

# Mean Bluebirds

By Gary Gaard

**Summary.** The only thing I provide bluebirds is for breeding adults, a safe nest box in good habitat; no supplemental feeding, and no rehabilitation. On my trails the bluebird must out-compete wrens and Tree Swallows to claim a nest box. Aggressive pairs of bluebirds are more successful at fledging broods than passive pairs of bluebirds. Man's landscape development necessitates bluebird's aggression development.

## Introduction.

There's never a doubt that wrens and Tree Swallows don't want you near their nest. If you approach their nest expect to be intimidated by either dive bombing or vocally scolding adults.

Bluebirds are of a mellower disposition. Some adult bluebirds sit on nearby limbs and watch when you approach the nest box – there is no attempt to protect their nest. Other pairs of adult bluebirds will dive bomb, click their beaks, and vocally scold if you approach their nest. I've had bluebirds hit my cap when I approached their nest. These are the bluebirds I want! These aggressive bluebird pairs are more successful competing for nest sites. Successful nest site competition favors reproduction by the more aggressive bluebird pairs.

## Why the Eastern Bluebird's Mellow Disposition?

Since the last glacier, 10,000 years ago, the bluebird evolved on the prairie. Their nest was a cavity, most likely in White or Bur Oaks. These oak's thick bark protected them from prairie fire heat. Pre-settlement landscape descriptions said these oaks were in upland and were solitary or in open savannah. Fire raged uncontrolled, killed the brush, and thus excluded the wren from nesting near these oaks. There are convincing arguments the American Indian started prairie fires to drive game and to improve grazing for elk and buffalo.

Wrens nested in brushy swales and river bottoms; therefore they didn't



**My friend Emmett is preparing queen bees. Occasionally I get to repair the microscope he uses for artificial insemination of bees. At age 80 Emmett is the keenest, most patient observer of nature I have ever known. He is at the bee yard every day and nothing enters, passes through, or grows that he isn't aware of.**

**The "bluebird house" in photo 2 is in his bee yard, 20 yards behind him. The bee yard is really woods with a driveway in front of the bee colonies.**

compete with bluebirds for nest sites.

The Tree Swallow feeds on insects caught over water. So if there was no water within a few miles of the bluebird's nest site, there was no bluebird - Tree Swallow competition for nest sites.

## The Calendar.

Nest box competition from wrens and Tree Swallows is not an issue for the first round of bluebird nesting. But in competition for nest site between bluebird pairs, the more aggressive bluebirds will select and defend the better nesting sites.

Mid to late June nest sites are premium because bluebirds, wrens and Tree Swallows are competing for a limited number of nest sites. The more aggressive birds will claim the better nest sites. In the field I have seen an increase in the number of bluebird pairs that are aggressive enough to keep House Sparrows/wrens/Tree Swallows/ other bluebirds away from

their nest/breeding site.

In July, after Tree Swallows fledge, bluebirds will again have a surplus of nest sites. Wrens may want the same nest site and, unless the male bluebird drives them away, the little terrorists will pick holes in bluebird eggs in order to claim the nest site.

## What has White Man settlement done for the bluebird?

Everything we have done to "civilize" the land has destroyed bluebird habitat. The single exception would be to place and maintain bluebird nest boxes. And we didn't do this until the bluebird population was dangerously low.

For 200 years we have been farming the former prairie. What, in part, have we done to destroy bluebird habitat and/or increase nest site competition?

We cut the prairie oaks for fence posts, and the oak posts had a few nest cavities. The oak posts rotted and were replaced by steel posts with no cavities. And then pastures were replaced by bailed hay and silage.

Mono-cropped fields, as corn or alfalfa, fledge few bluebirds.

We introduced the House Sparrow.

We planted trees and shrubs on former prairies. This introduced the wren.

The most destructive thing we have done to bluebird habitat is introduce invasive shrubs and trees. Box elder is the dominant tree in many woodlots, the only tree in many fence rows, and is steadily moving into fields no longer cropped. The Civilian Conservation Corps planted Black Locust on erodible soils (that weren't erodible before we plowed or over-pastured the prairie). Multiflora rose was planted for hedgerow, wildlife food. And the worst is Tartarian honeysuckle that has profusely overgrown both woodlots and open fields. Most invasives cannot be removed by cutting because they regenerate from stumps – dig the roots or herbicide the root system.

## What can a bluebird do?

Only a few natural cavities remain in prairie setting.

The bluebirds' only option is to build its nest where we place a nest box. And if this nest box is in a less-than-ideal site, the bluebird must defend



**The “bluebird house” was placed in the woods to attract chickadees. A pair of bluebirds chose this “house in the woods” over a house in the field 100 yards away. They nested late April, fledged 5 mid-May. The same adults, presumably, nested in the field early July.**

**Emmett observed that each time a wren came into the bee yard the male bluebird would “chase his backside out of there”. His description of the aggressive bluebird was “Gaard, you’re raising mean bluebirds”.**

the site from takeover by other birds. To defend, the bluebird must become more aggressive.

Can you develop aggression in a few generations? Consider the changes man has bred into dogs or farm animals. Or read [Beak of the Finch](#) ISBN 0-679-4003-6, to learn how scientists can measure change in millimeters when weather changes food supply.