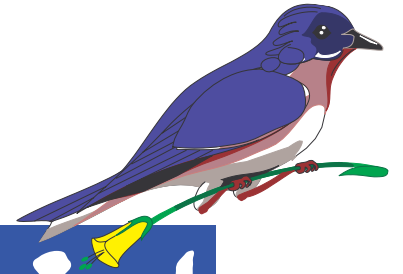




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# Western Bluebird

*Sialia mexicana*

by L. Schumacher and S. Sells

**C**an you imagine eating bugs and berries and living inside a tree? Western bluebirds do just that! They are members of the thrush family, meaning that they are related to robins. There are three species, or kinds, of bluebirds in the United States: the Eastern bluebird, the Western bluebird, and the mountain bluebird. Both Western and mountain bluebirds live in Oregon.

Bluebirds eat mostly insects. Grasshoppers, earthworms, snails, and beetles are among their favorite foods. They sit on perches and drop quickly to the ground to catch food or they can catch insects in the air. Bluebirds also eat fruit and berries, especially during the winter when there are fewer insects.



Photo: Bruce Johnson

Bluebirds love to eat many kinds of bugs.

## Why bluebirds need our help

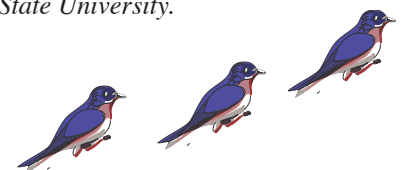
Populations of western bluebirds have declined over the past 50 years. The main reason for their decline is competition for nest holes from European starlings and English house sparrows. Starlings and house sparrows are exotic species, meaning they came from somewhere else and don't occur naturally in North America. These birds were brought here (introduced) and have multiplied quickly. They out-compete many of our native birds for nesting habitat.

Another reason for bluebird decline is loss of habitat due to the cutting of dead trees and suppression of fire. Fires are important for maintaining oak woodlands with open meadows. Without fire, dense forests of fir trees can take over.

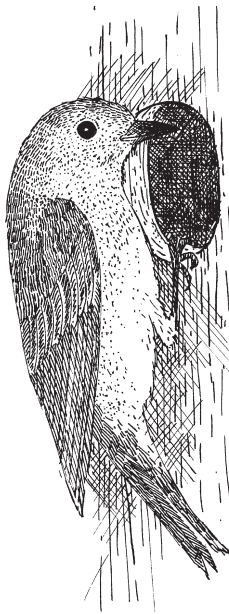
Raccoons and house cats may be part of the cause of bluebird decline because they prey on bluebirds. Bluebirds also suffer when insects are poisoned with chemicals such as some pesticides. If a bluebird eats these insects it can get sick or die.

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Laura Schumacher and Sarah Sells, students in Fisheries and Wildlife, Oregon State University.



## Species description



Bluebirds are very beautiful. Adults are about 6 inches long. Males are very bright purplish-blue with a rust-colored chest and gray belly. Females are similar but not as bright, with more gray than blue on their head and a lighter chest.

The behavior of a male bluebird trying to attract a female can be fun to watch. First he might sing to the female. He flies near her, partially opens his wings, and spreads his tail feathers while flapping his wings. Then he lands beside her. He might give her food or preen her feathers. If she decides he will make a good mate, they begin nesting.

Bluebirds nest inside tree cavities or holes made by woodpeckers. The male and female work together to make a cup-shaped nest of stems,

grasses, and twigs. They sometimes line the nest with soft materials such as hair and feathers, just as we line our beds with soft sheets and blankets.

A female bluebird lays four to six pale blue to white eggs. She incubates (sits on) the eggs and keeps them warm while the young develop inside the eggs for about 2 weeks. Newborn chicks are naked and completely helpless, so their parents must provide everything they need. Bluebird parents feed their chicks insects.

The parents sometimes have help from older chicks who help feed the new chicks. Bluebird chicks learn to fly and leave the nest when they are between 15 to 18 days old.



## Where they live and why

Bluebirds are found throughout Oregon except the north coast, Cascade Mountains, and southeast Oregon. They live in open areas scattered with trees. They are secondary cavity nesters, which means they nest in tree cavities (holes) made by other species such as woodpeckers. Woodpecker holes in old or dead trees provide homes to many species, such as bluebirds, whose beaks are too soft to make their own cavities.

Bluebirds like a mixture of trees and open areas such as fields, orchards, meadows within oak and ponderosa pine

woodlands, and stream-side woodlands. They also are found in clearcuts with standing snags (dead trees) and in other areas with nesting cavities.



**Nest boxes provide habitat when natural tree cavities are not available.**

Photo: Noah Strycker

## Creating habitat



Bluebirds need places to nest. Old trees often have many woodpecker holes that they can use. Don't remove all of the dead trees in your area. They are important for wildlife.

Nest boxes have helped increase populations of bluebirds in many areas. Bluebirds will nest in boxes if they are well made and are placed in a good location. You can build a nest box (see below) or buy one at most wild bird stores. (Ask for help in selecting the best type.)

Building bluebird trails is popular throughout the country. You might like to build one too! A bluebird trail is a series of bluebird nest boxes along a path planted with berry plants. The path should be near an open area where bluebirds can forage for insects. The boxes need to be at least 100 yards apart because bluebirds don't like to nest beside other bluebirds.

Small shrubs and trees with berries are important for bluebirds, especially in



Photo: Emily Smith

**Bluebirds will appreciate a birdbath.**

winter when insects are hard to find. Serviceberry, elderberry, dogwood, juniper, redcedar, bayberry, cherry, and sumac have berries that bluebirds like. Many other bird species like them too.

Bluebirds need places to perch while they look for insects. Tree limbs and brush piles near open areas make great perches. Artificial snags or perches can provide more options for the bluebirds.

Finally, don't forget a birdbath. Bluebirds like shallow birdbaths lined with flat rocks. Place the bath in an open area with a perch nearby so the bluebirds feel safe.

### Building a bluebird nest box

A great way to help bluebirds is to build a nest box! Use exterior plywood or natural materials such as rough cedar. Thicker wood insulates the nest better. Never use wood that has been treated with chemicals.

Make a box with a 5 by 5-inch bottom and 8-inch walls. Put the entry hole 6 inches above the floor. Make the entry hole a 1½-inch smooth circle to keep out bigger birds. A slanted roof should overhang 1 inch or more to keep rain and sun out of the entry. Drill small ventilation holes near the top on each side.

Place nest boxes 5 to 10 feet above ground in open areas. Fence posts or the

area beneath an eave are good locations. Don't put nests too close to people, who can disturb nesting bluebirds. Install your box by February before bluebirds begin to look for nest sites. Bluebirds might nest up to three times in one year, so don't remove the box after one brood.

Contact your local office of the OSU Extension Service or the North American Bluebird Society (<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/>) for instructions on building a nest box and caring for the box and birds that live there.

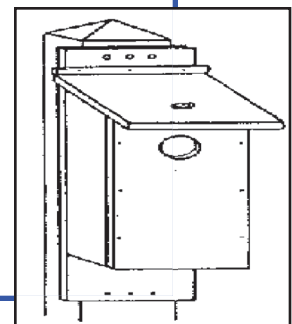




Photo: Julie LaFollette

Bluebirds find nest boxes to be a great place to build a nest.

## Fun facts



A pair of bluebirds can have three broods (groups of young) in one year.



Bluebird nest box trails were first built in the 1970s.



Famous author and naturalist Henry David Thoreau referred to the bluebird as “the bird with the sky on his back.”

## Learn more!

Birdzilla.com (<http://www.birdzilla.com/sub.asp?strType=BACKYARDBluebirdSociety&strTitle=Bluebird+Society>).

The Bluebird Box (<http://www.audubon-omaha.org/bbbox/>).

Cedar Works ([http://www.cedar-works.com/newsite/bird\\_info5.html](http://www.cedar-works.com/newsite/bird_info5.html)).

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