

Bluebirds at home in Colorado



It's easy to see why it's called a bluebird. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

My wife and I used to spend a large part of our summers in the Lake City area of Colorado. The mountains, trails, lakes, and of course, the Alpine Trail, were favorite areas we liked to hike, fish, camp and ride ATVs.

On one trip, heading into Lake City, I noticed birdhouses on just about every other fence post along the highway. I thought that rather unusual for so many birdhouses in such an area. They started after Red Bridge and followed Highway 149 all the way to town, probably covering a 15-mile stretch.

I made some comment about the houses and my wife claimed they had been there all along and I never noticed them before. Admittedly, I don't notice a lot of trivial things, saving my attention for things of greater consequence, but surely I would have noticed that many birdhouses.

"Then why are they all so weathered looking?" she inquired.

"The guy who built them probably used barn wood when he assembled them," was the only retort I could muster.

My wife insisted I build



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

a birdhouse for our yard a few summers ago. I constructed a sturdy and colorful little house and installed it on a fence post along the rear property line, near the creek.

The little birdhouse stood vacant for several years, until a large family of yellow jackets built a large nest inside. I decided to ignore the interlopers, figuring at least someone was getting use out of the birdhouse. The yellow jackets stung me every time I rode by on the tractor as a "thank you" for the little house. So much for being a good guy.

The birdhouses are actually nest boxes, installed to help nesting bluebirds. Bluebirds are social migratory songbirds that cannot make their own houses. They are second cavity nesters, meaning

they rely on either artificial nest boxes; natural holes in trees, or previously used nesting cavities such as old woodpecker holes.

There are three species of bluebirds in Colorado, including the mountain bluebird, western bluebird, and the eastern bluebird. The bluebirds start returning to Colorado as early as the middle of February. The most common around our area is the mountain bluebird. Although most species are similar in behavior, we will mostly refer here to the mountain bluebird since they are the ones you are most likely to encounter.

Mountain bluebirds are busy in March finding and defending territories around nest boxes. They will lay eggs by April, generally having two broods per season. Each clutch can have between four and eight eggs. The bluebirds will hang around until late October, before returning to milder climates in southern Colorado, Texas and Mexico for the winter months.

The mountain bluebird around the western slope and the high country is can thrive at elevations up to 12,500 feet. These are the

birds that use the nest boxes in the Lake City area.

As breeding season winds down, flocks of 30 or more mountain bluebirds begin to form. Each post-breeding flock centers on one or more families with dependent fledglings, later joined by unattached adult birds that failed to reproduce that year. As the last fledglings become mobile, these post-breeding flocks may wander out of sight for long periods, returning to visit the nesting area for short periods, until eventually they disappear from the territory.

Bluebirds feed on the ground, grabbing insects like beetles and grasshoppers, with caterpillars being their favorite. In the winter months, they feed on small fruits and seeds when available. Mountain bluebirds hover while foraging, often times pouncing on their insect prey from an elevated perch.

Male mountain bluebirds are sky-blue, a bit darker on the wings and tails, and pale below with white under the tail. Females are mostly grey-brown with small tinges of blue in the wings and tails.

The bluebirds may reach 7 inches in length with a

wingspan of up to 12 inches. These little birds top the scales at 1 ounce, so I imagine a gusty wind can play havoc with them.

Mountain bluebirds are fairly common, but their numbers have been in trouble. Their overall population globally is about 4.6 million birds, which is down about 24% since 1966.

Bluebirds benefitted from the westward spread of logging operations and grazing operations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the clearing of forest created open habitat for foraging. The specie declined with the waning of these industries and the deliberate suppression of wildfires.

Populations are declining in areas where trees are too small to provide natural nesting cavities, and where agricultural management has reduced the availability of nesting sites.

The good news is that mountain bluebirds take readily to nest boxes. The Colorado Bluebird Project was founded with the intent to stabilize and improve the population of bluebirds in Colorado. One of its projects is the

construction, installation and monitoring of nesting boxes throughout the state. Anyone can take part in this project and information is available at bluebirdproject@denver-audubon.org. The project is working and I have even noticed more bluebirds near the Montrose area in recent summers.

No bluebird ever homesteaded in the birdhouse in our backyard. The yellow jackets have allowed the house to fall into complete disrepair, and they clearly show no intent on fixing the place up. Perhaps it is time I deliver them an eviction notice via a can of wasp spray. Now that is something I can get into.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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