

# A Word of Caution When Feeding Bluebirds

By Pat Ready, Editor

There's no secret about it. Bluebirds love mealworms. People love feeding them to bluebirds. Bluebirds quickly discover mealworms when they are put out in a feeder. Most people signal the bluebirds by tapping on the dish or whistling. The birds soon learn to fly in for a quick meal. But is it necessary to feed them mealworms? Will they survive if they don't have the mealworm handout? How many should you feed them? These are all very good questions, ones I often get asked when giving my cavity nester talk at seminars and workshops.

The answers to these questions vary depending on the time of the year. To begin with, it really isn't necessary to feed bluebirds for their survival. In summer they can find plenty of insects and fruit in their nesting territory. In winter, most migrate south and stay in the southern U.S. In the past few years we have been finding more and more bluebirds staying here in Wisconsin and taking on the sub-zero temperatures. This has led to people wanting to feed mealworms throughout the winter. Mealworms are not the most nutritious food source and shouldn't be the main staple of their diet at any time of the year. Julie Zickefoose, nationally known bird author, speaker and wildlife artist learned this from first hand experience. She spoke at the North American Bluebird Society convention last March in Kearney, Nebraska and also has a well known birding blog site. (<http://www.juliezickefoose.com/blog>) She isn't against anyone feeding mealworms but just cautions against overdoing it. One year, she fed the bluebirds in her yard as many mealworms as they wanted, through winter, spring, and summer. That year, one pair successfully raised four broods, but because their systems were overtaxed, failed to molt on a normal schedule, and were still almost featherless in late August. By October, new plumage had come in, but it was cutting it too close. Bluebirds are supposed to molt gradually starting in August.

Her other concern was when she was feeding them suet dough mixed from lard, cornmeal, peanut butter, etc. well into summer. The birds enjoyed the mixture and gobbled it up. She noticed the female was favoring one of her feet when she came to feed. Zickefoose shot close-up photos of the feet and noticed that the bird had an unusual swollen and red foot. Very painful to the bird. She sent the photos to a friend who is a board-certified avian veterinarian

in Connecticut, who confirmed that it was gout. This was most likely caused by eating an unbalanced diet, too rich in fat. Once she discontinued the suet, the bird got better. (For graphic photos of gout in bluebirds, brought on by excessive feeding of suet dough, see

<http://www.juliezickefoose.com/blog/2008/06/uh-oh-zick-dough.html>

<http://www.juliezickefoose.com/blog/2008/06/crack-is-better-name-for-it.html>)

She points out that mealworms are not a nutritious food source for birds. They are low in phosphorus and high in fat. Some people add vitamins to the mealworm dish to provide needed nutrition. Her main point was to emphasize that too many well-meaning people think they are "saving" bluebirds by feeding them mealworms year round. This only makes the birds lazy by giving them an easy handout. She recommends no more than ten worms a day per bird, once a day. Mealworms are a great emergency food in case of steady rain and cold in the nesting season, or ice storms in winter, but should not be fed all spring and summer. Until a few years ago, stores didn't carry live mealworms in winter. Now they do or some people mail order them or raise their own.

Mary Strasser from La Crosse puts out a variety of food for her birds during the harshest days of winter (see *Wisconsin Bluebird*, Spring 2008). Bluebirds come to feed on shelled peanuts, hulled sunflower, crumbled up suet cakes, raisins and mealworms. She offers several types of food to provide a balanced diet and avoid the birds becoming dependent on any one thing. The bluebirds learned to hover at feeder portals to knock food out or to grab it, fly off, and consume it.

As spring approaches, bluebird flocks should start to break up, pair off and begin to start finding nesting territories. This is the time to reduce the amounts of food and let them get back to finding their food naturally.

One thing you may wish to consider is planting native trees and shrubs that produce food for all birds to attract them to your yard. Species such as Gray Dogwood, Smooth Sumac, Cherries, Hawthorns, Serviceberries, Crabapples, Viburnums, and Snowberry are a few favorites for birds. Add a year round source for water and the birds will come flocking to your yard. Now just sit back and enjoy the show.

*Photos by Kristine Vaughn*

