

MAY 1 - 14, 2021 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

EASTERN BLUEBIRD



#1 Eastern Bluebird, *Sialia sialis*, male.

© Dick Harlow

The Eastern Bluebirds that we see here at EastView follow their habit of preferring open fields near trees, or where there are less shrubs around trees as well as less ground cover. Therefore, one would very likely find them near upland pastures, plowed and open fields, backyards, golf courses and suburban parks. That is why we have them searching out the various bird boxes we have at EastView.

Unfortunately, English Sparrows, also known as House Sparrows, seek out nesting sites earlier than do Bluebirds and Tree Swallows; consequently, they make it very difficult for Bluebirds to find an empty bird box. Sometimes when they do as do Tree Swallows, it is only because House Sparrows had neglected to take ownership of that box.

These two species, Eastern Bluebird and Tree Swallow have been seriously hampered by the introduction of the House Sparrow from Europe.

The Eastern Bluebird is territorial during the breeding season which is generally from the end of April to August. As with Robins and other birds that are territorial, they will not only defend their nesting habitat but will also defend their feeding territory as well.

We need to understand that food is not necessarily plentiful for all wildlife and therefore feeding space, feeding areas are needed for a species survival; therefore, those areas are fiercely defended.

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#2 Eastern Bluebird, *Sialia sialis*, female.
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Usually, a pair of bluebirds will have two broods in a season. The female will usually lay 3-7 eggs that range in color from white to dark blue. Picture #3 shows a light blue, which is a gradient of the typical color range for bluebird eggs.



#3 Eastern Bluebird Eggs,
© thebackyardnaturalist.com

Bluebirds nest in holes in trees that are old woodpecker nesting holes; openings in trees allow bluebirds to build a nest and be protected. Or they nest in birdhouses that have been made by man.

Once the nesting area has been decided upon it will be defended primarily by the male and sometimes to the death if need be.

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It usually takes ten days for the female to build the nest. Once the eggs are laid it takes between 14 to 16 days for the eggs to hatch. The parents, both male and female feed and take care of the young which will take another 14 to 21 days before the fledglings are on their own. However, initially bluebird young are not entirely on their own when they leave the nest. One or more of the young of the first brood will help with the rearing of the second brood. Bluebirds form a very strong family bond!



#4 Eastern Bluebird, the male with an insect waiting his turn to feed the chicks. © Dick Harlow

Bluebirds feed primarily on invertebrates such as grasshoppers and beetles as well as other insects. They also eat fruit such as berries, usually small in size.

Based on banding record studies the life span of a single bluebird is between 6-10 years. The survival rate for a single nest of five fledglings is around one out of five.

Birds in general as well as bluebirds specifically have many obstacles as well as challenges that they must face. When a young bird is out on its own it must learn quickly what are its predators, what food to eat, where to find its food, how to stay warm during freezing weather, where to find water, all the many attributes that will allow this individual to survive. Birds, like people, have those individuals who learn well and those that do not. But in the bird real-world, mistakes or lack of understanding can be lethal!

Some of the natural predators that will either rob a nest of its eggs or eat its nestlings can be as small as the Eastern Chipmunk or as big as the Black Bear. There are of course other predators of bluebirds regardless of their age such as racoons, fire ants, rat snakes, falcons, owls, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and the Northern Goshawk.

If a first-year bird can survive for a year, then the probability it will survive for another is better than 60 percent. Whereas 90 percent of first year birds do not survive their first year.

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Month of MAY 01-14, 2021

All Measurements taken at solar noon (1230 EST).

PRECIPITATION

Average May Precipitation for Vermont = 3.46 inches.

Total precipitation for May 1-14 was 29.8 mm or 1.2 inches. We have 2.26 inches to make up for the rest of the month to stay on average.

Overcast Days: We had 10 days of overcast skies. Of those overcast skies 5 days produced rain.