HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

BLUEBIRDS

Something blue flashed across my path as I entered the Disney Wilderness Preserve near Poinciana. It is almost as elusive as the green flash of Keys sunsets, but this blue flash was a real thing, a creature. It was an eastern bluebird, *Sialia sialis grata*.

These little birds are one of the few birds that are true blue. They are in the thrush family and smaller than the robins that are visiting this time of year. The male has brilliant blue feathers on the head, back, tail and wings. The breast and throat are a chestnut brown, almost orange, with a white belly. This bird flaunts University of Florida Gator's team colors, orange and blue. What team spirit! Females are a duller color, more gray and young birds are spotted.

In addition to the Disney Wilderness Preserve, I have seen bluebirds along the roadside, on fence wires and powerlines as I travel south on Canoe Creek Road and at artificial nest boxes at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s Wildlife Management Areas and recreation areas such as Sunset Ranch, Three Lakes and Prairie Lakes.

Bluebirds live here all year long and feed on a variety of foods, depending on availability. In the winter they feed heavily on fruits and during the summer their main diet is insects. They prefer open grassland habitat for feeding but nest in tree cavities. They cannot dig out their own tree hole. They depend on woodpeckers and other primary cavity nesters to make the hole for them.

Bluebirds are having a hard time finding housing these days. Hurricanes removed a lot of dead snags where woodpeckers and bluebirds would have nested. Wooden fence posts have been a good substitute, but low maintenance plastic or metal fencing has replaced this alternate home site. Bluebirds also compete for nest cavities with other non-native birds such as starlings and house sparrows.

At the turn of the century, bluebirds were more commonly found near towns, but development has moved into some of the native rangeland and pastures and changed the natural landscape. Most homeowners and developers remove dead trees for fear of liability so bluebirds are not seen so often around here now.

You can help bluebirds in several ways. If you live near an open field, pasture or open pine flatwoods, you may be able to entice bluebirds to nest in your yard. They have to have the open grasslands for feeding, a nest cavity (either a natural tree cavity or a nest box), as well as adequate food. There are many plans for bird houses which provide homesites in areas where they just don't have any natural tree cavities. Be sure the size of the hole is 1 ½ inches to keep larger pesky birds from moving in.

If the nest boxes are cleaned out after the first clutch of three to five light blue eggs is reared, you may get the birds to nest two or three more times. Eggs hatch in about 2 weeks and the young birds fledge, or leave the nest in 15 to 20 days.

Bluebirds eat wild berries year round. You can plant native plants that provide small fruits such as gallberry, American holly, eastern red cedar, Virginia creeper vine, shining sumac, blueberries, huckleberries, wild grapes and blackberry. During the spring and summer, the high protein found in insects is important to support the fast growing baby birds.

Unfortunately, outdoor cats are a major predator in residential neighborhoods. Keep your pet cats indoors for their safety, to prevent them from getting diseases from wild animals, but also to protect song birds.

You will sometimes see bluebirds at suet feeders, especially ones with peanut butter. You can by suet feeders at most garden centers. Try this recipe if you want to make your own. Heat suet or beef fat over low heat until melted, let cool. Don't get it too hot or it will smoke and catch fire. Heat it again until melted
(heating twice will make it better for hanging in warmish weather). Turn the heat off. Allow the suet to cool until slightly thickened, then add 2 cups corn flour and 1 cup dried fruit, seeds, or nuts, depending on what type of birds you want to attract. Let it cool and shape into a ball. Wrap it with yarn or string to make a secure loop and hang in a tree.

Help me track where our bluebirds live. Please email me at efoe@osceola.org if you have had bluebirds visit your birdfeeders or move into your nest boxes in town. Type bluebirds in the subject line and send me the address where they were seen or are nesting. If you prefer, call me at the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office at 321-697-3000.

I still have a few spaces on the upcoming Woods Walk to Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area where you may see bluebirds in the wild. Call Cindy at 321-697-3015 or email her at crut@osceola.org to reserve your space.

Learn more about birds and their upland habitat needs in the upcoming Florida Master Naturalist Series on Upland Ecosystems. Cindy has more information or you can check the web link at http://masternaturalist.org and check or the Osceola County Course listing.

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