

The Way to a Bluebird's Heart.... Or.... What's on the Menu?

By Penny Brandau

If you have tried to feed bluebirds in your backyard you have probably discovered that they are not your normal "birdfeeder" type visitors. They spurn the normal feeder offerings of black oil sunflower seeds, thistle seed, safflower seed, store bought suet blocks, cracked corn and the cheap millet type seed which attracts many other types of birds.

Since the Eastern Bluebird's diet is primarily insects (about 68%) and the remainder is fruit what can we do to entice them to feed on our properties? In the winter dried mealworms, small bits of fruits and bluebird suet are often the foods of choice for feeding backyard bluebirds.

It is easiest to train bluebirds to come to a bluebird feeder in the summertime when they are nesting. They LOVE live mealworms and if you put 10 -15 live mealworms in a small shallow dish about 25-50 feet from their nest box they will soon be carrying live mealworms to the young in the nest box. Caution: Limit the number of live mealworms to approx 10 per bluebird per day- this is a supplement and should not be their only diet. The bluebirds will get used to your morning or evening feedings and show up at those times for their mealworm treats. They also learn to recognize and respond to a whistle or small bell if that is consistently used each time mealworms are offered. Although live mealworms are highly desired by bluebirds you can substitute dry mealworms in the winter months. This provides protein for their diet since insects are hard to find in the winter! 😊

The Eastern bluebird loves dogwood berries and relies largely on fruiting plants like sumac, wild grape, Japanese honeysuckle, climbing bittersweet, multiflora rose hips, pokeweed, viburnum species, greenbrier and poison ivy. (I don't recommend planting poison ivy or multiflora rose) Summer berries like elderberries, blackberries or chokeberries are also part of their diets. Planting native shrubs and trees which bear fruit for the birds is a good way to attract them so include landscaping with dogwood trees, holly bushes, serviceberry shrubs, blueberry bushes etc. if you have room on your property.

In your bluebird feeder you can offer dry currants, small amounts of chopped frozen blueberries, dogwood berries or serviceberries in addition to dry mealworms. Some people chop up raisins for their feeders.

In the winter our backyard bluebirds also readily eat crushed "bluebird nuggets"- a purchased mix of beef suet, roasted peanuts, raisins, corn and oats. Many recipes for homemade bluebird suet or puddings can be found in books and on websites. If you are interested in trying to make your own here is a website with recipes: <http://www.sialis.org/suet.htm>

Eastern bluebirds prefer feeders that are several feet from any other feeders. The two primary types of feeders that they use are platform and the classic bluebird feeder. Platform feeders are the types of feeders usually used for feeding bluebirds but if starlings or other birds are keeping the bluebirds from using the feeder it is time to switch to a more advanced feeder design. The classic bluebird feeders which we purchased for use in our backyard look like a covered bridge with 1 ½ inch holes in both wooden ends and Plexiglas sides. The clear sides allow the bluebirds to see the food but the size of the entry hole prevents starlings from getting to the food. My husband modified our feeders by adding a second 1 ½ inch hole in each end to give the bluebirds more exit options.

Lastly here is a bit of obvious but sometimes overlooked advice- “don’t feed house sparrows”. House sparrows (an invasive, nonnative species) prefer bread or small seeds like Milo, cracked corn and millet- the ingredients found in many less expensive birdseed mixes. If you feed house sparrows all winter they will take over any available bluebird nest boxes in the spring and drive away the bluebirds or destroy their eggs and nestlings. Feeding only the types of food that native birds prefer will promote a better chance of their continued presence in our lives. I wish you bluebirds!

