



Western Bluebird: The Comeback Bird

How many of you think of that large, noisy blue and gray bird dominating your feeder when an old timer asks, "Whatever happened to the bluebirds I saw in the Willamette Valley when I was a kid?" Well, there is no lack of Western Scrub-jays in our neighborhoods, but you would be one of the lucky few if you did see the small, dainty Western Bluebird!

These beautiful songbirds are cavity nesters that were prevalent early in the twentieth century when small farms with interspersed clearings and woodlands dominated the Willamette Valley. The bluebirds used holes in snags, dead and dying trees and wooden fence posts to build their nests. These natural cavities diminished as residential development and large-scale agriculture replaced the family farm.

With fewer nesting sites, the growing competition from House Sparrows and European Starlings, which were introduced from England, pushed the Western Bluebird into higher elevations. By the mid-1940's bluebirds were only found in places like Ladd Hill near Sherwood, and Parrett and Chehalem Mountains near Newberg. Because the population was at risk, the State of Oregon listed the Western Bluebird as a "sensitive" species in the Lower Willamette Valley.

Today, you have a chance to see this magnificent bird because of the work of a group of volunteers with the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project. Since the 1970's, this organization has been working to save the Western Bluebird. Prescott volunteers build, erect and monitor bluebird nest boxes in Washington, Yamhill, Marion, Clackamas and Multnomah counties. Most of the nest boxes are in rural or semi-rural areas. Bluebirds need lots of open space with short grass that makes it easy for them to catch insects on the ground. Residential acreages and pasture land are their preferred habitat. They don't nest in cities and rarely nest in suburban developments.

The volunteers who put up and monitor bluebird nest boxes welcome other native cavity-nesting birds like Tree Swallows, Violet-green Swallows and Black-capped Chickadees. The monitoring process involves counting the number of eggs laid, the number of eggs that hatch, and the number of young that successfully leave the nest. Unfortunately, cold spells during Oregon's typically rainy spring take a great toll on the tiny nestlings that depend on the warmth of their mother's body and a sufficient supply of insects to survive adverse weather conditions. During bad weather, volunteers offer mealworms on feeding platforms to help the parent bluebirds obtain enough food to keep their nestlings warm and full.

Bluebirds are excellent parents. The male establishes and protects the nesting territory while the female builds a neat cup-shaped nest made almost exclusively of dry grass. She lays four to six blue eggs that she alone incubates for 13 to 14 days until the eggs hatch. During the three weeks the nestlings are in the nest, they are fed by both parents. Only the female broods them, however. If something happens to her during incubation or before the nestlings are fully feathered, the male who has no brood patch can not keep them warm, and they generally perish. Once the nestlings are about 12 days old, however, a male alone can successfully raise bluebird young.

While the young are in the nest, the parents keep it clean by removing a fecal sac each time they go into the nest box to feed the nestlings. After fledging, the young still must be fed by their parents for two to three weeks until they learn to fend for themselves. The female usually leaves that task to the male with the occasional help of offspring from the prior year. She is busy adding new material to the nest and laying four to five more eggs for her second clutch. By the time the second clutch is raised, the parent bluebirds will have invested three months in producing the next generation of bluebirds.

The bluebird population in the lower Willamette Valley does not migrate in winter. Family groups usually stay together, moving down from higher elevations to the valley floor in search of dried berries and insects. Champoeg State Heritage Area near Newberg is a good place to see Western Bluebirds in the winter. Annually in June, the Champoeg Bluebird Festival offers a wonderful opportunity to see nesting bluebirds, watch video and slide presentations about this delightful songbird and build a nest box.

Banding adult birds and nestlings and recapturing adult birds to check their band numbers are an important part of the recovery effort. This allows Prescott researchers to determine the life span and reproductive success of specific birds and to track the dispersal of fledged young to other nesting locations. This, in turn, guides decisions about where to put up additional nest boxes.

The use of nest boxes with 1½” entrance holes has eliminated the European Starling as a major predator of the Western Bluebird; however, the House Sparrow continues to wreak havoc wherever it competes with bluebirds for nesting cavities. But the most serious predators of bluebirds today are cats and raccoons. These climbing predators destroy bluebird nests, killing both the nestlings and the adult birds. Volunteers trap the sparrows and add metal baffles and predator guards to nest boxes where cats and raccoons are a problem.

Today, the Western Bluebird is making a comeback in the Willamette Valley. But there is much work yet to do. The Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project is limited only by the number of volunteers available to establish and monitor new bluebird trails. If you are interested in monitoring a bluebird trail or if you have seen bluebirds on your property, please call us at 503-245-8449 or contact to us through our web site at www.prescottbluebird.com.

The project is a nonprofit organization funded entirely by contributions which are used to buy lumber to make nest boxes, to buy meal worms to supplement the diets of nestlings and to pay for printing and postage to keep in touch with property owners and volunteers. If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution to this important effort, send your check to the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project, PO Box 1469, Sherwood, OR 97140.

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