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Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

Have You Ever Seen A Bluebird?



The bluebird was once a common sight here in the upper midwest, but if you are less than 30 years old, chances are that you may never have seen this beautiful bird. Surveys indicate that the bluebird population has diminished by 90% since the turn of the century. The decline of this brightly colored little songbird has been related to several factors. Bluebirds commonly build their nests in the cavities of dead trees or those formed by woodpeckers. The advance of civilization brought with it the clearing of these old and decaying bluebird nesting trees. For a time, old wooden fence posts provided cozy cavities for nesting, but now even these are being replaced by steel fence posts. With the introduction of the house sparrow and starling from Europe came added problems for the bluebird. These alien birds are also cavity nesters and utilize the same type of cavities for nesting as the bluebird. Since both the house sparrow and starling are very aggressive the bluebird is quickly evicted from its nest. Summer after summer may go by with bluebird pairs being unable to successfully nest and raise a family.

You can easily help the bluebird overcome its dilemma, since they readily nest in man-made houses that starling cannot use if constructed properly. In fact, in recent years many national and local groups, as well as individuals, have been building and setting out bluebird houses in great numbers. Their efforts have resulted in notable increases in local bluebird populations. With a little effort and creativity you can easily build a bluebird house from scrap lumber using the following specifications. The floor should have an area of 16 to 26 square inches. The entrance hole should be 1.5 inches in diameter (which is too small for starlings). The entrance should be about 10 inches or more

above the floor. This will be just beyond arm's length of a raccoon who is very fond of eggs. Drill a hole in the roof about one inch in diameter and cover it with screen. This lets in the rain which adds needed humidity to increase the egg's chances to hatch successfully. Drill a few small drainage holes in the floor and hinge the roof for easy cleaning and observation. Do not put a perch by the entrance hole. Placing the house on a metal post four to seven feet above the ground and away from large trees will keep other predators from molesting the nest. Test your carpentry skills — you will be in for a pleasant education and hours of entertainment!

Bluebirds usually arrive here in Wisconsin in late April when they begin looking for nesting sites. When a suitable cavity is found the pair begins to construct a nest from soft grasses and other plant materials, then line it with down. Soon the female will lay three to seven light blue eggs which will hatch in about two weeks. In a short time the young bluebirds will be out on their own while their parents are busy with another brood. Bluebirds usually raise two broods of young each season and sometimes three.

This delightful little bird feeds mainly on insects and consumes thousands of pesky mosquitoes each day. These birds not only provide hours of entertainment, they also reduce the population of bugs in your yard. Bluebirds also feed on small plant seeds but do not eat domestic fruit and are not the garden raiders that other birds often are. No mention has been made regarding the color or beauty of this bird. Both are implicit in the name. However, it must be said that both Missouri and New York have chosen the bluebird as their official state bird.

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