

# The Tennessee Bluebird

*Special Edition*  
 Helping Our Bluebirds Through The  
 Winter In Tennessee



Photo Donna Ferguson Dudley

**Editors Notes**

The past two winters have been hard on our Tennessee Bluebirds. Cold weather and ice storms have resulted in winter kill of many bluebirds throughout Tennessee.

In this special edition of The Tennessee Bluebird we will address best practices on how we can help these beautiful birds get through their most stressful time of the year.

I do not proclaim to be an expert and rely heavily on those that have far more experience.

As always we appreciate your feedback.

Happy Birding!!!!

*Chuck James*

- In This Issue**
- Bluebirds, Species and Range in North America
  - History of the Bluebirds Plight
  - Winter Housing for Bluebirds
  - Winter Foods for Bluebirds

## BLUEBIRD QUOTES

**I** noticed a LONG time ago that people who are willing to spend their time helping bluebirds are ALWAYS going to be people you will



love getting to know and sharing your precious time with!  
 - Keith Kridler, Bluebird\_L, 2006

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY BY CHUCK JAMES



There are going to be as many opinions and solutions for helping our bluebirds during the winter as there are bluebird lovers. Some will say we

should do many things to help while others will say let nature take its course. Only you can make the decision that's best for your bluebirds. There is no right or wrong way, if however we can find a way to help them through the winter I think it's worth discussion.

In this edition I will be referring to many observations and opinions by Dr. T. David Pitts from his book "Studying Eastern Bluebirds, A Biologist's Report and Reflections." If you don't have this reference book in your collection, it's a must. Dr. Pitts, is a retired Professor from the University of Tennessee in Martin, TN. He studied bluebirds intensively over a 25 year period form 1969 through 1993.

Before we start discussing how we can help our bluebirds during the winter in Tennessee, let's step back and look at the history of the bluebird and why they need our help.



Male & Female Eastern Bluebird



Male & Female Western Bluebird

Bluebirds are a member of the Thrush family (Robins). Bluebirds are one of the few thrush genera in America. The only place in the world where you will see Bluebirds is on the North American Continent and parts of Mexico. There are three (3)

species of bluebirds: Eastern Bluebird (Sialia sialis),

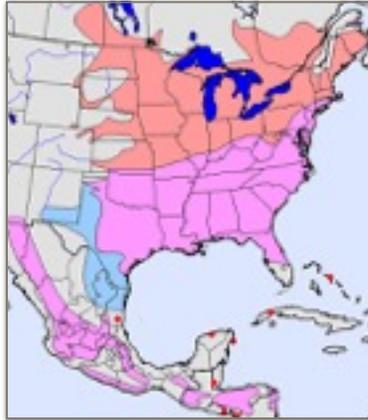


Male & Female Mountain Bluebird

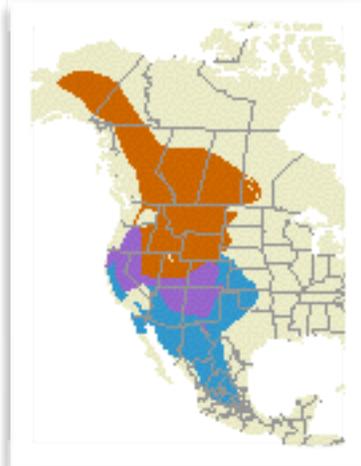
Mountain Bluebird ( Sialia currucoides) and Western Bluebird (Sialia mexicana).

## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY BY CHUCK JAMES

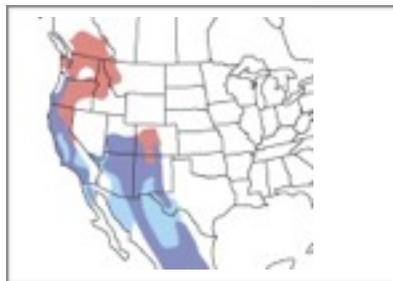
The Eastern Bluebirds range from Colorado to the west to the east coast. From Costa Rica to the south to the 49th Parallel to the north in Canada half way up the Quebec Province continuing to the east over the top of Nova Scotia.



The summer only range runs from the middle of Kansas across southern, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio up to Rhode Island on the coast north. Below that line including Tennessee the Eastern bluebird remains permanent all year.



The Mountain Bluebird ranges in the summer during breeding all the way into Alaska while the blue area shows where they winter. They typically stay at the mid elevations in the mountains.



The western bluebirds are at lower elevations and summer as far north as Canada and winter in lower California and Mexico.

We hope these maps

give you a general idea of where our three (3) species of bluebirds can be seen in North America and Mexico.

Since most of our members live in the breeding range for the Eastern Bluebird our focus will be on that species of bluebird.

### HISTORY OF THE BLUEBIRD

To see where we are headed we must first look to the past. In bluebirding it is important we look at the struggle for survival of the bluebird since the 1700's.

Bluebirds are secondary cavity-nesters, meaning their beaks are not strong enough to excavate their own nests. Therefore, they rely on cavities made by others, like woodpeckers, or naturally occurring cavities, or on nest boxes. The availability of nesting sites in the early days was closely tied to land use. When settlers started to clear the eastern forest in the early 1700's as timber trading business increased, the Eastern Bluebird benefitted by having more open grass land.

When the first settlers arrived the bluebird was as abundant as the Robin. When you search the literature you will find many references to bluebirds. Keith Kridler indicated that some Native American tribes tied two or three gourd birdhouses together and put them up in dead trees around areas where they dried meat and dumped refuse near villages, to attract cavity nesters that would feed on the flies and other insects the meat and garbage attracted.

<b>INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY BY CHUCK JAMES</b>
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From 1750-1800, the population of farmers needing land exploded. During this time period, most people raised their own food. Forests were converted into pasture, and fruit tree orchards were planted. Home sites with open areas created ideal bluebird foraging habitat. Bluebirds may also have nested or roosted in recesses in log cabins and farm buildings. Some early farmers used binders that used twine to tie bundles of grain stalks together. The twine boxes had a roof and two holes on either side, and they were often used as nest sites by bluebirds. (Source: Children's Bluebird Activity Book)

By the mid 1800's more and more people were immigrating from England and Europe to America. This was also during the period of Irish Potato Famine from 1845 -1851. Of course, they wanted to bring things they enjoyed back in England, such as the song of the House Sparrow.

In a history compiled by E. A. Zimmerman, accounts show the first couple of introductions of the English House Sparrow in the New York City were not successful. In 1851 25 pairs of English House Sparrows were released followed by another release of 100 birds purchased in the fall of 1851. The birds were released in Central Park. In 1854 and 1858 the English House Sparrow was released in Maine. During the next decade 1,000 birds were released in 8 cities. At this point they were releasing English House Sparrows and European Starlings.

An 1883 article in The Messenger (Indiana, PA, 06/27/83) said "The little sparrow has been declared an outlaw by legislative enactment and they can be killed at any time. They were imported into this country from Europe some years ago as a destroyer of insects, but it has been found they are not insectivorous. Besides

they drive away all our native song birds and give no equivalent. Let them all be killed."

By 1943, the English House Sparrow population growth from the original 50 pairs in 1853 to a continental population was estimated at 150,000,000 birds (Wing 1943).

How have the English House Sparrows and European Starlings impacted our native cavity nesting birds, such as the bluebird. These birds are also secondary cavity nesters that will compete with the bluebird and other native cavity nesters for nesting sites. English House Sparrows will enter a nest where there are eggs or baby bluebirds and peck holes in the eggs or kill the young. There is no question these two birds have had an impact on the population of the bluebirds in North America.

From the end of World War II there was a boom in suburbia with many towns popping up around the country taking away valuable nesting habitat from the bluebird.



On the chart on the next page you can see the decline during this period from the lost of old dead trees with woodpecker holes.

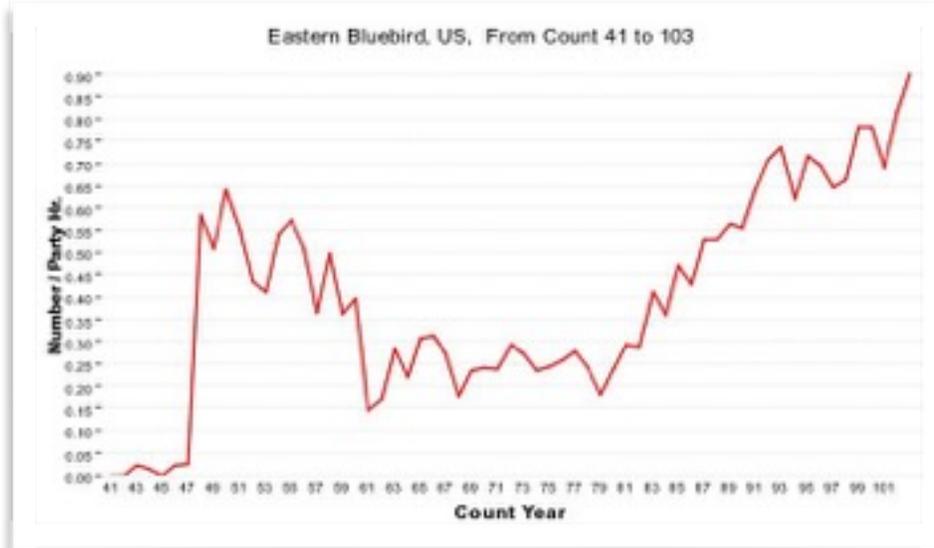
Also, during this period farmers were converting from wood fence posts to metal taking away more natural habitat.

## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY BY CHUCK JAMES

In our next section we will discuss the affects of cold weather on our bluebirds over the years.

To conclude our history we would be remised if we didn't discuss Dr. Larry Zeleny's impact on bring back the bluebird. In 1976 Dr. Larry Zeleny published an article "The Bluebird - How Can You Help Its Fight For Survival." He along with his colleagues estimated that from the late 1920's to 1970s Eastern Bluebird population declined by 90% during that period. Dr. Pitts in Tennessee confirmed similar losses in Tennessee.

In 1978 Dr. Larry Zeleny and a small group of experienced bluebirds got together to form the



North American Bluebird Society. The interest generate by this group grew NABS to a membership of 6,000 members. They had speakers that would talk about establishing and monitoring nest boxes and trails. The public soon became aware of the plight of the bluebird and as you

can see by the chart above the recovery can be directly attributed to people like you, interested in the carrying for one of our most beautiful birds - The Eastern Bluebird.



*We wish we could go more in-depth on the history of the Eastern Bluebird. The resource used for the history of the bluebird came from, probably the best resource on bluebirds - [www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org). A special thanks to Bet Zimmerman for this wonderful resource.*

*Chuck James*

**HELPING OUR EASTERN BLUEBIRDS SURVIVE THE WINTER:** by Chuck James

In the previous section on the history of the bluebird we showed how mankind impacted the bluebird both bad and good. In this section we will discuss how weather impacts the bluebird population and what we can do as stewards to help these beautiful birds survive the winter.

Without question we are experiencing a climate change in our world. Whether it is a cyclical event or permanent is beyond our level of expertise. We can say for certain the past few winters in Tennessee have been hard on our Eastern Bluebirds. But this is not the first tough stretch.

In 1940 more than 50% of the Bluebird population died during an ice storm in Illinois (Musselman 1941, BNA). There are reports of hard winters in the 1960's and 1970's Dr. David Pitts reports that 80 percent of the Tennessee Eastern Bluebird population may have died during an extreme winter in the late 1970's.

**HOW CAN WE HELP!!!**

**Nest Boxes:**

Often bluebirds will roost together in a nest box when it gets very cold. Do the following

- 1) Insulate the nest box by sealing off all the cracks and air vents so there won't be drafts. Just leave the entrance hole open.
- 2) Put a layer of Pine Straw on the floor of the nest box.

3) Face the box away from the prevailing wind.

4) Make or purchase roosting boxes for the winter. One of the problems with the bluebirds roosting in a nest box is they will stack up in the box 7 or 10 birds suffocating the bottom birds. With a roosting box the



birds can benefit from each others warmth while standing on a ladder. This box is available through our corporate sponsor The Wood Thrush Shop in Nashville.

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<b>HELPING OUR EASTERN BLUEBIRDS SURVIVE THE WINTER:</b> by Chuck James
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## Water



Photo's on this page: by Chuck James

The most important thing we can do for our bluebirds and all birds is supply them with a fresh supply of water daily. If you have a heater on your bird bath great. If not, make sure you get out there each day with fresh water. They need to keep hydrated, just one or two days without water can kill a bluebird.

Why do bluebirds follic in the water in the winter. They may bathe more to remove excessive oil from their feathers. Most birds have a preen gland or uropygial gland at the base of the tail. With their beak, birds realign the barbs correctly, remove any dirt or parasites and sometimes apply preen oil. Robins and bluebirds seem to produce more preen oil than other birds.

Fluffy feathers provide proper insulation against bitter winds. Too much oil on the feathers can cause the feathers to clump and lower the body temperature to dangerous levels. Most birds have one main molt a year, so birds have to maintain

their feathers carefully for a year until they go through another molt.

## FOOD

Bluebirds carry only enough fat reserve to last a couple of days. Bluebirds are bug eaters that switch over to suet, fruit, nuts, and berries in the winter. A bluebird that visits a seed feeder in the winter is much more likely to visit a mealworm feeder or hunt for bugs in the summer.



Feeding the bluebird and other small birds can be difficult especially if you have a jealous Mockingbirds around. We have found the best solution is a gage feeder.

It only takes the bluebirds, Titmouse, chickadees, wrens a short time to figure out how to get into the cage.

In the dish in the middle you can feed the bluebirds items with protein that will provide them with fat.

Live mealworms are always a mainstay for the bluebird. Dried mealworms offer the same nutritional value as the live mealworms. We have found that our bluebirds have been fussy but have adapted to dried mealworms.

**HELPING OUR EASTERN BLUEBIRDS SURVIVE THE WINTER:** by Chuck James

Live mealworms can be purchased at your local bird store and also online. Some of the online sites are: Bassett's Cricket Ranch, CA [www.bcricket.com](http://www.bcricket.com), Nature's Way, OH [www.thenaturesway.com](http://www.thenaturesway.com) and Grubco, OH [www.grubco.com](http://www.grubco.com).

The dried mealworms can also be purchased at your local bird store or on line. Personal experience, the only dried mealworms our bluebirds are attracted to are the Royal Wing Dried Mealworms, these can be found at Tractor Supply in most areas of Tennessee.

Other sources of protein and fat can be found in several other sources: The Royal Wing Bluebird Nuggets also found at Tractor Supply is a good source of protein and fat.

Liz Cutrone Owner, Wild Birds Unlimited, Knoxville suggest: "Bark Butter Bits (small nuggets of suet) Bark Butter (spreadable suet) Suet with peanuts blueberries or other fruits Shelled Peanuts Tree Nutty Plus (chopped tree

nuts, fruit, suet nuggets, calcium carbonate) Chips (shelled seed) can be found at our store on Kingston Pike, Knoxville.

Bluebirds are not seed eaters. They can't digest seed well. In fact when bluebirds start eating seed they are in desperate times. It's not a good sign when we see this behavior.

Bluebirds like suet bits or pieces. Most insect eating birds will eat suet. The spreadable type is easier for insect eating bills."

*Happy Holidays From The Tennessee Bluebird Society*



Photo by: Stan Colburn

**HELPING OUR EASTERN BLUEBIRDS SURVIVE THE WINTER**: by Chuck James

Here are two recipes you should try when it gets cold this winter.

Pinecone Feeder would be a fun project for children. This would be perfect for a church group for the holidays to have the children make up Pinecone Feeders as a project and take them home for the holidays.

Perhaps a elementary school after the winter break could do this as a nature / science project to demonstrate how, as an individual, you can help our winter birds.

Please contact your local church, school, Girl Scout Troop, Cub Scouts, Etc.

### Natural Foods

Dr. T. David Pitts writes, In January 1977 and January and February 1978 he and Harry McLeod, student at UT Martin studied dry bluebird fecal material from roosting boxes. They identified 761 fruits that bluebirds had eaten.

### Pinecone Bird Feeder



- 1 Tie a string around the pinecone.
- 2 Mix ½ cup peanut butter/suet/shortening with ½ cup oats/cornmeal.
- 3 Use a spoon (or fingers!) to spread the mixture onto the pinecone. Make sure to get the mixture into the open areas of the pinecone. ...
- 4 Place birdseed in pie tin. ...
- 5 Hang your pinecone feeder in a tree just outside you window.

Overall, 54% of the fruits were from sumac, 37% from Japanese honeysuckle, and 5% from deciduous holly; greenbrier, wild rose, bittersweet, pokeberry, hackberry and wild grape together made up the remaining 4%.

Do you have any of these plants in your yard? Sounds like a sumac or honeysuckle bush would help our bluebirds during the winter.

Perhaps we should have a project planting these bushes where bluebirds reside.

We hope you have enjoyed this information. If you have other suggestions please email us at: [tnsialia@gmail.com](mailto:tnsialia@gmail.com)

Chuck James

### NEW ZICK DOUGH: SMALL BATCH

Melt in the microwave and stir together:

1 cup peanut butter  
1 cup lard

In a large mixing bowl, combine  
2 cups chick starter

## **We need help in the following areas**

*\* **County coordinators** - Give presentations to local civic groups and organize one community project per year.*

*\* **Data Collection** - Must have strong spreadsheet skills. Collect trail data and collate for research.*

*\* **Woodworkers** - Willing to build nest boxes.*

*\* **TBS Board Members** - We need people interested in taking a leadership role in TBS.*

*\* **Newsletter Publisher** - Must have past experience putting together newsletters.*

*Email us if your interested in the above opportunities to:*

[tnsialia@gmail.com](mailto:tnsialia@gmail.com)

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Website: [www.tnbluebirdsociety.org](http://www.tnbluebirdsociety.org)

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I have interest in helping the following areas: Newsletter\_\_\_\_, Membership\_\_\_\_,  
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 Bluebird Society**

**10350 Altona Cove  
 Collierville, TN 38017**

Website: [www.TNBluebirdsociety.org](http://www.TNBluebirdsociety.org) / Email: [TNSialia@Gmail.com](mailto:TNSialia@Gmail.com)  
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