HOW TO GET EASTERN BLUEBIRDS IN YOUR BACKYARD:

Reduce the threat of House Sparrows!

HELP THE FEMALE & MALE EASTERN BLUEBIRD:

Bluebirds are members of the Thrush family; they are smaller than Robins and Cardinals - and larger than House Finches. The male bluebird has a blue back and head, with an orange neck & chest and a white belly. The female bluebird is similar but her colors are not as bright – with more gray in them. From the tip of its beak to the end of its tail a bluebird measures about 7 inches.

Eastern Bluebirds are “cavity nesters.” Early in the year, usually March/April, each pair selects a nesting cavity – often a bird house – in which to build a nest and lay eggs. They feed their nestlings inside the box until they are ready to fledge (fly out under their own
wing power). Other cavity-nesting birds that use nestboxes include Black-capped Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, Great Crested Flycatchers, Tree Swallows, Nuthatches, House Wrens, Carolina Wrens, and, sadly, the House Sparrow.

**THE SINGLE GREATEST THREAT TO THE EASTERN BLUEBIRD IS THE HOUSE SPARROW (abbreviated HOSP).**

**Reason:** A prolific and wide-spread bird, the House Sparrow searches for a man-made nestbox and takes control of it. The HOSP will kill other cavity-nesters who try to use it.

The **House Sparrow**, also known as the **English Sparrow**, is NOT a native American bird. It was brought into this country during the 1850’s and has spread to all contiguous States. Numbering in the millions, it is a common resident in every city and town. It is NOT protected by law in the U.S.A. – and can be evicted. Every shopping mall has been taken over by this bird. The problem is that when a House Sparrow finds a nestbox, it drives away other birds, even if they already have eggs or young inside. The House Sparrow has a deadly weapon: its beak. The photos below show how thick and strong it is. The HOSP uses his beak like a hammer – pounding into the bodies of other cavity-nesters. I have witnessed the killing of cavity-nesting birds by House Sparrows. Even though native birds fight with all their strength, they are no match for the HOSP.

The male House Sparrow

House Sparrows are deadly and difficult, but there are ways to manage them.

"Without question the most deplorable event in the history of American ornithology was the introduction of the English Sparrow." -W.L. Dawson, The Birds of Ohio, 1903. [Pg. 2]
The House Sparrow (HOSP) is a bit shorter than the Eastern Bluebird, but its body is sturdy. A comparison of the beaks of House Sparrows and Eastern Bluebirds shows that the HOSP beak is thick and wedge-shaped, whereas the beak of the bluebird is slender – ideal for catching larvae and bugs – but ineffective in battle against the House Sparrow. If you find the body of a dead Eastern Bluebird inside your nestbox with a pecked head or body, you can be sure it was the victim of a HOSP – who wanted that box.

In 2017 I was called to help at a retirement center where residents had not seen bluebirds for a long time. I discovered that every nestbox had been taken over by House Sparrows -- a depressing sight. We took down half the boxes to reduce nesting opportunities for HOSPs. We then removed all House Sparrow nests every week. We finally attracted two pairs of Eastern Bluebirds. Sadly, one of the male bluebirds was killed by a House Sparrow. The other pair of bluebirds had their eggs destroyed by House Wrens. WE HAD TO GET RID OF HOUSE SPARROWS. There are both passive and active measures to do so. This brochure explains passive measures. For further information on ways to eliminate HOSPs, go to www.sialis.org.

Click the drop-down menu and select “House Sparrow Control.”

HAS THIS HAPPENED TO YOU? YOU USED TO HAVE BLUEBIRDS IN YOUR NESTBOX, BUT NOW THERE IS A STRANGE BIRD IN IT. HE SITS ON TOP OF THE BOX & CHIRPS REPEATEDLY. ALERT: YOU HAVE THE HOUSE SPARROW. IF THE HOUSE SPARROW IS USING YOUR BOX, THE BEST THING YOU CAN DO IS PLUG UP THE HOLE OR TAKE DOWN THE BOX! LEARN TO IDENTIFY THE HOUSE SPARROW (DESCRIPTION BELOW)!

IT IS BETTER TO HAVE NO BIRDS AT ALL THAN TO PERMIT HOUSE SPARROWS TO REPRODUCE IN YOUR NESTBOX!

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE HOUSE SPARROW – because there are many sparrows!

The House Sparrow (Passer domesticus) is sparrow-sized. Adult birds are stocky – and 5.75 to 6.25 inches long - a bit shorter than a bluebird, but larger than a Chipping Sparrow and a House Wren. HOSP bills are thick and dark. The back is brown with black streaks. Both males and females have a dingy buff-colored breast & belly without stripes. The tail is short compared to other sparrows. The song of the House Sparrow is a loud, non-musical, monotonous single-note chirp – “Cheep, cheep, cheep.”

Adult males have a black, v-shaped bib on the breast under the beak (darkest during breeding season). Their feathers are brownish, with a white horizontal bar on the wing. The top of the head is gray, with a chestnut band from the eye down to the neck. Females are dull gray with a light streak slightly above and behind the eye. They are sometimes confused with other sparrows and brown birds. For more detail, go on-line and type in House Sparrow.
The male House Sparrow, with its victims below – dead male bluebirds.

Note the difference between the size of beaks.

Actual photos of what the HOSP does:

THE KILLING OF BLUEBIRDS CAN OCCUR ON THE GROUND OR IN THE BOX:

The hacking to death of EASTERN BLUEBIRDS IS WHY WE PREVENT THE NESTING OF HOUSE SPARROWS. The slender beak of the bluebird has NO chance against the wedge-shaped beak of the House Sparrow. Left image: notice indentations on the bluebird’s neck and chest – where the HOSP inflicted fatal injuries.

Our goal is to help the Eastern Bluebird - a native American bird and “cavity nester.” Bluebirds often depend on humans to supply nestboxes. Once the bluebird pair finds a nestbox, and the female accepts it, the pair will use it as their “Home.”

You will NOT hurt bluebirds by opening their nesting box gently and looking at their eggs. You will not drive away a bluebird pair if you carefully check the nest. They cannot smell humans.
Bluebirds are at the top of the list of American birds for their beauty, loyalty, captivating song, and usefulness – as they eat primarily insects & benefit farmers. Bluebirds like to have their nestboxes in the open – with plenty of uncluttered space around. They do NOT normally nest in trees or in boxes placed inside bushes/wooded areas. They are often the first bird to nest in the spring. They are devoted parents who defend their nestboxes to the best of their abilities.

The male and female bond for life. If one of the partners disappears or dies, the widower will search for a new mate.

Henry David Thoreau described the male bluebird as “carrying the sky on his back.” (Journal, 1854).

**HOW TO GET RID OF HOUSE SPARROWS:**

1) **REDUCE THE NUMBER OF BOXES.** FOR A SINGLE YARD, YOU SHOULD ONLY PUT UP ONE (1) BOX. REASON: BLUEBIRDS NEED LOTS OF SPACE! One box per acre is recommended. A bluebird pair does NOT want another pair close by – males are competitive.

2) **REMOVE HOUSE SPARROW NESTING MATERIAL AND EGGS EVERY WEEK.** IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE, REMOVAL OF HOSP NESTING MATERIAL & EGGS IS ESSENTIAL – because this will prevent population increase.

3) **PUT BIRD FEEDERS FAR AWAY FROM YOUR NESTBOX.**

4) **INSTALL A MONOFILAMENT LINE OR INSET ON YOUR BOX** (next page).

5) **PUT UP A SPARROW SPOOKER AFTER FIRST BLUEBIRD EGG IS LAID.**

THE SPARROW SPOOKER IS ATTACHED TO THE TOP OF A NESTBOX:

A Sparrow Spooker scares away House Sparrows. Because we cannot watch a nestbox 24/7, a Spooker will protect it with sparkling, wind-blown strands of mylar tape. Sparrow spookers are one of the few passive HOSP controls that work, although nothing is guaranteed 100% effective. Put the Sparrow Spooker up after egg laying begins, but **before** incubation to protect your bluebirds. Take it down as soon as the babies leave the box.  

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Give bluebird parents time to accept the Spooker (prior to incubation) to prevent eggs from chilling. If you put it up while eggs are still being laid (they lay one a day, and incubation does not begin until there is a full clutch), you will have confirmation (with a new egg the next day) that the Spooker has been accepted by your bluebird pair.

If the babies have already hatched and HOSP are in the area, it is OK to put up a Spooker later rather than not all. But DO this in the morning when it is not windy, and observe for up to an hour to verify acceptance by the bluebird parents.

2. THE MONOFILAMENT LINE – Slender fishing line is installed on both sides of the entry hole, about 2 inches out from the hole. This line is secured to the top of the roof and down each side of the hole, then secured to the bottom of the box. When installed, the lines are spaced about one-and-one-half inches apart. Bluebirds and many other cavity-nesting birds are insect eaters and have keen eyesight. Because House sparrows are mostly seed eaters, they may not see the line, which they will hit with their wings. This will deter them from entering and cause them to avoid the box. The line can be put up at any time and left up year round. Do NOT let any lines dangle freely – as they can entrap bluebirds.

Left: Monofilament line inset, prior to installation. Right: Chuck Musser’s “inset” screwed in over the entry hole. Secured monofilament lines do NOT hurt birds. Instead of using an inset, you can attach your own monofilament lines directly onto the box. Go to www.thebsp.org for instructions, supplied by Joan Watroba. Chuck Musser attends BSP Bluebird conferences, where he sells the inset ($10). Contact info.: Bainbridge, PA, at 717-367-3548. NOTE: In order to use the inset, your box must open from the side.

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KNOW YOUR BIRD NESTS!

Because birds often fly away at the approach of humans, we must be able to identify the nests of common cavity nesters. THIS IS EASY, because the nests of cavity nesters are different from one another. Below are five common nests: 1) Bluebird nest. 2) Tree Swallow nest. 3) House Wren nest. 4) Chickadee nest. 5). House Sparrow nest.

BLUEBIRD NEST (1): A typical bluebird nest is neat and cup-shaped, woven out of fine grasses and/or pine needles. The nest is 2-4 inches in height. If a used nest is not removed, the female bluebird will build a second nest over it. Easy ID – BB nest: NEAT, FINE GRASSES or PINE NEEDLES. The nest conforms to the shape of the box. The eggs are blue. Rarely white.

Bluebird nest with 4 nestlings.

2) TREE SWALLOW NEST – similar to the bluebird nest – constructed of pine needles or dry grass, with feathers added. The feather-tips often curl over the eggs and/or young. Eggs are white.

For further information on birds, bird nests, and other avian matters, go on-line and visit www.thebsp.org. The BSP website has a “President’s Hotline,” where you can ask questions and get a speedy response.

There are many sites on-line that will help you identify birds and their nests.

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4) HOUSE WREN (HOWR) NEST: The male HOWR puts sticks into the nestbox. The female then constructs a tiny cup of grassy material inside the sticks.

5. THE HOUSE SPARROW NEST: A loose jumble of odds and ends, including coarse grass (with seed heads), cloth, feathers, weeds, and sometimes litter (e.g., clear plastic, cigarette filters). Some nests contain bits of green vegetation. THE NEST IS USUALLY TALL, FILLING UP THE SPACE INSIDE THE BOX. It often has a tunnel-like entrance.
Another HOSP nest: This also has LONG WEEDS AND DEBRIS. Male HOSP at his nest.

If you want to see HOSPS, go to the outside of a Shopping Mall, where they feed on food scraps on the ground and pick dead bugs off parked vehicles. They build their nests in eaves, ledges, and inside large store letters above entrances.

HOUSE SPARROW eggs have irregular fine brown speckles. The shell is smooth with slight gloss. HOUSE SPARROW EGGS ARE ABOUT THE SAME SIZE AS BLUEBIRD EGGS, BUT HOSP EGGS ARE SPECKLED!

The House Sparrow's Latin name, Passer domesticus, describes its preferred nesting habits—around houses. DO NOT PLACE YOUR NESTBOX near farm buildings, feedlots, or barns. If sparrows do take up residence, relocate the box to a site farther away -- OR PLUG UP THE ENTRANCE HOLE.

FEEDING BIRDS WITH A BIRD FEEDER:

Bluebirds do not normally take seeds from a feeder. Dried mealworms are popular with bluebirds – but not all. Suet is of benefit to many birds, including bluebirds, who may take bits of peanut from a feeder.

FOR BLUEBIRDS: MEALWORMS, SUET, PEANUT BITS.

IMPORTANT: DO NOT PUT OUT ANY SEEDS THAT WILL ATTRACT HOUSE SPARROWS. NEVER USE MILLET, MILO (Sorghum), OR CRACKED CORN!

FOR CHICKADEES, TITMICE, CARDINALS (and a few others) PROVIDE SUNFLOWER SEEDS. IF YOU DON'T LIKE BLACK SEED CASINGS on the ground, below your feeder (the husks of Sunflower seeds), THEN PURCHASE THE SUNFLOWER SEEDS WITH SHELLS REMOVED, called sunflower hearts, which don’t make a mess below your feeder. REMEMBER: SUNFLOWER SEEDS ARE SUCCESSFUL.

NYGER SEED IS NICE! – Also known as thistle seed, it is enjoyed by Goldfinch and House Finch!

MILLET IS MALEVOLENT!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: SOME MATERIAL IN THIS BROCHURE WAS OBTAINED FROM SIALIS.ORG. I THANK THE AUTHORS OF THE SIALIS WEBSITE (WWW.SIALIS.ORG) FOR THE EXCELLENCE AND ACCURACY OF THEIR INFORMATION. FOR FURTHER QUESTIONS ON BLUEBIRDS, PLEASE GO TO THIS WEBSITE.
I THANK BET ZIMMERMAN-SMITH -- AUTHOR, SPEAKER, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND BLUEBIRD EXPERT. With her permission, I used several of her photographs in this brochure. Ms. Zimmerman-Smith has helped many people become successful “Bluebird Landlords.” I am among those individuals who learned from her!

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TO MY READERS: FILL IN BLANKS BELOW:

THIS WILL HELP YOU IDENTIFY BIRD NESTS. WRITE IN THE NAME OF THE BIRD WHO BUILT EACH OF THE NESTS BELOW. Nests may be shown twice.

1. _______________________

2. _______________________

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Nest #4: ___________________________  Nest #5: ___________________________

Nest #6: ___________________________
Nest #7: _________________________________ END OF TEST.

BETLLO: Black-Capped Chickadee:

Always protect our little Chickadees – they stay with us all Winter!


CONCLUSION:
“The House Sparrow has driven birds like the Bluebird and Purple Martin from areas where they were once common. House Sparrows nest in bird boxes, tree holes and in almost any nook or cranny of a building. They are aggressive fighters and will evict ANY nesting bird from a cavity to take over the site. House Sparrows will tear up nests, break eggs, kill and toss out nestlings and adults and then build their nest right on top of the carnage.” Tulsa Audubon Society.

OUR GOAL IS TO HELP AND SUPPORT NATIVE AMERICAN BIRDS, ESPECIALLY THE EASTERN BLUEBIRD:


You CAN attract a beautiful pair of Eastern Bluebirds to your nestbox - and experience the joy of protecting this beautiful bird! MLM, 2017.

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