

Description of the Eastern Bluebird

IDENTIFICATION – They are relatively small thrushes, with an average length of 7.5 inches and a wingspan of 10-12.5 inches. A noticeable physical trait of males is the color contrast between the blue plumage and the reddish-brown or brick red breasts, which taper off to white towards the bottom. The blue in females is more of a grayish tone, with the exception of the wings and tail, and the breast a more subdued orange-brown with the white coloration extending to the throat. As with most birds, an easy way to identify a bluebird is through their call: [CLICK TO HEAR](#).



An adult female



An adult male

BEHAVIOR - Bluebirds are migratory birds, and can be found throughout this region during the summer. They nest in cavities excavated by other birds, usually woodpeckers, and prefer trees in or near meadows and grassy upland areas. From this vantage point, they can scan their surroundings for insects and small invertebrates, which compose approximately 2/3 of their diet. For this reason they can most often be found in open developed areas, including yards, parks, golf courses, pastures and agricultural fields. The nest is constructed by the female, and takes around 10 days. Mating season is during the spring and summer, and a mating pair will typically produce 2 broods. During this time, males can become extremely territorial and will attack birds seen as a threat. Although individuals can live up to 10yrs, most die within the first year, with predation a major factor in the mortality rate. Predators include raccoons, snakes, fire-ants, owls, and housecats. Competition from introduced bird species, such as the European Starling and House Sparrow, is a significant threat and contributed to extensive population declines prior to a conservation campaign involving nest boxes such as those found along the Lost Creek Hiking Trail. This is discussed in more detail on the next page.

WHY DID THE POPULATION DECLINE?

Bluebird population levels have long been tied to human land use. It is thought that the creation of new habitat through deforestation and conversion to agricultural land, coupled with the perception of bluebirds as beautiful and harmless, led populations to initially flourish under the increasing settlement of the 18th and 19th century. With human settlement, however, came other less beneficial changes as well. The aptly named House Sparrow was introduced from Europe in the mid-late 1800s. Although they do not fare well in natural grasslands or woodlands, their aggressive disposition and appetite for grain and livestock feed allowed them to outcompete Bluebirds in towns and farmlands. Another introduced species, the European Starling, exacerbated this problem. Over 99% of tall grass prairie has been converted to farmland since European settlement. Furthermore, the 20th century brought heavy and increasing pesticide use, with DDT (banned in 1972) becoming popular in the 1940s.

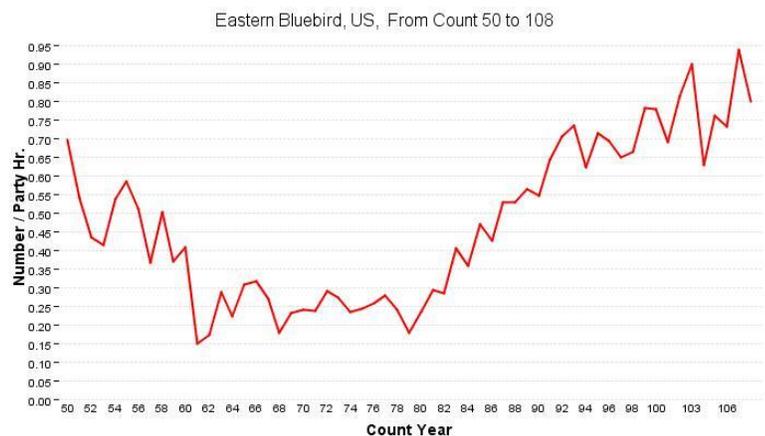
CONSERVATION EFFORT

It is possible we would no longer have a healthy bluebird population in southeast Minnesota today had it not been for an active and mostly volunteer conservation effort involving nest boxes that spawned from the green revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not all nest boxes and birdhouses are suitable for bluebirds, and even a suitable nest box may not aid in the recovery effort if it is not monitored or is improperly placed. These websites offer guidelines for how to select, position, and monitor nest boxes so as to provide additional habitat whilst keeping predators and competitors out.

[Bluebirdnut](#)

[Bluebird Recovery Program](#)

[Sialis.org](#)



Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) from 1950-2008 for the United States. Very little data exists before this, but it is estimated that the population peaked around 1900.



MORE RESOURCES:

Cornell Lab of Ornithology

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/eastern_bluebird/id

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

<http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/birds/easternbluebird.html>

National Geographic

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/bluebird/>

Bluebird Population History

<http://www.sialis.org/history.htm>