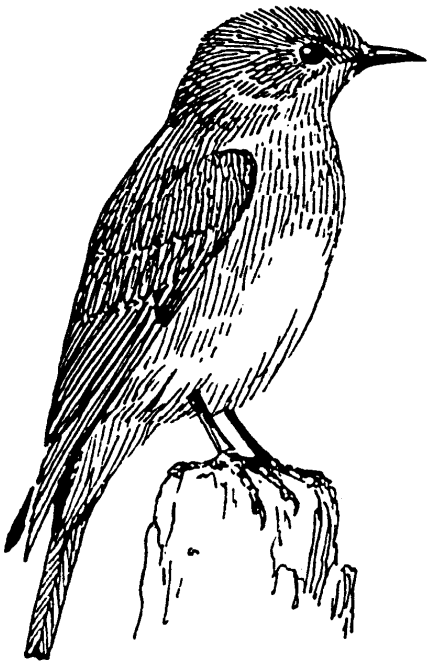
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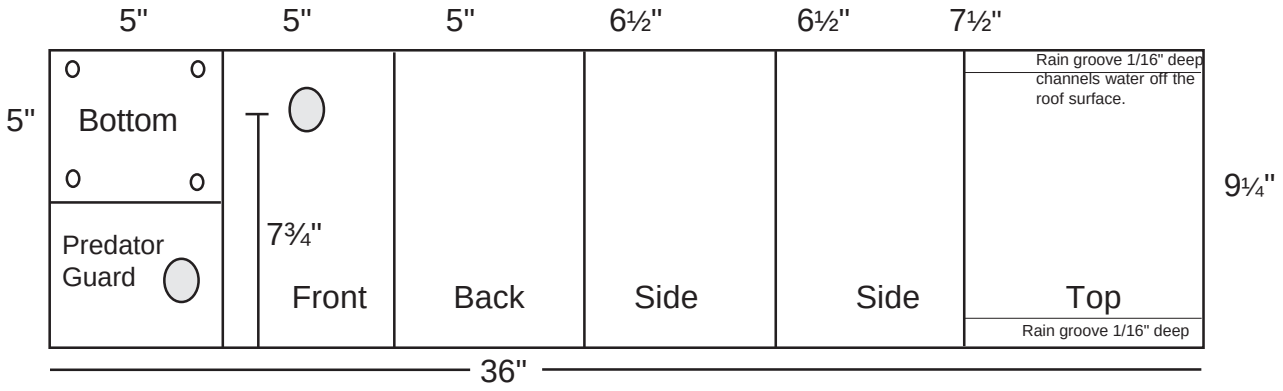
the top of each side piece. Set the box up so that the opening faces the southeast. You may leave the wood its natural color or paint the bluebird house any dull color; do not use white. Do not use chemical-treated wood and don't add a perch.

The inside surface of the front piece should be rough wood so the young birds can cling to it for feeding and to exercise their wings before their first flight. If the wood was planed, you can roughen it by sawing 1/8" slots, punching shallow holes with a screwdriver, gluing on small strips of wood like popsicle sticks, or tacking on a strip of hardware cloth. Do not paint or stain the interior.

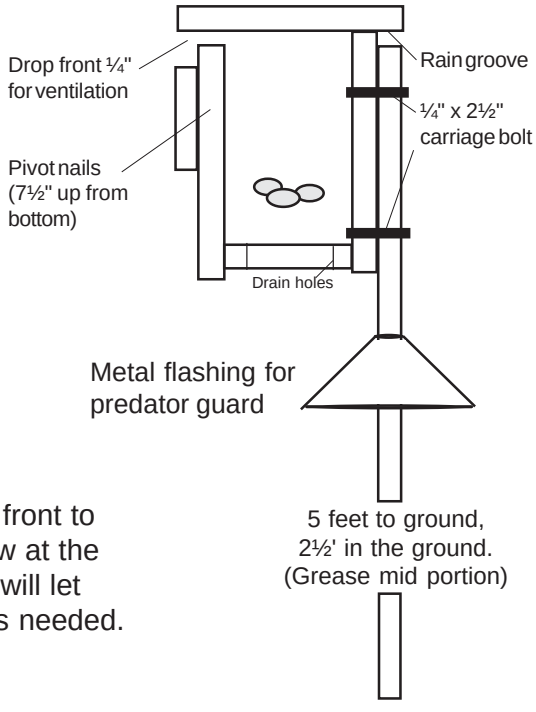
If you have a particular problem with sparrows competing with the bluebirds for use of the houses, some experts recommend cutting a 3" diameter hole in the roof of the house. Cover the hole with ¼-½" hardware cloth. Bluebirds don't seem to mind the "sun roof" but sparrows will be discouraged by it and may nest elsewhere.

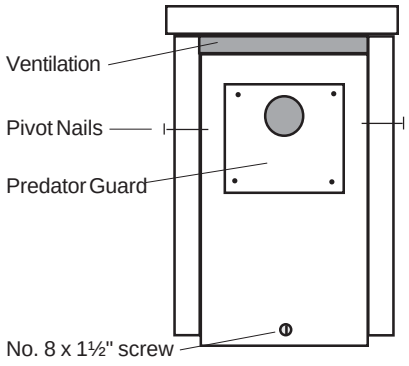


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This bluebird nesting box design uses a 3 foot board 1" x 10". Use 1½" galvanized box nails and glue all permanent joints. The predator guard is simply an extra piece of wood around the entrance hole the added thickness may protect the baby birds from intruding beaks or paws.





The pivot nails allow the front to swing out when the screw at the bottom is removed. This will let you clean out the nest as needed.