

Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*)



In the mid-1800s, poet Henry Thoreau penned "The bluebird carries the sky on his back." Indeed, once you get to know this sky-blue songbird, it is easy to sing its praises. In Hernando County, look for the Eastern bluebird perching on the fence posts alongside open pastures and pinelands. At first glance you may only see an unremarkable small dark bird, but closer inspection will be quickly rewarded. The males of the species are a bright blue with their throat and breast painted red over a white belly. Females are similar, just not as vibrant in their colors.

But their beauty is more than feather-deep. Its soft melodious warble, gentle manner, and family life enchant those who know this bird. Sometime between March and June, the male courts the female with spread wings, song and preening. They then settle down to family life, creating a close bond to raise their young. The male will locate the nest cavity and attempt to defend it from predators and other birds seeking to evict the family. The pair can have two clutches of 3 to 5 pale blue eggs in the same year. It is not unusual to find members of the first clutch helping to feed their younger siblings. Bluebirds also can be quite neighborly; in cold weather, you can sometimes find communal gatherings in nest boxes where dozens of birds gather to share their warmth.

During spring and summer months the bluebird dines on insects and grubs—a great help to farmers and gardeners. In the winter, migratory visitors can be spotted alongside the permanent, Florida-resident bluebirds as they seek out their preferred menu of small fruits, such as those of the sparkleberry. The bluebird does these plants a great favor by spreading their seeds.

One hundred years ago, this small, colorful songbird was a familiar resident of roadsides, fields, parks and pastures. By the 1950's, however, 90% of their numbers were gone. How did this happen? Over the years, numbers of bluebirds and other cavity-nesters such as purple martins and chickadees plunged because of the introduction of aggressive bird species such as sparrows and starlings, which steal their nests. The landscape of their preferred habitat, such as Florida's open pinelands found in sandhill plant communities, has changed drastically due to development, agri-timber, and degradation due to fire suppression. Other problems include the loss of natural nesting sites when dead trees and wooden fence posts, often used by bluebirds as nesting cavities, are removed. Nowadays, many people can't recall ever seeing a blue bird, and it has become a species of "special concern," in Florida.

Fortunately, some people are already working to stop the decline of this beautiful species. Since tree cavities are not always present, providing artificial nesting boxes can help, and many public lands, such as Chinsegut Nature Center, have successfully used these boxes to raise generations of bluebirds. Much information about construction and placement of bluebird boxes has been developed as a part of bluebird restoration efforts. For example, the best houses have a 1.5-inch opening into a 5 x 5 x 8" interior, and should be mounted about 100 yards apart, 4 to 6 feet off the ground, in an open area. Nest boxes work best at the edges of fields. Parks, golf courses and cemeteries have been shown to be good areas, as are pasturelands, because they provide the open country, short grass areas and nearby trees bluebirds need for spying and catching insects.

by Mike and Cindy Liberton

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