

# A March Bluebird Nest

By Mary Strasser

For the past three winters, a small flock of 5 to 9 bluebirds has overwintered in my golf course neighborhood — a coulee with a “links style” golf course surrounded by wooded bluffs and ravines, in Onalaska in west central Wisconsin. My yard, on a wooded hillside overlooking the golf course, has been a popular way station for these winter bluebirds. I have stocked platform feeders with suet crumbs, peanuts, raisins, and mealworms throughout the winter months to help the bluebirds survive the worst of winter weather, and I have been heartened by bluebird gatherings around the rim of my heated birdbath on frosty days.

Early this spring I benefited from the bluebirds’ year-round presence when, in March, a pair decided to build a nest in my backyard birdhouse—a nest that was the earliest reported bluebird nest in the state of Wisconsin in 2009! I have two bluebird houses in my yard—one on my small front lawn, and the other in a small prairie area on a south facing backyard slope. In early March a male bluebird was singing near the NABS style birdhouse in the front yard, and by March 14 (51 degrees) was excitedly showing a lady friend the Gilwood style birdhouse (designed by Steve Gilbertson) in my backyard prairie. From March 19 to March 23 the female bluebird was busily carrying nest materials into the latter birdhouse while the male escorted her and valiantly chased away sparrows and starlings daring to get too close. Both bluebirds were seen making visits to a dish feeder that I’d stocked with favorite bluebird fare at the feeding station about 50 ft. from the birdhouse. The couple also bathed and drank frequently at a birdbath located about 35 ft. from their chosen home.

The rest of the early nesting process proceeded as follows:

March 28 (39 degrees for a high! 20 degrees for a low)—The female bluebird was sitting inside the birdhouse for an extended period of time while

her mate perched on the roof. I suspected the hen was laying an egg.

March 29 and 30 (Temperatures in 40s by day, 20s at night)—The bluebird couple remained in the yard and checked on their nest regularly.

March 31 (High of 53 degrees)—The female spent most of the day sitting inside the birdhouse. She flew out and perched nearby when she heard me walking through the backyard to refill the feeders.

April 1 (High of 40 degrees)—I was certain the hen was incubating eggs when I saw the male bluebird feeding her as she sat on the nest all day.

April 2-8—I saw both bluebirds dining at the suet/mealworm dish and observed the male taking snacks to his mate as she sat inside the birdhouse.

April 9 (High of 56 degrees)—I finally peeked inside the nest and found 5 lovely blue eggs.

April 15 (High of 70 degrees)—I noticed that the male bluebird was taking food offerings all the way into the birdhouse rather than just poking his head in to pass them to his mate. I figured there must be some new bluebird hatchlings on the scene!



April 16 (High of 73 degrees)—My suspicion was confirmed when I found 5 tiny hatchlings peeping at me during a nest check. It seemed strange to have bluebird chicks in my birdhouse when there were still redpolls at my finch feeders.

April 22 (High of 62 degrees)—I checked the nest today, a sunny day that followed several chilly and windy days with showers. Inside the nest were 5 dark bluebird chicks starting to get a bluish tone.

April 26 (High of 54 degrees)—The bluebird parents fed their youngsters by just poking their heads through the entry hole of the birdhouse rather than entering it. The chicks were big enough to reach for their meals.

April 30 (High of 69 degrees)—The bluebird chicks’ begging calls could be heard yards away from their birdhouse, and parent bluebirds were observed carrying out fecal sacs after feeding sessions.

May 2 (High of 65 degrees)—The nestling bluebirds started poking their heads out of their home to survey the big world outside. I knew they would soon be making their fledgling flights from the safety of the nest.

May 3 (High in the low 70s)—At 8:00 AM, my husband and I had the sublime pleasure of watching two of the bluebird youngsters taking their first flights as they exited their home. Yay! By afternoon all five chicks had fledged and were exploring the world.

May 4 (High of 74 degrees)—This morning all five fledgling bluebirds were huddling together in trees at the edge of the backyard while their parents hunted for breakfast. When I cleaned out their birdhouse, I found insect casings and a few leftover mealworms in the well-flattened nest. The bluebirds’ first nest of the season was a success!

By May 8, the adult bluebirds were showing renewed interest in the backyard birdhouse. On May 10 the hen bluebird worked all day constructing a second nest, while her mate tended to their hungry fledglings

continued on next page

## March Blues . . .

**continued from page 13**

nearby. A birdhouse check on May 14 showed the presence of a very well formed second nest. On May 18, the extended amount of time the hen spent on her nest indicated she was laying a second clutch of eggs. In the meantime, her mate was introducing their first brood to the birdfeeders.

All was going well for the next several days until some new arrivals, male house wrens, began looking for nest sites around our yard. By May 28 I noticed that the bluebird adults were not in evidence in the yard. I thought the hen may've deserted her new nest the previous day, when we'd had an unrelenting all-day rain. On May 29, when I saw two house wrens entering the bluebirds' home, I knew that the bluebirds' second nesting attempt had failed. While our woodland-rimmed yard is enticing to bluebirds in early spring, it becomes wren habitat once the trees leaf out. My husband and I consider ourselves fortunate to have hosted a successful nesting bluebird pair in our yard so early in the season, and in less than ideal habitat.

This account does end on a positive note for the bluebirds too. In late June and early July, the bluebird pair was again seen regularly visiting the suet/mealworm feeder and then carrying tidbits of food off in the direction of our next-door neighbors' yard, a yard that has a bluebird house! On July 10, our neighbors informed us that they'd found a brood of 4 bluebird chicks in their birdhouse earlier in the week. "Our" bluebird couple had succeeded in raising a second brood after all.

---