



Photo by MALINDA MASTAKO

This male bluebird stopped on Malinda Mastako's deckrail to feed its three fledglings. Mastako frequently has bluebirds nesting in her yard.

Now's the time to entice bluebirds to your backyard

By Cyndi Lieske
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For the average Eastern Bluebird, April is prime time for house hunting in Livingston County.

They can be choosy about where they decide to make their homes. Three area bluebird enthusiasts have tips on successfully attracting bluebirds.

Michael Tucker, an interpretive naturalist with the Kensington Metropark Nature Center in Brighton Township, has presented many programs on bluebirds.

"Probably, most importantly, if you want to attract bluebirds to your yard, you have to start out with some bluebird habitats," Tucker said.

Bluebirds like dogwoods for shelter and cover. They will eat dogwood berries in the winter and hide in its branches throughout the spring and summer. Smooth sumac also produces fruit that the bluebirds will eat in the winter.

Good nesting boxes are also important, said Malinda Mastako, a volunteer at Kensington. Mastako is one of a handful of area residents who is a steward for bluebirds nesting at Kensington. Mastako and volunteer Bob Hurley maintain bluebird nesting trails at the park.

A common problem in area backyards is people attaching birdhouses to trees. In a tree, raccoons, cats, and even ants can climb up and disturb the nest, Mastako said.

"Raccoons will eat the eggs," Mastako said.

Baffles are essential for keeping pests away. At Kensington, bluebird boxes are mounted on poles with baffles. There are not enough baffles for each box, so Mastako checks each box and if she sees a bluebird choose it, she attaches a baffle.

Tucker said sometimes a proper house is all a bluebird will need to nest in a certain area. House placement is important. They should be somewhat sheltered from the wind, but not too close to bushes or shrubs. The opening should face south or east so the birds can get some sunlight. Some people have had good luck with putting black spots on all sides of their birdhouse so a bird flying by will stop to explore.

"It's not always easy to get a bird to see an opening," Tucker said. "One person took black cardboard to make the dummy holes and had good luck with that. That is kind of a neat trick."

Weaver finches, more commonly known as house sparrows, are a mortal enemy for bluebirds and many other winged native species, Hurley said. Sparrows will attack and kill adult bluebirds and their babies. They will destroy eggs and make their nest atop a bluebird nest. Once a bluebird box is installed, it should be monitored frequently to ensure that sparrows are not nesting in the boxes. Homeowners need to be persistent and remove the nest



Photo by CYNDI LIESKE

Malinda Mastako checks one of the bluebird boxes at Kensington Metropark on the Livingston/Oakland county line. Soon bluebirds will be hunting for new homes.

and eggs before the interlopers settle in.

Bluebirds also need plenty to feed their young. Their preferred food is meal worms.

"If you put meal worms out, they are a high-protein treat for the birds," Tucker said. "The birds are just starting to stake out their territory, so this is a good time to do it."

Water features such as ponds, fountains or small waterfalls are all attractive to birds, Tucker added.

Hurley has put bluebird houses up in his Brighton Township backyard for 11 years.

"We have had many broods over the years," he said of the bluebirds. "They are very clean and they are good neighbors. They like to keep their houses nice and neat."

Bluebirds do not like to live

too close to one another. If a bluebird makes its home in a box on a bluebird trail, another bluebird will not take the box next door, Hurley said. Tree swallows often will take the spot, he said.

"They come up here in the summer, and they get along well with the bluebirds," he said.

Growing up in Massachusetts, Hurley never saw bluebirds.

"I never even saw one until we moved to Georgia 20 years ago," he said. "They are absolutely a knockout. They are just beautiful birds."

Mastako agreed.

"I waited 40 years to see what a bluebird looked like," she said. "They are so friendly toward humans. They follow me around the yard when I fill the feeders. They know everything that's going on."