

# under the sky

## Build Your Own Bluebird Box: It's Easy!

BY SUSAN USHER

Vivid blue with cinnamon-red breasts, eastern bluebirds are among the first spring arrivals from the north, though their numbers are small.

Aside from their cheerful call and warbling song, the small thrush family members are valued because they destroy insects.

Bluebirds have had an up and down history, says Tommy Hughes, district Wildlife Resources Commission biologist. Hughes led a July 20 workshop in building bluebird houses as part of "Celebrate July," the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department's National Recreation and Parks Month observance.

Eastern bluebirds once were common in Carolina orchards and clearings, but insecticides usage took its toll, he said. Only now are the small, attractive birds making a comeback. In Brunswick County, they're seen now more than in the last 10 or 15 years. If you're impatient, there are ways to encourage their coming to your area.

While bluebirds prefer nesting in natural cavities in old trees and fences, they will use nesting boxes, Hughes said. Especially now, when timbering practices and the advent of metal fencing have eliminated many natural sites.

If you've missed the bluebird and want to encourage it in your neighborhood, begin by building one or more bluebird boxes. They're simple and inexpensive to make.

But choosing where to mount a birdbox, says Hughes, is the single most important step to having a successful bluebird program.

Bluebirds like to use a very specific type of habitat, rarely deviating from it. In general they prefer open areas with scattered trees, such as an orchard or at the

edge of a clearing near a stand of trees. The clearing should have low growth. They don't like sites in heavy timber—just near it.

Boxes should be placed at intervals of 150 to 200 yards, preferably facing east. "They go to them faster for some reason," said Hughes.

Boxes should be mounted about five to seven feet above ground level. Fence posts make excellent choices.

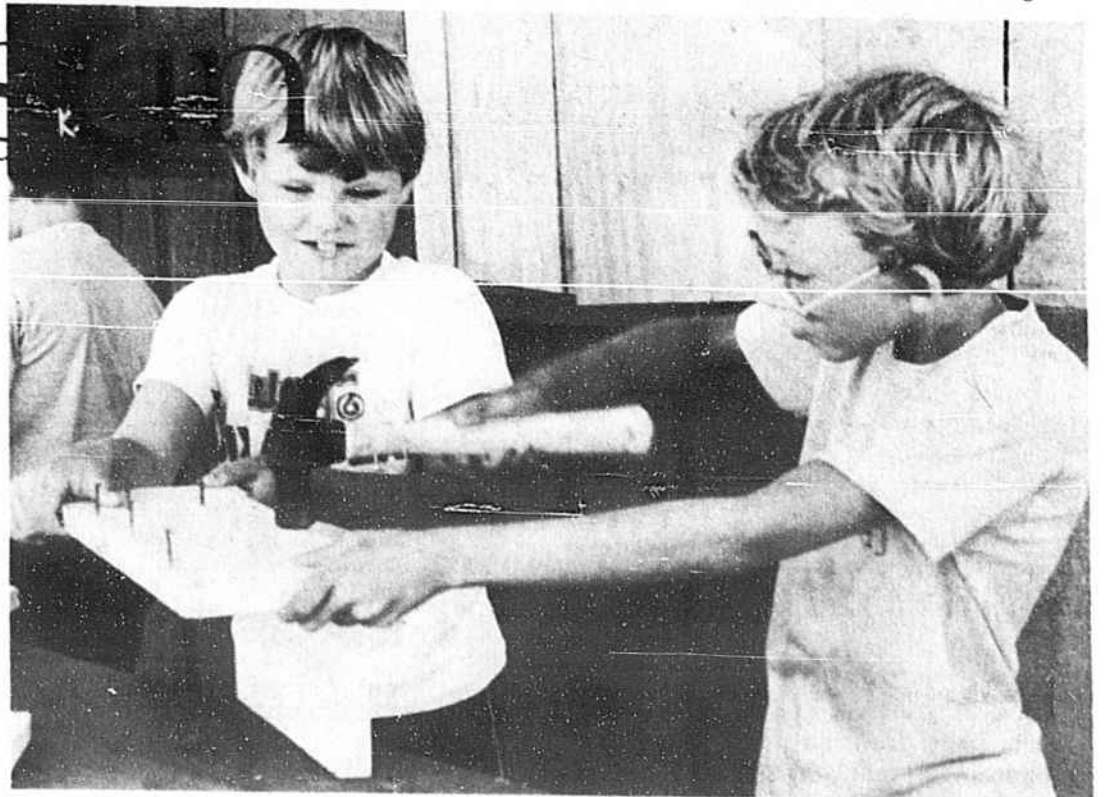
And, he stressed, since bluebirds feed almost entirely on insects during the nesting season from late February and early March to July, the box should not be placed in or near areas of widespread insecticide use.

During the nesting season, bluebirds will use the same box for two or three successive hatchings—if you clean the box out immediately after each clutch of eggs hatches and the young fledge. The eggs hatch in about 12 or 13 days.

Locating the box in town or adjoining a farm yard will usually attract sparrows, not bluebirds. "Don't put boxes where you have a lot of English sparrows. They're real competitive with bluebirds. They will actually kill the young or destroy the eggs and take the nest." Keeping the opening to the box 1½-inches in diameter also helps attract bluebirds rather than sparrows.

Also protect the bluebirds from other predators, such as cats, by 1) hanging a predator shield beneath it; and 2) mounting the box where it cannot be reached from above from nearby trees.

Each bluebird house requires: 33 inches of 1-inch x 10-inch lumber; 20 to 25 1½-inch to 1¾-inch galvanized siding nails or aluminum nails; a small metal hinge; wire or ring-shank nails to attach box to post; and (top-



JODY BOWEN AND MARK LOGAN use the buddy system, taking turns holding and hammering.

tion) a 1½-inch wood screw with washer to secure the front of the lid.

Tina Pritchard, assistant director of the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department, said lumber for 15 boxes costs approximately \$35.

All materials were supplied to participants in the Saturday morning workshop, who were asked to bring hammers only.

Participants ranged in age from Cub Scout Jody Bowen to an older couple who drove from Wilmington for the event, bluebird watchers Robert and Mary Catherine Marlowe.

Following Hughes' instructions, they welded drills and hammers, all completing at least one box during the session.

### Make A Box

Making a box at home is easy.

From one side of your 33-inch long board (dimensions are given for ¾-inch thick lumber), cut a top or door measuring 6½ inches by 7 inches; a back, 16½ inches by 5¼ inches; and a front, 9¾ inches by 5¼ inches. From the other side, cut a bottom 3/8 inches square and a long piece 20½ inches by 3/8 inches for the sides. Measure 9¾ inches along the side piece and cut the board at a slant. Position the sides with the slant ends up to provide ventilation space between the top and sides.

To finish the top or door piece, slant one cut side at a 77-degree angle to mount flush against the back of the house.

On the front piece, cut a 1½-inch diameter hole, centering it horizontally and spacing it 1¼ from the top. Roughen the inside by making notches with a saw or holes with an awl or drill, to help young in climbing to the entrance hole.

Take the bottom square and sand the corners off, rounding them. This also provides ventilation and drainage for the box.

Assemble the enclosure so that the back extends farther at the bottom than at the top. Recess the bottom panel one-quarter inch to allow drainage.

When completed, drill two or three holes in the back

panel above and below the enclosure for quick attachment to a pole or post.

When completed, finish in a dull natural shade of stain or paint. Lighter tones will keep the box cooler.

Diagrams that illustrate dimensions and assembly procedures are available from Tina Pritchard, assistant director of the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department in Bolivia.



DEPARTMENT VOLUNTEER Kay Brannon learns to use a drill with the help of Tina Pritchard, assistant director of the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department.



WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST TOMMY HUGHES helps Jody Bowen determine where to place drill holes before nailing a box together.



FOR A HIGHER OCCUPANCY RATE, mount the completed box facing east and out of predators' reach. Keith Bowen and Mark Logan display their boxes, which lack only a coat of paint or stain.

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