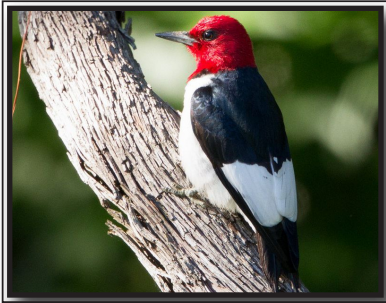


Tips to help Nature~ Especially Birds & Butterflies



by Keith Radel,
The "Bluebird Guy"



"After over 30 years of having bluebird trails and doing weekly checks on the nesting boxes throughout the 25-week nesting season, I have noticed several commonsense things that can help nature."

Keith Radel

1. Leave some standing dead trees to provide a place for the woodpeckers to excavate holes (cavities) to nest and raise their young (they usually make new holes each year to nest). The secondary cavity nesters such as eastern bluebirds, tree swallows, black-capped chickadees, several ducks, including wood ducks, use those old woodpecker holes for many years to nest and raise their young. Some of the butterflies that winter over in old woodpecker holes include mourning cloaks, red admirals, and painted ladies.

2. Mow less--If you have some acreage, leave part of it in tall grass for ground-nesting birds including meadowlarks, ring-necked pheasants, song and field sparrows, indigo buntings, and many others. These birds will not nest on a Kentucky Bluegrass lawn that is mowed weekly. Having a tall grass area for wildlife will save money by eliminating mowing costs. Also, dandelions do not like tall grass competition, so weed spraying is not necessary--another savings.

3. Plant for wildlife:

- a. For butterflies -- in gardens and your tall grass wildlife area plant some common and swamp milkweed for monarch butterfly reproduction. Planting tubular flowers will provide food for hummingbirds and sphinx moths. Plant Mexican sunflowers, monarda & 4' blazing star (*pycnostachya*) for adult butterflies to use in the fall (monarch butterflies use them for food on their migration to Mexico).
- b. For birds -- plant bushes and trees that bear fruit. Good fruit-bearing bushes include serviceberry, blue muffin viburnum and red osier dogwood. Some of the birds that are drawn to fruit include waxwings, robins, eastern bluebirds, and ring-necked pheasants. Trees for those birds include european mountain ash and golden raindrops crabapple for fall fruit. Two good trees to hold fruit into the winter and following spring are red splendor crabapple and hackberry. They provide much-needed food for birds during spring snowstorms.
- c. For birds and animals -- Plant red, pin, white and burr oak trees. The acorns are food for birds, including wild turkeys, blue jays, and red-headed woodpeckers (once common, now rare). Some of the animals that like acorns are deer, squirrels, and chipmunks.

4. To help keep birds safe keep your house cat in the house. House cats that stay inside live three times longer than those that are allowed outside. Also, when kept in they are never beaten up by the local tomcat, who is one tough customer (your housecat is no match for him)!

5. Spray less: maybe leave some weeds such as dandelions which provide one of the earliest sources of nectar for honeybees and our native bees. American goldfinches like the mature seeds from dandelions as a food source. You could also plant some red and white clover and sedum for summer and fall nectar sources for pollinators.

6. I don't use insecticides on our lawn. I rely on the birds to eat those insects and they do. They also feed those insects to their young. Our black-capped chickadees never take seed to their nestlings in the nestboxes -- only insects such as caterpillars. Did you know that the diets of wood duck ducklings and ring-necked pheasant chicks are almost 100% insects and their larva?
7. Over the past 20 years mowing in our county has dramatically increased and the populations of ground nesting birds such as meadowlarks and ring-necked pheasants have dramatically decreased. The more we mow, the easier we make it for predators like raccoons, opossums, skunks, foxes, coyotes and feral cats to find the ground nesting birds and their nests. Delay mowing of road ditches and other tall grass areas until after the first frost (about October 1st). The monarch butterfly reproduction is over then and ground nesting birds are also done nesting. Maybe to keep some of the cover for wintering birds, just mow the downslope and leave the rest. That way the seed that's on top of the grasses will still be available as a fall and winter food source. Mowing less would certainly give those birds a better chance to reproduce.
8. Delay trimming evergreens, deciduous bushes and hedges until fall. Many non-cavity nesting birds use these to nest in. I have found brown thrasher, chipping sparrow, catbird, American robin, northern cardinal, and mourning dove nests in bushes and hedges. If you have a spring or summer event and trimming needs to be done for that event, carefully inspect the bushes for nests. Also, adult birds will usually let you know that there is a nest nearby and you can skip trimming until the nestlings have fledged.
9. If you want to provide nest boxes to help cavity-nesting birds -- here are some basics that I have learned from having my own nest boxes and listening to Dick Peterson, founder of the Bluebird Recovery Program in Minnesota (WWW.BBRP.ORG). He was known as "Mr. Bluebird."
 - a. Make a commitment to do a weekly nest check (open the nest box, look in and touch the nest material). The female nesting bird will not abandon her nest, even if you scare her off of the nest. If you can't make this commitment, do not have nest boxes for birds! I cannot describe in words how special this miracle will be for you -- first the nest, then the eggs, then young chicks without feathers, then older chicks with feathers, and finally the fledglings. Please share this with as many people as you can!
 - b. Nest boxes should never be mounted on trees, fences, wooden posts, or steel fence posts as these mounts provide easy access for predators such as raccoons and cats which will destroy the eggs and eat the nestlings and female nesting birds. I actually call nest boxes mounted this way raccoon feeders, and

sadly that is what they are! Eastern bluebird and black-capped chickadee nest boxes can be easily mounted on the predator-resistant Steve Gilbertson ½ conduit/rebar system described and pictured on the BBRP.ORG website.

- c. Nest boxes should not need drain holes in the floor. If rainwater is entering the nest box, your design is no good or your nest box roof is broken & you should fix it! Wet nests will cause the loss of nestlings. Good quality bluebird nest boxes include: the Gilbertson PVC, the modified Gilwood, Tom Comfort's Xbox, the Peterson and the Troyer. These are pictured on the BBRP.ORG website. Round entrance hole size for eastern bluebirds is 1 9/16" in diameter, not 1 ½". Bluebird nest boxes should be placed ¼ mile apart on high ground, approx. 300' from trees (100 steps) but no further. Bluebirds like open country next to a treeline. Overhead wires, pasture fencing, & short or mowed grass make a site more attractive. Do not place nest boxes in lowlands or in the woods where their nesting success will be nearly zero! If tree swallows are using the nest boxes, boxes can be paired 10'-15' apart, leaving one for the bluebirds (entrance holes should face a tree, not a road or highway). Chickadee nest boxes should be placed 50' from lone trees with no brush around them. The entrance hole size for chickadees is 1 ⅞" in diameter, no bigger!
- d. If your nest boxes have vent holes, please close them for the first hatch in May and then open them for the second hatch. (Now, many nest boxes for our northern states do not have vent holes, and I have found that that's OK).
- e. Keep paper wasps and mice out of nest boxes (the birds cannot remove these). Personally, I believe we have enough paper wasps and mice -- we do not need to raise more of them in nest boxes.
- f. Keep records of how many eggs were laid, how many hatched & how many bluebirds fledged. Send a year-end report to WWW.BBRP.ORG with your results.
- g. Wood duck nest boxes should not be mounted on trees. They should go on 4x4s or 2" steel pipe with the cone baffle. The best way to do this is shown in the "Best practices" section on the Wood Duck Society's website: WWW.WOODDUCKSOCIETY.COM
- h. If you have an old purple martin house, that is nothing more than a house sparrow or starling slum, PLEASE close the holes, or better yet, take it down. Want to help purple martins? Contact the Purple Martin Society -- WWW.PURPLEMARTINS.COM

10. Finally -- Get involved with helping something in nature. It will change your life for the better! My life has been greatly enriched by helping the bluebirds!!