

# Golf Courses — A Bluebird Paradise

by Ken Schar

**W**hy are golf courses considered a good area to attract bluebirds? The reason in one word is “habitat.” Habitat is defined as “the region where a plant or animal (bird) naturally grows or lives.”

The habitat that the bluebirds like is open areas with scattered trees where the ground is not heavily covered with vegetation but is kept short by cutting. They especially like trees with a few low branches that they can use as a perch from which to scan the ground for insects, the main diet of bluebirds. The bluebirds have excellent eyesight! This is a plus for golf courses in that they can be environmentally friendly by relying less on pesticides and more on predators, such as the bluebirds.

Thus, golf courses have reduced their use of chemicals, because of these “predators,” and course maintenance time by using a variety of turf grasses and the use of native plantings, such as wildflowers, which attract the bluebirds.

The bluebirds are a cavity-nesting bird and must have a house to live in. The use of a properly built bluebird house is a must, and there are many designs. (All of my houses are the front-opening slot type, which I call the Tuttle design.) They do not have to be fancy--homemade is fine--but follow an approved plan using the proper lumber. **DO NOT USE ANY GREEN-TREATED LUMBER!** The ability to inspect the inside of the house is a must; front or side opening houses are easy to inspect.

The location of the house is important. Face the house in any direction, but the opening should



*Ken Schar checking a bluebird house among the wild flowers.*

face a tree from 25 to 100 feet away. Never mount houses where insecticides or herbicides are used because they'll kill the insects that the bluebirds feed on (and also could kill the bluebirds).

The house should be mounted on a metal pipe or post covered by a PVC pipe to prevent animals (such as raccoons) from climbing

up to the house. The house should be 5 feet from the ground to the bottom of the hole in the box. Bluebirds are territorial; therefore, space the houses 100 yards apart.

The next step, and perhaps the most important, is a regular monitoring, i.e., checking of the houses at least once a week. Record your observations of what has happened. One of the reasons we monitor is because of two nonnative birds, the house sparrow and the starling. These two birds were imported from the old country and are not protected by our federal or state laws. They both will destroy the bluebird eggs or the young, so it is very important to never let these birds nest in your bluebird houses.

To monitor your trail means you visit and open every house. Watch the house as you approach. Gently tap the house before opening; maybe a bird will fly out. Upon opening the house, you will observe a simple, clean, usually cup-shaped, small, dry grass nest. It is a bluebird's nest. Leave that and close the house. However, if



*Bluebird slot house with a nest.*

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you observe a nest of long weeds from the top to the bottom of the house, it is a sparrow's nest. Clean out the house. I carry plastic bags with me to put such nests in. Chances are, if it was a bluebird, it will fly back into the house before you get very far away. It takes 6 days to build a nest. Be sure to record your observations.

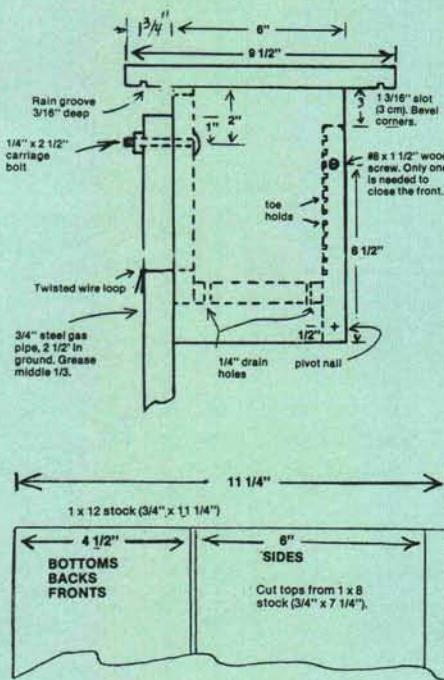
After the nest is complete, the bluebird will lay one egg a day, usually in the morning, until all eggs are laid. Incubation takes 14 days. Only the female incubates, but both parents feed the young, usually every few minutes all day long. The bluebirds maintain a very clean environment inside the house by carrying out the fecal sacs from the young every time they feed them. The nestlings (the young bluebirds) will remain in the house for up to 18 days after they hatch. When they leave the house, they are called fledglings. You can see from the above information the importance of keeping good records.

After the bluebirds have fledged and you clean out the nest, maybe, if you are lucky, a new bluebird nest will be started. I have experienced that the female bluebird has laid eggs in the old nest before I could clean it out. Bluebirds can have up to three nestings a year, but they usually have two.

When the fledglings leave the nest the first time, they are capable of flying 50 to 100 feet. This is the reason you want a tree nearby. The tree also provides protection for them by hiding them among the branches. The fledglings are not capable of feeding themselves, and the parents feed them for 2 weeks before they are on their own.

Bluebirds usually arrive in Illinois around March 15 each year and leave in the fall around October.

**Front Opening Bluebird Slot Box**



**Materials**  
Use Cedar lumber. Smooth one side, "smooth side in." It is not necessary to paint.

2 sides ..... 6"x9 1/4"  
1 front ..... 4 7/16"x8"  
(Don't forget toe-holds.)  
1 back ..... 4 1/2"x7 1/4"  
1 bottom ..... 4 1/2"x4 1/2"  
1 top ..... 7 1/4"x9 1/2"

**Assembly**  
Pre-drill holes for the mounting bolt, wire loop, drain holes, wood screw, and pivot nails. Use #6 siding nails (twisted and galvanized). Glue all permanent joints. Slightly bevel the top corners of the front. Nail the back to the bottom. Add the sides. Make a slot spacer 1 3/16 inches wide and use it when the pivot nails are driven through the sides to affix the front. Add the top.  
Pre-drill a 9/32 inch hole one inch from one end of a 7 1/2 ft. length of steel pipe. Use a post pounder to drive the pipe into the ground 2 1/2 ft. Bolt and wire the box to the pipe, and use a pipe wrench to face the box toward the desired direction.

I have my trail on the Merit Club in Libertyville and am very fortunate that Oscar Miles, Golf Course Superintendent, provides me with a cart, for it still takes 4 hours to do the trail. ■

*Editor's Note: Ken Schar has been gracious this month to share with us his success story on bluebirding. Ken first got started back in 1986 when he and his wife, Beverly, attended a program put on by the Lake County Forest Preserve on bluebirds.*

*He got hooked. He ran a bluebird trail with the forest preserve for many years and then got introduced to Oscar Miles at the Merit Club. He has since been working the 67 bluebird houses there. In 1995 his boxes had 106 baby bluebirds! Ken gives talks on bluebirds to many service organizations and has had displays in local libraries. His address for those of you who may want some pointers on attracting bluebirds is: Ken Schar, 500 Broadway, Libertyville, IL 60048-2323.*



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