

TEXAS Blues



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Purple Martin Landlord Converts to Bluebird Rentals

Article and photos by **Lynnette Reese**

I live in rural North Central Texas. The region is marbled with Post Oak Savannah and Black Prairie landscapes with trees, large fields, and varied wildlife. With both woodlands and meadows, it's a bird's paradise with a dozen cardinals all year, a flock of goldfinches in winter, and an extended family of painted buntings in the summer.

However, I fail to attract Purple Martins to the high-rise Troyer gourds put up in 2017. The purple martins here seem happiest in the neighbor's cheap, dark-roofed plastic houses. In 2018 I added an automatic Purple Martin audio attractant called the "Bird Magnet." I watched. I waited. Starlings could not enter the special-shaped excluder entrances. But still no purple martins.

One day, a bluebird investigated the loud "dawn song" playing every morning. He seemed interested in the loud singing, cocking his head in several directions. Excited, I put up a cheap cedar house from a big box store on a pole in the yard. Bluebirds moved in the following year. I began reading all about bluebirds and nervously monitored the nest once or twice with a small telescoping mirror. One day they were all gone. Did I open the box at the wrong time? Did I scare them out too early? There were no broken eggs, no feathers on the ground, and no parents nearby.

Without a baffle on the pole, I had to hope for the best.

Yes, Snakes *do* Climb Poles

The next year, a Titmouse couple moved into a gourd. We had many "recreational" spousal arguments about whether snakes can climb poles. I said "yes," he said "no." That summer, he caught a large rat snake about 6 feet up that pole and saw the light. They successfully fledged. He moved the snake to a location about ½ mile away, and until we had baffles, I was worried he would come back and try our cheap birdhouse.

New Nestboxes

When we attended the 2019 TBS conference in Midlothian, Texas, we decided to replace or add TBS nestboxes with sun shields and stovepipe baffles. By 2020, our

new nestboxes had to be up soon. I had read somewhere that Feb. 1 was the date that bluebirds start nesting in North Central Texas, so we put three up that day. I put a tablespoon of food-grade diatomaceous earth in each nestbox and spread it around to deter mites. The next day they started a nest in the new nestbox at the original location as if answering an ad in the Bluebird Times. Birds catch insects from our garden in exchange for rent.

I began notes on nestwatch.org, but the bluebird parents weren't happy if I got within 20 feet. The nest cup is just above my head, out of my line of sight. With my little telescoping mechanic's mirror, I can only see a quarter of the nest at a time and kept re-counting eggs. After some thought, I taped my smartphone to a yardstick.

(continued on page 2)



TBS nestbox installed with baffle on Feb.1st, and occupied the next day.

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After three videos in one visit, I finally got a good count as the parents flew from tree to tree, calling in alarm. Two dull gray chicks and one with bright blue-tipped pinfeathers were warily eyeing the camera.



I managed to get a photo of the eggs before they hatched on March 2020. Is that tiny white chip evidence of one hatching?

To make amends, I put some live mealworms in a plant saucer on top of the nestbox. I always walk past my nestboxes--not to and from on the same path--so the raccoons don't pick up the location of a nifty snack-vending machine. Every time I got within 100 feet, they called loudly. If I sat 100 feet away, they stared at me for a long time, never re-entering the nestbox when I was near. I didn't see any birds take mealworms.

The next day a flock of chipping sparrows was in the trees above, hopping about and chirping loudly as if excited by a bucket of Halloween candy. Had I attracted birds to the nest? Although we've never seen house sparrows in our area, I moved the worms to my birdfeeders.

My fantasy of monitoring bluebirds was that the parents would chirp sweetly from a nearby branch as if I were Snow White in a Disney film. Instead, they were wild birds that had never been monitored and almost dive-bombed me like catbirds. And unlike Snow White, I got a lot of chigger bites outside.

By April 9, the bluebirds fledged from that nice TBS nestbox. Four eggs hatched and one was left buried under newer material in the nest along with some stiff, crispy mealworms. I removed the old nest on April 24, since sialis.org said that bluebirds might brood twice in a single season if the nest is removed. They only had one brood in 2019, so I didn't think they would try again.

TBS nestboxes that don't get too hot, are located in a field that's within 60 feet to a fledgling's first perch,

and are rain tight but vented are attractive to birds. This box was so comfortable that the bluebirds built another nest and were laying eggs again by May 8th.

Phoebes

Our house had been vacant for years when we moved in three years ago. A phoebe was roosting on a nest just six feet from the backdoor under the porch roof. The eggs hatched, but I didn't see much activity. One day the babies were just gone, so I took the nest down. Had a raccoon climbed the supporting column and gotten the babies?

This year, a phoebe couple had been eyeing the rock work outside my kitchen window for a month. I had a hunch that the ledges created by the rockwork were inviting, but too narrow. I cut some 2" wide wooden stakes and wedged them tightly in between the flat rocks in several corners under the roof. The rocks in the last spot weren't holding one of my stakes, so I tacked them in place with Liquid Nails. Within a week, the phoebes started making a mud and grass nest on the last board. The phoebe sat very still on her nest for days--with just her tail sticking out to one side. After hatching, the nestlings were difficult to count and monitor since the parents were often nearby. Nestwatch.org wants an actual count of eggs, nestlings, dead birds, and cowbird eggs at every visit and the phoebes would flee if they saw anyone near. It was not possible to count accurately every time.



The phoebes chose this spot soon after I wedged a piece of wood and tacked it in with Liquid Nails. We live near the River Brazos. Phoebes like a nearby water source.

She risked her life brooding her eggs. After several days of visits with bugs, spiders, or caterpillars in their beaks, both phoebe parents started fussing loudly at a cardinal looking for caterpillars on the Vitex bush. The cardinals had never been challenged in the area

before. I walked around the corner outside and saw two little fellows looking up at me. Finally fledged, the pair sat near a Vitex tree in the courtyard below. As I approached, they flew off and I never saw them again. The last one was coached out the next day by the parents. The phoebes did not lay a second brood. No cowbirds had found their nest; all were phoebes.



By duct-taping my smartphone to a yardstick, I was able to video record the contents of the nest and freeze a frame to use as this image. Phoebes are very skittish. They fly off the nest when you walk past. Only if the female is brooding will she stay.

Other Birds Need Nestboxes

I am convinced that the wrens that abandoned five eggs in a gourd last year were inexperienced newlyweds and it got hot too fast. This year, adding more vents to the gourds and moving to a shadier afternoon location didn't help the purple martins in their choice, but at least it would be more hospitable to other birds.



A nestbox in a small grove of trees became occupied in May. The nestbox is located 15 miles from Weatherford, Texas, about 150 yards from the Brazos River.

My other nestboxes were all clear. I would check them and put a long piece of grass in the hole. Several times I checked if the grass disappeared, but nothing would be in the box. One of our nestboxes is located at the edge of a little grove of trees. In May, I decided to take one last look in that box to see if any wasps had started a nest.

It was too late for any birds to start a nest, right? As I removed the nail and yanked the side open, a bird flew in my face and disappeared into a tree. Both of us were startled. She had been brooding. Inside was a neat, moss-covered nest with speckled eggs. I'm sure she would have served me tea and crumpets in her little green parlor had I not opened it without knocking. She was fussing at me up in the trees somewhere. I closed the box, walked on past it, and circled back to my own house. Was it a chickadee? Googling the mossy nest and its location, I found it to be a Titmouse family. Holy-Moley! Did they move from a 16-foot-high gourd last year to a nestbox five feet off the ground? The nestbox was less than 100 feet from the gourds that had fledged titmice the previous year. As the realtors say, "Location, location, location!"



Titmouse nestlings photo on May 6, 2020.

New Problems

For years I had been on the lookout for house sparrows but had not seen one. Several chipping and field sparrows hopped around my feeders, but no House Sparrows (HOSPs). The male HOSP is easy to identify. In late May, one was singing his heart out on the front porch of a gourd. I took it down, opened the side, and saw no eggs. Had I found some, to be certain I would have made sure the nest was a messy HOSP-style nest, identified the eggs, and then shook them vigorously and put everything back

A HOSP may relocate and evict others if they feel their eggs are in danger. Better to let them brood for weeks instead. Alternatively, you can trap them and donate the live birds to a raptor rehabilitation center.

(continued on page 4)

Purple Martin Landlord Converts to Bluebird Rentals

Birds of prey that are hand-raised need to be taught how to catch their food. House sparrows are not native and have wrecked countless bluebird nests, killing babies and even adults to take over the nesting location.

I moved the detached gourd to hang from a wire under a canopy of trees behind the house. A long wire will make it harder for snakes to enter, and raccoons can't reach far inside a Troyer horizontal-gourd tunnel that's several inches long. Perhaps the titmice will try a gourd again next year.

Unprotected Bluebirds

On a drive home, I noticed a bluebird entering an old cheap house attached to a tree near the road. The box's entry was enlarged and scarred. Alarmed, I stopped the car, tapped on the side, and checked the box—not my property—and found five blue eggs in a neat nest. I resolved to move the nest *after* the eggs had hatched to a NABS box on the tree with at least a Noel guard. I didn't want to shake or drop an egg. The parents would return to the new house as long as it was in the same spot. I checked again a week later. They were all gone except for a little piece of shell. A snake had probably found it. The fact that she decided to nest this box meant there aren't enough good boxes in her territory. The landowner has said that I can replace the old box with a pole-mounted NABS box with a baffle. My lesson is that bluebirds are more attached to their territory than a safer box that's closer to another's.



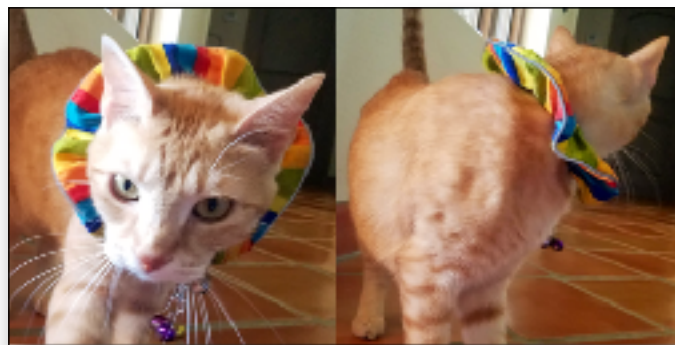
This old box near a neighbor's land by the side of the road attracted a bluebird this year. The eggs were all taken by a predator within a week.

Many birds cannot find a tree cavity and resort to dangerous options. Many people cut down dead trees, landscape with plants that don't flower much or bear fruit, and mow or spray insecticide on vast lawns and pastures to make them look green, trim, and neat.

People don't think about how dead trees have benefited wildlife for eons. A protected box helps more than bluebirds. We have numerous basic privileges than we did a couple of hundred years ago. With running hot water, air-conditioned homes, and easy entertainment and food sources, we live as only kings would have lived in medieval times. I want to give a little back to the world I live in for the creatures we have affected. Maintaining a safe cavity for birds is a small sacrifice.

Cats

We have three cats. They want to go outside, but we keep them inside until after dark. This is not perfect, but to save the peace in our marriage, we came to a compromise. We put Bird-Be-Safe™ Elizabethan collars on them. I added a small but loud bell. Our cats usually come back within two hours for canned food. They like to catch moths, lizards, and spiders on the back porch. We know that cats can destroy baby birds in the nest, especially during the day when babies cry as parents approach. We have witnessed the benefits of these collars since our best hunting cat—although she prefers to hunt crawly things—has not yet caught a bird with one on.



The BirdbeSafe Collar has been quite effective in making our best hunting cat unnaturally more visible. Adding a loud bell is even better (barely visible on the left behind her whiskers).

If you buy these from Amazon, be sure to use [smile.amazon.com](https://www.smile.amazon.com) and select support for TBS. Amazon donates a percentage of your purchases when you are logged in from [smile.amazon.com](https://www.smile.amazon.com). The cost of your purchase does not increase; Amazon gets a tax write-off. I use Birdbesafe and Beau's Cat/Dog Bells.

(Editor's note: Kudos to Lynnette for her aggressive approach to addressing the problematic issue of protecting birds from a beloved pet.)

Buttonbush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*

By **Linda Crum**, Master Gardener/Master Naturalist

Buttonbush is a multi-trunked, deciduous shrub or small tree with an open growth habit that loves wet feet. So if your landscape has a spot that has poor drainage, buttonbush is the perfect native to thrive in that site. It also grows in a well-drained landscape if it receives enough moisture until established. Irrigate during drought.



In nature, buttonbush is found in swamps, ponds and margins of streams throughout Texas and in the eastern United States from Canada to Mexico. Buttonbush tends to stay a shrub when grown in water but will develop into a tree with an attractive twisted trunk when grown on the

banks of streams or in your landscape. Usual height is less than ten feet but can reach a height of twenty-five feet.



*Unique flowers give buttonbush its name.
Backyard photo by Linda Crum.*

Light requirements range from shade to full sun. Buttonbush will bloom more in full sun than shade but will also require more water.

The name of buttonbush comes from the interesting flowers, which are arranged in small spheres with protruding anthers. Blooms occur from June to August and are very fragrant. The spherical blooms, often covered with bees and butterflies, look like white to pale pink pincushions.

Seed pods, while young, are green but become small brown clusters by fall that attract more than twenty-five species of waterfowl. Birds such as Cardinals and Mockingbirds will build their nests in the branches of buttonbush.



*Seed pods attract 25 species of waterfowl.
Photo by Sandy Smith.*

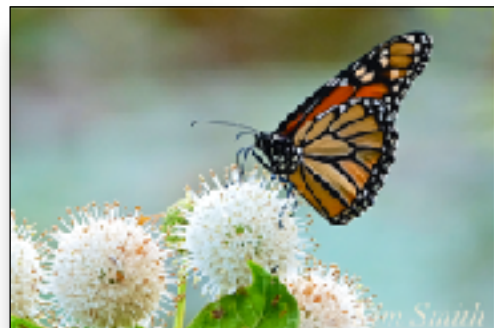
Glossy, dark-green leaves lack significant fall color. The foliage is also toxic which may be why deer do not usually browse buttonbush. Prune in dormant season or early spring before new growth appears.

If buttonbush becomes unmanageable, it can be cut back near the ground to revitalize. No insect or disease problems occur with buttonbush.

I like buttonbush! Give it a try.



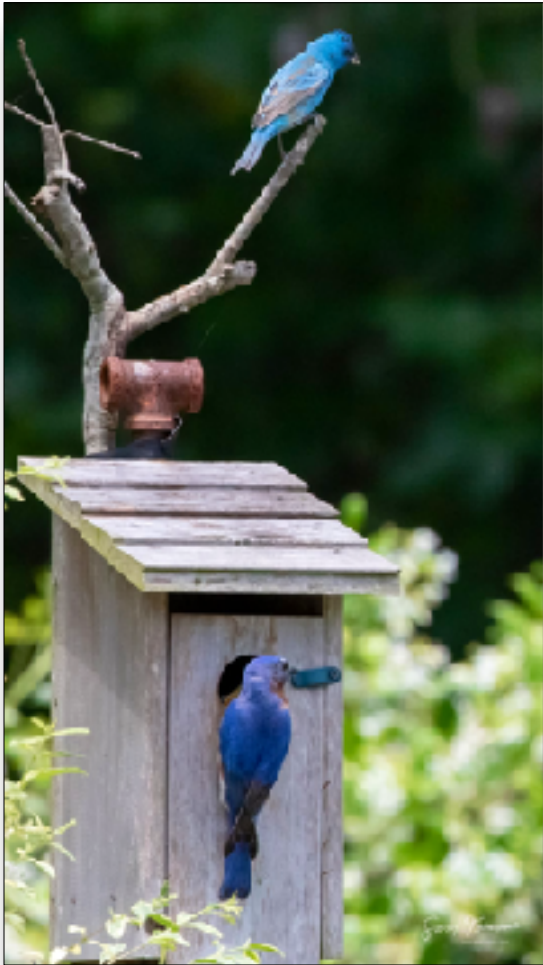
*Backyard photo by
Linda Crum.*



Birds are not the only wildlife that enjoy a bountiful buttonbush. Butterflies and bees also enjoy the blossoms. Photo by Kim Smith.

Members Share...

An indigo bunting checking out the bluebird nestbox with 5 babies. Papa doesn't seem to mind his presence. They flew in together. **Silver Wolf Images** Spring, TX.



Thankfully, there's only two. Love how the one is climbing on the back of the other...
Photo by **David Kinneer**.



Paul Nelson is getting **Nathan** interested early. He can name: bluebirds, purple martins, dove, ducks, mockingbird, hummingbirds and blue herons on site and sound!

Great parenting Paul and Kelly! A new birder and future TBS member.

Protect Cavity Nesters From House Sparrows!



This year we have way too many House Sparrows, so after mama Bluebird laid her eggs, I got out my homemade Sparrow Spooker. As you can see by this picture, the female Bluebird is right at home after a tentative period of uncertainty. My tried and true TBS nest box is over 5 years old and holding up pretty good in our SE Texas heat & humidity. After this breeding season, I think I'll clean it off and paint it white. Photo by John Park.

Another passive control method for House Sparrows. OIL THE EGGS! Eggs never hatch. For research details view [2019 NestWatch Digest](#) page 16.



Texas Bluebird Society

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Some very creative members have been hard at work on a special project for TBS.

Results and project details will be featured in the October issue of TX Blues.



Thanks For Your Financial Support!

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Welcome New Members!

**New members who give us permission to print their name.*

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- JK, Lufkin
- JK, Nacogdoches
- TK, Galveston
- EB, Nacogdoches
- RP, Nacogdoches
- MW, Garrison
- BP, Nacogdoches
- BW, Friendswood
- PS, Nacogdoches
- BC, Austin



Nestwatch.org
Every nest counts!

Yes, Size Does Matter!

You can help decide who inhabits your nestbox. The size of the entrance hole controls which cavity-nesting species can **safely** use your nestbox.

An easy way to control the size of the entrance hole without building a new nestbox is to use a “portal” over the hole. Commercial or homemade, adding a portal to reduce the entrance hole size will provide homes for a variety of cavity nesters.



A “portal” reduces the entrance hole size for the Brown-headed Nuthatch.



Bluebird nest on top; Carolina Chickadee in the middle; Brown-headed Nuthatch on the bottom.

Chart below shows size requirements for entrance hole.

Species:	Adapt Size To:
Ash-throated Flycatcher	1 9/16 inches
Carolina Chickadee	1 1/8 inches
Tufted Titmouse	1 1/4 inches
Black-crested Titmouse	1 1/4 inches
Brown-headed Nuthatch	1 inch
Carolina wren	1 1/4 - 1 1/2 inches
Bewick’s Wren	1 1/8 inches
Prothonotary Warbler	1 1/4 inches

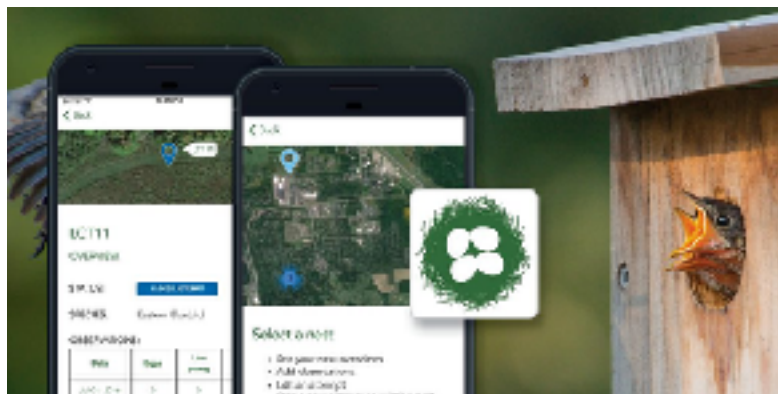
This is a perfect example of why size matters

A Brown-headed Nuthatch requires a 1 inch entrance hole. This nestbox has the normal 1 1/2 inch opening which allows larger birds to use the nestbox. A bluebird has built its nest right on top of a Carolina Chickadee, who built their nest on an existing Brown-headed Nuthatch nest! Photo by Greg Grant.

Also, Birds have been known to build a second nest on top of the first nest. This places the nest precariously close to the opening; an easy reach for some predators. Always remove the nest after the babies have fledged. Dispose of the nest far away from the nestbox. Otherwise, the old nest will alert predators that a nesting site is near.

Federal law protects all native nesting birds!

- Do not disturb birds or collect nests/eggs.
- Monitor and report activity to NestWatch.



NESTWATCH MOBILE APP - (Apple or Google Store)
The easy way to count and record!

The Texas Bluebird Society newsletter, *TX Blues*, is published four times a year: March ■ May ■ July ■ October

Debbie Bradshaw Park, Editor

Moved?

Send email/address changes to records@txblues.org

