



Wintering Bluebirds May Need Help

Lawrence Zeleny

Bluebirds sometimes run into serious trouble during the winter months and in occasional winters when the weather is exceptionally unfavorable, they may perish by the thousands. A little help from their human friends at these times may be all that is needed to save many of them.

In summer, Eastern Bluebirds are found scattered throughout almost all parts of the United States and Southern Canada that lie east of the Rocky Mountains. They do not have well established migration routes or patterns, but in the late fall most of those in the northern part of their summer range gradually move southward into roughly the southern half or two thirds of the country.

Food supply is the all-important factor governing the bluebirds' wintering range. Bluebirds will often remain in areas far north of their normal winter range if there appears to be a sufficient abundance of wild berries to carry them through the winter. Those of us within the winter range of the bluebird can do a great deal to help the bluebird and other berry-eating birds by encouraging the extensive planting of trees, shrubs and vines which bear fruits that persist throughout the winter. Such plantings as American Holly, mountain ash, hawthorn, pyracantha, sumac, chokeberry (Aronia) and American bittersweet are particularly valuable. Multiflora rose and Oriental/Asiatic Bittersweet are extremely invasive and in many areas they should never be planted.

Bluebirds are quite capable of taking care of their own needs under all normal conditions, but when their winter food supply is suddenly cut off they may perish within a day or two without our help. Heavy snows sometimes cover all available wild

berries. Freezing rains that form heavy coatings of ice over all available food are even more deadly.

Since the great population explosion of the European Starling in this country, large flocks of these alien birds roam widely over the countryside in winter in search of food. Great hordes of starlings will often descend on an area where there is an abundance of berries to their liking and completely strip the trees and shrubs of their berries within a few days or even a few hours. This may happen in fall or early winter so that the native berry eating winter birds are left without their food supply during the coldest months to come. Starlings have a particular liking for the berries of the flowering dogwood. Thus, in the East, this very important and often abundant source of winter bird food is now less dependable than in earlier years.

Bluebirds are not common visitors to winter bird feeding stations, but when their normal food supply is cut off for any of the above reasons, they will gladly accept our hospitality. Bluebirds are not seed eaters since they do not have the hard bills or the skill necessary to remove the hulls from the seeds to render them digestible. Thus the usual mixed wild bird feeds offer little that the bluebirds can eat. However, they will gladly accept raisins or other dried fruits, wild berries, chopped unsalted nuts, peanut hearts and suet. Heated birdbaths will also draw bluebirds.

On cold winter nights, bluebirds wisely seek a protected place to roost. Since they are cavity nesting birds, they often roost in natural cavities or nesting boxes for added protection from the cold winter winds. For this reason it is usually better to leave nesting boxes out all winter so that the birds will use a single nest box on cold nights, taking advantage of the additional warmth produced by their numbers.

Editor's Note: There have been many reports of bluebirds wintering over in New York State. If you have bluebird sightings in your area, winterize your existing nestboxes by plugging the ventilation slots and perhaps placing a small amount of hay or chaff on the bottom to provide more insulation.

For further information: Please contact us by email at Info@nysbs.org or visit us at www.NYSBS.org

Revised 3/07