

My Experiences in Deterring House Sparrows on my Bluebird Trail

Steve Sample. V.P. BRAW

Background

The House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) is arguably the worst invasive species of bird ever introduced in North America. This is especially true with Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) for the house sparrow is the principal species that has led to their decline. House Sparrows are not protected by law.

European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) also played a large part in bluebird decline, but introducing the bluebird nesting box with a restricted size opening has eliminated this bird as being an adverse factor today. That is not the case with the House Sparrow.

To save the bluebird from extinction, many organizations and bird enthusiasts have established box trails specifically for bluebirds with specially designed nesting houses and continuously monitoring them.

I currently have 36 bluebird nesting boxes on my primary trail. I took the trail over 12 years ago.

The War

On the onset, I was having trouble with House Sparrows. They were taking over nesting attempts and destroying, not only the eggs, but young hatchlings were being killed pulled out of the nests, and often adult bluebirds were being killed in the box as well. House Sparrow males would build nests on top of destroyed eggs and bluebird carcasses. Their poorly constructed nest speaks for the species as a whole.

One (of several) reason a monitor checks their nest boxes on a weekly basis is to assure that House Sparrows have not taken over a box. A clue that this has happened can be seen with the male House Sparrow sitting on top of the box before you get there. Removing the nest does not end the issue for the male will build a new one when you leave. Every time!

If you do not own the land your boxes are located, be sure to ask the owner if they do not object to dealing with these birds. Allowing you to use the area is a good sign they will not object.

1). One solution is to leave the nest box open with closing it up the next time you return. This often works, but you lose one+ week of potential bluebird nesting. And it is still possible a House Sparrow will return. However, it is hoped they will setup a new nest elsewhere over that week.

2) The second line defense is to use a Van Ert trap. If you are not familiar with this device, check on-line or at our set sites for instructions. If a male House Sparrow is on top of a box, it is given there is no active bluebird nesting taking place. All my boxes are designed with an inside screw to support the quick installing of this trap. This trap does what it says, it traps the bird in the house. First, after the male flies away, you pull out any nest he may have built. (*Sometimes a female may be sitting on eggs. I always open the box door quickly and grab the female. The eggs that may be laid can be either donated to bird studies, crushed on the ground, or given to reptile enthusiasts as food.*) Install the trap that will close the opening when the male returns. It is usually in just a few minutes after you leave that he sets off the trap. Using a plastic bag, it is easy to capture the male.



The Van Ert Trap

3). During one of the BRAW conventions, Gene Birr offered a tested example go an easy House Sparrow deterrent. The “Sky Box”. By having an open top covered with plastic, it seems House Sparrow females will refuse to nest. However, bluebirds and other cavity nesters are not bother by this design.



The Troyer Style Nest Box

This is a Troyer design box with a 3” opening at the top and a plastic weather cover.

Troyer design is not recommended by BRAW, but works well in this case because the opening at the top will shed the heat created by the sun filtering in from the top.

Notice the hatchlings calling for food!



The Troyer Nest Box Side View



Top View Showing the Vent

Using a recommended NABS design box, this top has an elevated plastic cover to shed heat during the summer months.

Notice the yellow rope that insulates the opening during the early spring with low night temperatures.

Obviously, the rope is removed when the temperatures at night is above 55 or so.



Side View Showing the Gap

I now have seven of both designs on my trail. When a House Sparrow shows up, I change to this design of nesting box and “bingo” no more House Sparrows. Thus far, both Eastern Bluebirds and Tree swallows have used these boxes.