

How to Create Your Bluebird Habitat

by Mariette Nowak

Bluebirds have specific habitat needs in each season of the year. In summer, they require plenty of insects for food, perches from which to hunt insects, and natural nest cavities or boxes. In winter, most bluebirds migrate to escape the harsh weather in the northern Midwest, but some remain year-round in Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin. At least some of the northern migrants pass over the resident bluebirds in the southern Midwest and winter farther south. Wherever they are, berries are the mainstay of their winter diet. You are likely to attract bluebirds to a large suburban or country yard if you provide for all of their habitat needs. Unfortunately, bluebirds rarely nest in cities, except in large parks or golf courses.

Vegetation

Bluebirds prefer a savanna-like habitat with scattered trees surrounded by relatively low or sparse herbaceous



vegetation teeming with insects. Their favorite insect foods are ground insects, including grasshoppers, crickets, katydids and beetles. In an Illinois study, bluebirds were more likely to nest at the Morton Arboretum where the average height of the grass was 24 inches, than at Fermilab and McKee Marsh, where the grass height averaged 27-1/2 inches. Shorter grasses, apparently, make it easier for the bluebirds to forage for ground insects.

You can replicate these conditions on your property with a tree or two, surrounded by a prairie of short grasses and forbs (wildflowers). We have Little Bluestem and Side Oats Grama, both short prairie grasses about two feet high, plus dry-loving forbs in a prairie on our gravelly septic field, with a wooded area along the far edges of the field. To our delight, bluebirds nest in a box on the edge of this field, ignoring boxes in less open areas with taller plants.

Not everyone, however, has dry soils suitable for short-grass prairie species. You may have clay or moist loamy soil, common to many areas of the Midwest, which is more suited for tallgrass prairie species. If so, you can maintain a small area of shorter plants near the bluebirds' nest boxes by mowing several times a summer. Some people simply have old grassy fields with a few weeds and wildflowers that they mow occasionally to keep the area attractive to bluebirds. Even lawns, especially if they have some clover and other weeds to attract more insects, will work. If you maintain a lawn for children's play and entertaining, bluebirds may also use it.

It is essential to have a good vari-



ety of herbaceous plants, which will attract a diverse and plentiful supply of insects. Native plants will provide a greater variety of insects and are likely to be more beautiful. If you have a lawn, plant a nearby patch of wildflowers and native grasses to supply more insects. Don't spray pesticides on your lawn or other vegetation, which can contaminate the insects on which bluebirds feed. Instead, let the bluebirds serve as your natural pest control.

The same techniques used in planting a prairie can be used in planting the herbaceous species in a savanna. (See chapter 9 for details and tables on pages 130–137 and 147–148 for recommended species for savanna gardens.) Be sure to plant more shade-tolerant species beneath trees in your bluebird savanna garden by interseeding or careful transplanting, so you don't disturb the tree roots.

If you already have a few scattered native trees, you're in luck. Since trees take years to mature, you'll want to retain the ones you already have, no matter what the species. The exceptions are invasive species like Autumn Olive or Chinese Elm, which should be removed and replaced with native tree species.

On completely open sites, plant one or more trees or shrubs. Oaks of various species are the classic savanna trees and are ideal choices. Although not essential for bluebirds, oaks are important for attracting many of the

other species of savanna birds, especially woodpeckers. Oaks also have good potential for forming cavities bluebirds and other cavity-nesters can use.

A few oaks have fairly shallow roots and are relatively easy to transplant, including Swamp White Oak, Red Oak and Pin Oak (not to be confused with Northern Pin Oak). Most other oaks have taproots which limit the size that can be successfully transplanted. The toughest and most adaptable oaks for yards are Bur Oak, Swamp White Oak, Chinquapin Oak and Shingle Oak, according to Edith Makra of the Morton Arboretum in Illinois. Although most oaks grow slowly, give them serious consideration. It's been said that a society may be measured by its willingness to plant for the future.

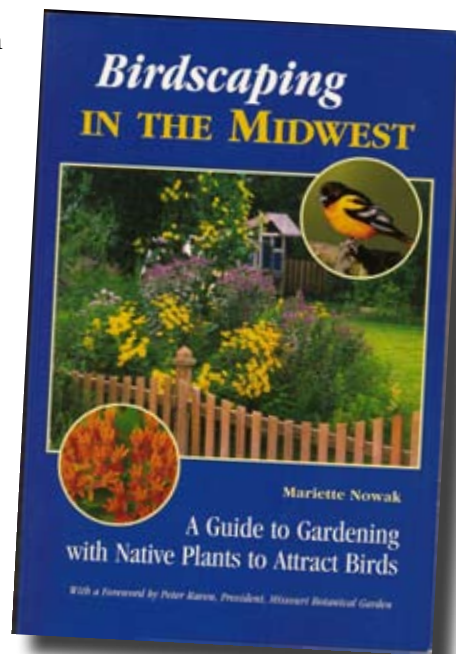
Nancy Aten, a landscaper designer in Wisconsin, suggests planting a faster-growing species, like Black Cherry, in addition to oaks. It is a particularly good choice for bluebirds, since cherries are one of their preferred summer fruits. Another fast-growing tree choice with summer fruit is Red Mulberry.

The size of the trees is also a consideration, especially for small yards. Most oaks, as well as Black Cherry and Red Mulberry, can grow 50 feet high. Many smaller trees and shrubs can take the place of a large oak. The result will be a smaller scale, but similar, savanna-like setting.

For the best bluebird habitat, provide trees or shrubs that produce berries throughout the year. Savanna shrubs, although rarely mentioned by pioneers, are thought to have been present but were stunted by frequent fires, and less noticeable in wet ravines and waterways protected from fire. If you plant a shrubby thicket at the border of your bluebird savanna garden with a variety of native berry-producing species, you'll

provide fruit while still maintaining an open savanna-like area to supply insect prey.

Native berry-producing plants are especially important in the southern Midwest where bluebirds spend the winter surviving mainly on fruit. There's a good variety of shrub species listed on page 147. Plant those that are native to your area and suited to the conditions in your yard. Many are the same species suggested for the shrubland and winter habitat gardens, so you'll also attract the birds that frequent those habitats.



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Photos by Jack Bartholmai

Editor's note: More and more Eastern Bluebirds are wintering over in Wisconsin and I hear about people wanting to help them by providing mealworms especially during very cold periods. Planting a habitat is another way you can help all bird species during the winter months and also supply them with food the rest of the year as well.

Trees & Shrubs for Bluebirds

Berry-producing trees and shrubs Bluebirds are known to eat the berries of species on this list. In many cases, there are several species within a genus that bluebirds eat. Other berry-eating savanna birds also feast on these fruits.

Among the listed species, those most commonly found in remnant oak savannas are Gray Dogwood, Smooth Sumac and various wild roses. Cherries, hawthorns, serviceberries, crabapples, viburnums, snowberry, and other dogwoods and sumacs are all fairly common. Early records suggest that red Cedar occurred in some savanna areas, although most restorationists today consider it a weed.

Winter fruits

Coniferous Tree and Shrubs

Red Cedar, *Juniperus virginiana*
Juniper shrubs, *Juniperus* sp.

Deciduous Trees

Mountain Ash, *Sorbus* sp.
Crabapple, *Malus* sp.
Black Gum, *Nyssa sylvatica*
Hackberry, *Celtis* sp.
Hawthorn, *Crataegus* sp.

Deciduous Shrubs

Snowberry, *Symphoricarpos albus*
Sumac, *Rhus* sp.
Viburnum, *Viburnum* sp.
Winterberry, *Ilex verticillata*

Vines

Bittersweet, *Celastrus scandens*
Moonseed, *Menispermum canadense*
Poison Ivy, *Toxicodendron radicans* (*Rhus radicans*)

Virginia Creeper, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*

Summer and Autumn Fruits

Deciduous Trees

Cherry, *Prunus* sp.
Red Mulberry, *Morus rubra*
Serviceberry, *Amelanchier* sp.

Deciduous Shrubs

Blackberry, *Rubus* sp.
Blueberry, *Vaccinium* sp.
Cherries, *Prunus* sp.
Black Chokecherry, *Aronia melanocarpa*
Currant, *Ribes* sp.
Dogwood, *Cornus* sp.
Elderberry, *Sambucus* sp.
Raspberry, *Rubus* sp.
Serviceberry, *Amelanchier* sp.
Viburnum, *Viburnum* sp.

Vines

Grape, *Vitis* sp.
Bristly Cat Briar or carrion Flower, *Smilax* sp.