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Bird Boxes at the NIH



Bluebirds (*Sialia* sp.) are one of our most treasured and beautiful native bird species. Bluebirds are easy to identify: they are smaller in size than a robin and most commonly feature orange or red throats, white bellies and bright blue wings and upper body.¹ In addition to their beauty, bluebirds love to eat insects, which means their presence is a natural form of pest control.¹ Unfortunately, the bluebird population experienced a dramatic decline nationwide in the 1950s and 1960s.² This decline was from a combination of habitat loss, competition from invasive species and the widespread use of DDT.² Fortunately, DDT was banned in 1972 due to its adverse environmental effects and human health risks.³ Bluebird populations have rebounded in the decades following the ban, but these species still struggle with habitat loss and competition.² Bluebirds are one of many native cavity-nesting birds in the United States, meaning they nest in holes and crevices that are created naturally or by other birds.¹ Bluebirds must find a place to nest, rather than create one themselves, which had led to a lack of nesting sites.²

The good news is that efforts to create nesting habitats for bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting birds are underway in many places, including at the National Institutes of Health. Luckily, bluebirds are very willing to nest and reproduce in man-made bird boxes. The NIH Bluebird Box program on the Bethesda campus began in 2002 with the erection of 33 houses under the direction of the previous NIH Landscape Architect, Lynn Mueller. Today, there are nearly 100 houses scattered about the Bethesda campus and another 55 houses on the Poolesville campus. In addition to

bluebirds, the houses provide nesting locations for other native cavity-nesters like house wrens, Carolina chickadees, and tree swallows. The number of yearly fledglings (baby birds leaving the nest) has increased over 400% in the past 15 years, thus highlighting the growth of the program. Over 150 fledglings were bred in bird boxes on the Bethesda campus during 2018. There are also accommodations for 24 nesting pairs of purple martins at the Stoney Creek Pond in Bethesda. Additionally, the Research Triangle Park campus has created their own program to introduce a variety of nesting boxes: 38 bluebird boxes, 28 nuthatch boxes, 4 purple martin boxes, 1 duck box, 1 screech owl box and 1 bat house.

The current NIH Landscape Architect, Brandon Hartz, has taken over leadership of the Bethesda program and its nearly two dozen NIH staff volunteers. Regular monitoring of the bluebird boxes is imperative during the nesting season (March-August).¹ Volunteer monitors collect data on the presence of nesting birds, the species of birds, the quantity of unhatched eggs and more. New volunteers for monitoring the bird boxes on the Bethesda campus are always welcome. Experienced volunteers are paired with newer ones, so prior experience is not necessary! If you would like to volunteer or have questions regarding the bird boxes on the Bethesda or Poolesville campuses, please contact the ORF Landscape Architect, [Brandon Hartz](#).



TAKE ACTION



How Can You Help Bluebirds?

One of the biggest hurdles for the bluebird population is a lack of nesting sites. Fortunately, we can each help with this issue by setting up our own bird boxes. Read inside for the for details!

[LEARN MORE](#)

STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Volunteer to Monitor Bird Boxes!

The Bird Box Program on the Bethesda campus is very reliant on volunteers for tracking the species using the boxes, reporting maintenance needs and many other important details. We discuss the volunteer process in detail for anyone interested in getting involved!

[LEARN MORE](#)

NEMS TRAINING

Did you know? House sparrows were introduced to the United States from Europe around 1850.⁴ In less than 200 years, the U.S. house sparrow population went from zero to an estimated 150 million birds.⁴ This invasive species is one of the main competitors to bluebirds and other native cavity-dwelling birds. To learn more about wildlife at the NIH, please visit the [NEMS Training webpage](#) to view a short (20 minute) NIH environmental awareness training video.