

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

Bluebirds in Winter

We recently received a good question concerning when to clean out bluebird boxes and how to help these birds in winter. We are fortunate to have bluebirds all year long. Often the number of bluebirds can increase here during winter months as birds summering further north move south to escape severe, snow-covered winters. I have several bluebird houses and I also prepare suet to help bluebirds get through the winter months.

Birdhouses provide more than just a place to nest. They can also help bluebirds survive during cold snaps, which are often a part of our winters in North Carolina. The birds use the boxes for roosting, to conserve warmth on cold nasty nights. Often several pile into a single box. Many folks winterize their houses by covering ventilation holes, leaving the stripping in place until the weather is reliably warm. As soon as the chill of late fall is upon us I clean out my birdhouses, ridding them of any possible parasites that could harbor in old nests. All of my boxes have a shelf of coated wire mesh about a half inch from the bottom of the box. I like this design for two reasons. In summer it may help control some parasites that bother nestlings, and in winter it provides a bit of air at the bottom of the box helping birds breathe if the box becomes overcrowded.

Bluebirds are insect eaters, relying on pesky bugs for the majority of their diet. In winter however when insects are scarce they incorporate many types of berries into their diet. Dogwood, bayberry, bittersweet, holly, mistletoe and Virginia creeper are among the berries they will eat when insects are unavailable. Growing such vegetation in your yard will attract these birds to spend time with you in winter. Another way is to mix up some tasty suet. There are several things they love to find in a suet cake, such as peanut butter, raisins, currants and peanuts. If you see bluebirds in the yard but cannot get them to sample your suet, try draping the feeder with a branch full of berries from one of the plants I mentioned above.

Do you need a recipe for suet? If so call Tim at The Nature Conservancy's Roanoke River office at 794-1818 or e-mail me at (j.jessop@gte.net).