

# Watchable Wildlife

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## Eastern Bluebird

*Sialia sialis*

### DESCRIPTION

The Eastern bluebird is a small bird in the thrush family. It stands 6 to 8 inches tall and weighs about 1 ounce. It has a wingspan of 10 to 13 inches with no noticeable size difference between sexes.

Males have a brilliant royal blue tail and wings with a bright reddish colored chest. Females are drab gray-blue with a duller reddish chest. Immature birds are speckle-breasted and grayish in color but have the defining blue on the wings and tail. Both sexes have a white lower belly and undertail.

### DISTRIBUTION

Eastern bluebirds are common and range from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico and east of the Rocky Mountains. They are also found in southern Arizona through central Mexico to northern Nicaragua.

### HABITAT

The Eastern bluebird is a territorial bird that prefers open grasslands, meadows and farms by woodlands. Bluebirds are often seen in orchards and golf courses. They require cavities for nesting but will readily use artificial nest boxes placed in back yards of residential areas.

### NESTING

Male bluebirds attract females by se-

lecting a nest site and flapping their wings while perched above. They place nest material inside the nest cavity in hopes of attracting a mate. After pairing, the female builds the entire nest and incubates the eggs.

The clutch size varies upon location and increases in size as you move north and west throughout their range. Eggs are pale blue with no markings and are incubated by the female for 11 to 19 days. Re-nesting is common with some pairs having as many as four successful broods a year. Chicks fledge in 17 to 19 days and broods born early in the year leave the parents while later born broods stay throughout the winter.

### DIET

Eastern bluebirds feed mostly on grubs, worms, insects and small fruits. They will utilize backyard bird feeders of the platform type filled with mealworms. They usually hunt from a perch and swoop to the ground to capture prey.

### CONSERVATION STATUS

The Eastern bluebird population was in decline in the 1960s and 1970s. One reason is due to nest cavity competition with non-native species such as the European starling and house sparrow. With the help of nest box campaigns, populations are now increasing throughout most of the bluebird's range. You can help

support bluebird populations and enjoy hours of entertainment by placing a bluebird box in your yard. 



### FACTS ABOUT

## Eastern Bluebirds

- + Bluebirds have no blue pigments in their feathers. Instead, each feather barb has a thin layer of cells that absorb all wavelengths of color except blue. Only the blue wavelength is reflected and scattered, resulting in their blue appearance to our eyes.
- + A good reason to clean out old nesting material from boxes is that bluebirds will normally build a new nest on top of an old one. This puts them too close to the entrance of the house and makes them easier targets for predators.
- + Many perceive the bluebird as a symbol of joy and happiness. This is thought to have originated from the 1934 song, "Bluebird of Happiness."