



TURFGRASS MATTERS

Spring 1998

Volume 70, Number 1

At Nature's Best: Cavity Nesting Birds and Golf Courses

Enhancing cavity nesting bird populations in the Mid-Atlantic region could happen by nature's own course; or on the other hand, could suffer as easily. Here are a few ways that golf course superintendents could help and why.

There are many birds in this region that are referred to as cavity-nesting birds. Cavities as simple as a hole in a tree or other man-made structures house these birds from the elements as well as protect them from predators. Since their introduction in the latter part of the 19th century, two species, the European Starling and the English House Sparrow, have multiplied ten-fold. Due to the significant competition for nesting space, our more desirable native birds are suffering. This article will focus on the fate of the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia Sialis*).

During the 60's and early 70's, the National Park Service along with local parks, and various Audubon societies were very concerned about the declining Bluebird populations. They were determined to remedy the problem. Hence, the design of the Bluebird box by Lawrence Zeleny of Silver Spring, MD, an instrumental part of the North American Bluebird Society. Since the project was started, the bluebird populations have increased remarkably.

Each eighteen-hole golf course is capable of handling at least thirty Bluebird Boxes. Depending on the size, location, and intensity of adjacent building populations, the most ideal locations for these small dwellings are at the outside bound-

aries of the golf course property. Fence lines are very ideal sites. Space them approximately 75 yards apart and about 6 feet from the ground.

It is important to know the establishment and maintenance criteria for these boxes. Key factors are timing and design. Designs, plans and detailed instructions to make Bluebird boxes can be obtained from your federal, state or local Park service and/or by contacting the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System. Ask them how to start your own "Bluebird Trail!"

In this region, bluebirds begin to search for nesting sites as early as mid-March. They will begin pairing-up and building nests through mid-April. This is a good time to appoint a willing staff member to monitor the boxes. After settling down, a pair may have up to three hatches in a season. The common end to the Bluebird's hatching season is mid-August. Once egg-laying has begun, it will take only 10-15 days for them to hatch and approximately 20 more days for them to fledge the nest. These increments of time tend to dictate a frequency of monitoring. Picking a day, once a week, from the beginning of nesting season to the end of August is an ideal frequency to catch all phases and appropriately time one of the most important tasks. Once the fledglings have flown the nest, remove all of the old nesting materials. The most common designs will allow for easy access; side access for cleaning and top access for monitoring. This will prepare the

box for the next brood. At the beginning of each season, it is a good idea to clean, inspect and repair all boxes to have a fresh start.

Dealing with undesirable birds such as a house sparrow can become a problem. The size of the entry hole is the best deterrent for most birds but not those that are similar in size. A once-a-week check can eliminate intrusion by removing nesting materials that you have observed being placed by undesirable birds or by removing what would constitute non-typical nesting materials for bluebirds. Once undesirable birds have laid eggs, you be the judge. Other acceptable birds you may allow to use the nest boxes Tree Swallows, Chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, House Wrens, and if you are really lucky, the Great Crested Flycatcher. In marshy areas, you may stumble upon a Prothonotary Warbler.

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Published by the
Mid-Atlantic Association of
Golf Course Superintendents

