

## Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*



**Folk Name:** Red-breasted Bluebird, Blue Robin

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Common to Very Common

**Habitat:** Open habitat; including fields, farmland, residential areas, golf courses, parks, forest edge

The Eastern Bluebird is a permanent resident found throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Nesting occurs from March through the end of July. The bluebird is more numerous here during winter months as birds from the North augment our local population. Over 300 have been tallied on several different Christmas Bird Counts conducted in the region, and one-day counts of more than 100 have been reported on Spring Bird Counts.

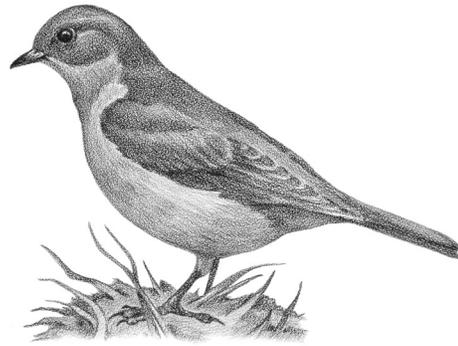
“Few American farmers fail to provide a box for the bluebird’s nest.” —*People’s Cyclopedia of Universal Knowledge*, 1884

“Their bright presence and their clear, cheerful calls gladdened the time so much that we wished to keep them near.” —T.G. Pearson, Greensboro, NC 1904

The Eastern Bluebird is one of our most beloved birds. The presence of a bluebird near a home was often considered an omen of future contentment and happiness. Early English settlers called it the “Blue Robin” due to its similarity to the European Robin. However, the two are not closely related and the European Robin is no longer classified as a thrush.

The Eastern Bluebird is arguably our most renowned cavity-nesting species. When people think of providing nest boxes for birds, they usually think first of attracting the rich, sky-blue-colored bluebird. Carolinians have been providing nest boxes for these lovely birds for hundreds of years, as is illustrated in this account published in the *Miners’ and Farmers’ Journal* in Charlotte on June 29, 1831:

A gentleman a few doors down from us, relates the following: A son of his, in the early part of the season, put up a cage in his garden, intended for the blue bird. Soon after it was completed, a pair of wrens paid it a visit, and being pleased with the tenement, took possession, and commenced building a nest. Before, however, the nest was completed, a pair of blue birds arrived—laid claim to the cage, and after a hard battle, succeeded in ousting the wrens, and forthwith completed a nest plan of their own. But the male wren was a bird of spirit, and not disposed to submit tamely to the injury, some days after,



watching his opportunity, when his antagonist was away, he entered the cage, and commenced rolling the eggs out of the nest. He had thrown out but one, when the blue bird discovered him, and with loud cries made an immediate attack. The wren sought safety in a neighboring bush and by his activity in diving about among the branches on the ground, succeeded in eluding his enraged adversary. ... The blue bird gave up the chase, and returned to examine the condition of his nest.

This scene still plays out today in yards, neighborhoods, and on farms, throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Eastern Bluebirds will only nest in a cavity, and there is always a limited supply of natural nest holes available. Once a suitable hole is found, a bluebird will often have to fight to defend it and keep it. The centuries-old practice of providing usable artificial nest cavities helps to increase



*Eastern Bluebird.* (Will Stuart)

the number of possible nest sites available and therefore helps to reduce the nesting pressure on bluebirds and other cavity-nesting species.

Eastern Bluebird populations are known to be susceptible to periodic severe weather phenomena. For many years, the spring of 1895 was known as the spring of “the vanished bluebirds” throughout the Carolina Piedmont and beyond. On February 7, 1895, a “terrible freeze” and blizzard impacted a large portion of the eastern United States. It coated the landscape in ice for such a long period that birds of many species were unable to survive. Professor J.S. Coon from the Georgia School of Technology wrote: “the destruction to small bird-life by that blizzard is beyond calculation.” Bluebirds were found dead from Georgia north to Massachusetts. Many were found dead huddled together in large numbers in hollow trees. North Carolina ornithologists reported that the species “apparently came very near to being extirpated” in the eastern states. Fortunately, over the next few decades, the population slowly recovered.

Then in the 1950s, the alarm about the status of this species was raised again. The possible prospect of “vanishing bluebirds” made the national news once again. A serious decline in the population of the Eastern Bluebird in the eastern United States had begun in the 1930s and continued for about 50 years. In 1977, Dr. Lawrence Zeleny estimated a loss of up to 90% of the bluebirds in the eastern states. This time, several causes were mentioned including competition with the introduced House Sparrow and European Starling, the loss of nest cavities as wooden fence posts were replaced with metal posts, overuse of pesticides that limited their food source, and once again periodic incidents of severe winter weather.

The breeding population in the Carolinas was seriously impacted throughout this period. Rhett Chamberlain summarized a precipitous decline of the Eastern Bluebird in the Carolinas in an article published in *The Chat* in September 1965. “Although the severity of the weather

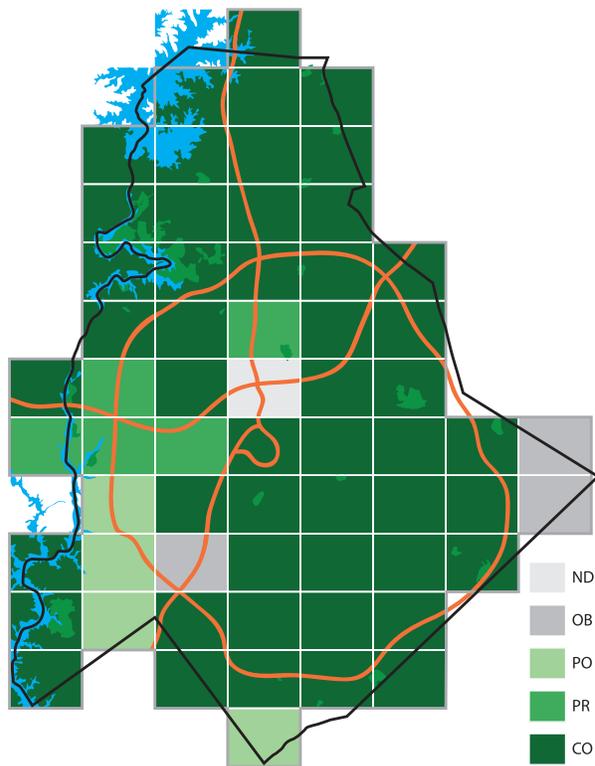
late in the winter of 1957–1958 dealt the initial blow to the Bluebird population as a whole, the knockout punch came in March of 1960 and the combination spelled disaster.” By that time, the Eastern Bluebird had become a “rare bird in many sections of its normal breeding range,” and once again concerns were raised about the possibility of an “irrecoverable loss” of this bird in the eastern United States.

This mid-to-late twentieth century decline spurred a massive public awareness campaign and the founding of the North American Bluebird Society and its many state affiliates, including the North Carolina and South Carolina Bluebird Societies. Since the mid-1970s, tens of thousands of volunteers have mobilized to “Save the Bluebird.” They have built and monitored tens of thousands of bluebird nest boxes all over the eastern United States. The end result has been remarkable. Due largely to these efforts, the bluebird is once again a common to very common bird throughout its breeding range.

Today, because this bird is so accessible and easy to work with, the Eastern Bluebird is the subject of a great deal of biological research. Professor Mark Stanback at Davidson College has been a leader in studying this bird and its nesting activities. Stanback and his students at the college have published a number of research papers and popular articles detailing many aspects of bluebird ecology in the Carolina Piedmont.



*Nestlings in a nest box. Fledgling. (Phil Fowler)*



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**  
*Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/5, CO/49)*