



# Homes for Bluebirds

By Carla Burgess | Photos © by Mike Dunn



*Since 1972, Jack Finch of Nash County has worked to revive eastern North Carolina as a welcome place for bluebirds*

One afternoon last summer, Jack Finch climbed on his golf cart and prepared for a four-hour journey. He traveled only a mile and a half, but he made nearly six dozen stops along the way. Jack was making his weekly check of the 70 birdhouses he built and put up on his farm and blueberry nursery in Bailey, Nash County. The wooden boxes are homes for bluebirds, which Jack, who is 87, has been studying for more than 30 years.

“I think nothing but bluebirds 24 hours a day, eight days a week,” he says. His obsession with the birds began in 1972 when he and his youngest son, Kelly, were digging blueberry plants and Jack heard the familiar sweet warble of an Eastern bluebird. He knew the sound from his childhood, but to his dismay his teenage son did not recognize it, because at that time the birds had all but disappeared from the countryside. They stopped work and built seven crude, wooden boxes with shingled roofs, then erected them immediately on poles around the farm. Eventually, bluebirds moved in.

In 1973 Jack founded Homes for Bluebirds, a nonprofit organization dedicated to restoring

bluebird habitat, supporting research and educating the public. He believed that conservation was key to saving the species, whose populations had suffered largely because of widespread pesticide use, dwindling habitat and competition with aggressive non-native species.

Though bluebird numbers have rebounded, the birds are still in a fight. Unlike woodpeckers, which hollow out their own nest sites in trees, the bluebird’s bill is not designed for chiseling. The bird must use existing cavities for raising young. Perhaps unaware of the consequences, people have destroyed habitat by removing dead trees, wooden fence posts and other places with holes and hollows where

bluebirds once built nests. The English sparrow (commonly called the house sparrow) and the European starling, introduced in the United States from Europe in the late 1880s, have stolen many of the remaining breeding locations. These species have handily outpaced the reproductive rates of bluebirds. Today, the house sparrow is one of the most abundant songbirds in North America.

Conservationists determined that the best hope for the bluebird's comeback was widespread placement of nest boxes—combined with strategies to discourage house sparrows and starlings. They also turned on its head the conventional wisdom of not interfering with birds and nests. To the contrary, experts insist that people monitor and maintain bluebirds' artificial homes and keep records on breeding trends. They even recommend evicting the aggressive starlings and house sparrows, which will take over a box and destroy bluebird eggs and their young.

Jack Finch perfected his own custom design and by 1979 had erected 2,280 of the vertical, rectangular bluebird boxes throughout North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Florida. He strived to monitor them at least once every 40 days. He put up hundreds of boxes in Pinehurst, Southern Pines and other places in North Carolina where golf courses are abundant. Though bluebirds will breed in a range of locales, they favor mowed, open landscapes where prey is highly visible. Bluebird boxes are now a common sight in pastures, on golf courses, and in rural and suburban yards.

### About bluebirds

Bluebirds are members of the thrush family and a bit larger than sparrows, about 7 inches. Males are vivid blue with a rusty-red breast and white belly. Females are similarly colored but much duller. Young birds have a gray-and-white speckled breast with a tinge of blue in the wings and tail.

Bluebirds are often described as having a cheerful song and disposition. Adults and children alike are enchanted by bluebirds' stark beauty and docile nature. They spend hours watching them build their nests and peering into boxes to count the eggs and young. "Observing bluebirds is a good form of mental therapy, especially for older people," Jack says.

In the temperate season, bluebirds feed almost exclusively on insects. They hunt from high perches, scanning the ground for grasshoppers, grubs and other insects, then swooping down to snatch up their prey. Both the male and female feed their babies meals of



primarily soft insects. In the winter, when insects are scarce, bluebirds eat berries. They particularly love the berries of hollies and dogwoods. Beautyberry, elderberry, mulberry and sumacs (staghorn or winged) are other suitable fruit-bearers that homeowners are encouraged to plant.

Bluebirds stay in North Carolina year-round and usually begin searching for nesting sites in late February or early March. So it's best to put up new boxes by January or early February. Days or weeks may pass before the male and female begin collecting grasses or pine straw to build a nest, usually in April. They typically build a nest in five or six days. The female begins laying eggs four or five days later. She lays one light blue (or rarely white) egg each day until the clutch is completed, then begins incubating them. The young hatch in about 17 to 18 days and spend another two weeks in the nest.

Bonded pairs can raise three broods each season—the first brood averages five young, the second brood four and the last one three, though Finch says as many as six may comprise a brood. The breeding season lasts until early September.

Because young birds fledge from the nests so quickly, it's a rare sight to see, even for Jack Finch. "In 30 years, I've never seen bluebirds leave on their own," he says, though on a few occasions he has accidentally flushed them from the box close to fledging time. For that reason, he recommends that people stop monitoring nests when the babies are 12 days old.

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## Devoted to bluebirds

Each year, Robeson County extension agent Everett Davis gets phone calls from people who want to know how to attract bluebirds. During the past 20 years, Davis has built about 600 boxes. He gives away the ones he makes from scrap wood and sells at cost the ones he makes from new materials. Davis also teaches 4-H and garden clubs how to build them. "It gets a whole lot of bluebird houses around the countryside," he says.

Desma Perry has done her part in the chain of distribution. In 25 years working for Jack Finch, she's built 70,000 boxes. Her record is 10,000 in a single year. That was 1990, when Jack and his accomplishments were featured on the "CBS Evening News" with Dan Rather. The saws and nail guns hardly stopped running to meet the demand for boxes afterward. Edith Finch (no relation), another loyal employee, once made 157 boxes in a day.

Jack won't even wager a guess at how many boxes Homes for Bluebirds has built and sold. All the money goes right back into making the boxes. Early on he borrowed thousands of dollars to buy a saw, which he has used to mill the lumber and cut all the pieces for the birdhouses. Now he's even growing the trees. "When I say we're nonprofit, I mean real, real nonprofit," he says. "I'd say the bluebirds owe me \$12,000."

All these boxes amount to a boon for bluebirds everywhere. But Jack stresses that monitoring is just as important as putting up a box. His and other bluebird organizations say you shouldn't put up a bluebird box unless you will check it regularly.

"If you don't monitor and take care of problems you're actually doing more harm than good," Jack says. "You might just be raising sparrows to destroy someone else's bluebirds."

Plus, he adds, "You're missing half the fun if you don't check your boxes."

*Carla Burgess of Raleigh is a regular contributor to Carolina Country.*

*Mike Dunn is an educator with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences and a freelance nature photographer. Contact him at mikedunn@aol.com.*

# BIRD AND BOX TIPS

## Building and Mounting Boxes

A versatile and functional bluebird box has a fixed floor, three fixed walls, and a front wall that swivels at the top and latches at the bottom. Entrance holes should be no smaller than 1½ inches and no larger than 1⅞ inches (to exclude starlings, which are larger than bluebirds). Perches are not recommended. Floor size should be either 4-by-4 inches or 5-by-5 inches. Boxes must have ventilation and drainage holes in each corner. Birdhouses may be mounted on wooden, metal or PVC poles. Baffles on the poles made of plastic or aluminum tubing will discourage predators like snakes and raccoons.

Place boxes at a height convenient for monitoring, usually 5 feet. Allow 100 feet between boxes, as bluebirds are territorial. Select a site near open or mowed areas, but not too open—bluebirds need a high perch nearby from which to spot prey. Boxes may be erected year-round. Put up new ones by mid-winter to recruit birds.

- For educational brochures or to order boxes, feeders, specialty hardware or handy cardboard nest cups, contact Homes for Bluebirds, P.O. Box 699, Bailey, N.C. 27807, [www.danfinch.com/birds.htm](http://www.danfinch.com/birds.htm) or (252) 235-4664.
- The N.C. Bluebird Society has county coordinators who provide bluebird house plans, tips and reference material. To find the coordinator in your county, visit the society's Web site at [www.ncbluebird.com](http://www.ncbluebird.com). Or call Chuck Bliss at (336) 625-5423.
- The North American Bluebird Society also offers plans, fact sheets and other resources. Visit [www.nabluebirdsociety.org](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org) or call (330) 359-5511.

## Monitoring and Maintaining Boxes

The Birdhouse Network provides field worksheets and instructions for recording and submitting your data. Your input helps biologists expand the body of scientific information. See [www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse) or call (800) 843-BIRD. Observe and record nesting activity, including when egg-laying begins each season, what materials the birds use for building the nest, size of the clutches and survival rate of young. Remove any dead babies as soon as you see them but leave unhatched eggs alone. Clean out boxes between each brood, removing old nest material, blowfly larvae and other insects, and debris. Check for and fix any leaks.

## Identifying Other Species

Bluebirds build neat, cup-shaped nests made of weed stems, grasses and sometimes pine straw. House sparrow nests are tall and messy, sometimes made of trash. Remove these nests, or better yet, locate your boxes away from places where house sparrows abound—such as close to your house or near a source of grain. Do not disturb nests of other native species that may use the box, such as tree swallows, flycatchers, wrens, chickadees and titmice. These are protected by law and are desirable species you can still have fun observing.

## Feeding Bluebirds

Unlike typical feeder species, bluebirds must be coaxed to eat from a specialty feeder. Supplements like berries and mealworms can help birds survive harsh winters when starlings have stripped shrubs and trees of fruit. For training tips, consult any of the sources listed above.

