

Wisconsin's Bluebird Comeback: Beautiful native bird is thriving with human help

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While the robin may be its official state bird, Wisconsin is decidedly bluebird country, too. So much so, the Badger State now leads the nation in the number of annual bluebird fledglings, according to Patrick Ready, president of the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, known as BRAW.



Throughout the state, dedicated bluebirders have been instrumental in the great bluebird comeback taking place over the past several decades. This includes BRAW's 800 or so members.

"It's not really a competition but . . . Wisconsin is doing very well," Ready said. "We really have an excellent statewide organization."

It's easy to understand why the bluebird has prompted such gung-ho restoration efforts. The beloved bird is universally endearing with its brilliant blue and orange plumage and melodious chortle. They are among only a few native birds in Wisconsin that are blue in color.

“I think it’s just the beauty of the birds, their cheerful song, and they’re fairly easy to attract,” Ready explained. “They are just so gorgeous.”

Still, the allure of the bluebird goes deeper. Traditionally, bluebirds have been associated with happiness, blessings, spiritual joy and tranquility. To see a bluebird is a good omen. Who wouldn’t want more bluebirds in their life?

Sound the bluebird alarm

Not long ago, however, the bluebird was in serious jeopardy. As recently as the 1960s, the eastern bluebird population had declined by 90% in its historic range east of the Rocky Mountains during the preceding 50 years. Ready estimated there were only about 600 Eastern bluebirds left in Wisconsin.

“Everybody knew they were in trouble,” he said.

Causes for the dramatic decline include loss of habitat and natural cavity nesting sites such as small hollows in dead trees. An increase in predators such as non-native English sparrows (also called house sparrows) and European starlings also proved detrimental to bluebirds. “The number one nemesis probably is the English sparrow,” Ready said

Fast forward through 50 years of human help to 2012, a recent “phenomenal” year for bluebirds, explained Ready. Optimal weather patterns enabled BRAW members to account for over 32,000 bluebirds fledged. Many females had three broods that year instead of the usual two, according to Ready.

“That was our peak year,” he said.

Since then, cold, rainy springs have reduced the number to around 20,000 a year. But he quickly added, “We are still doing well.”

Bluebird nostalgia, originating from Wisconsin’s rural roots, somewhat explains the passion of state residents for helping bluebirds, Ready said. Alarm bells went off for many of the older members of BRAW who remembered bluebirds while growing up on dairy farms.

“They were very anxious to see the bluebirds come back,” he explained. While the state’s Northwoods are too densely treed for most bluebirds, the lower, more-open two-thirds of Wisconsin, historically dotted with dairy farms, provides ideal habitat. Any area with short grass interspersed with trees is potential bluebird territory, including homes, business parks, cemeteries, golf courses, parkland, bike trails and even railroad tracks.

'Just a thrill'

One of the endearing aspects of bluebirds is that the same birds often return to the same area or box each spring, according to Mary Holleback of West Bend. Holleback is BRAW’s coordinator for Ozaukee and Washington counties and an educator naturalist at Riveredge Nature Center in Newburg, where she’s monitored a bluebird trail with 30 nesting boxes since 1980.

Holleback said she discovered a rare circumstance when a female bluebird had laid white eggs instead of the usual light blue from year to year, so she’s fairly certain it was the same female who returned to Riveredge. Bluebirds will often, but not always, fly south for the winter then return to an area if they were successful in producing young. The male and female may not migrate together or technically mate for life, but they somehow find their way back to the same spot and meet up in spring, Holleback explained.

Bird banding has also confirmed this homing instinct of bluebirds.

Another BRAW member who's been instrumental in bringing back the bluebird in Wisconsin is Ann Wick, bluebird trail manager in Black Earth. "This is my 25th year banding Eastern bluebirds from my nest boxes, having banded over 13,000 in the past 24 years," she said. "It's very rewarding to know you have helped bring back a species that was in sharp decline.

"When I began placing nest boxes and monitoring them in the mid 1980s, I observed very few bluebirds in our area (northwestern Dane County). Now people tell me they see them frequently," she attested. "I know this to be true as my plus or minus 150 nest boxes house plus or minus 50 active pairs of Eastern bluebirds, their eggs and nestlings yearly."

Holleback said even one property owner putting up a single nesting box and a simple birdbath can make a difference for bluebirds. Don't be sad if your nesting box attracts other native birds such as tree swallows or wrens, as you will still be helping cavity dwellers that have challenges similar to bluebirds, she said.

Partaking in the great bluebird comeback is a simple pleasure that also serves up a gratifying dose of nature just outside your doorstep, especially for children, Holleback said. "It's wonderful to have something that beautiful in your backyard," she said. "It's just a thrill."

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