The Eastern bluebird has faced threats from development and competition with immigrant birds such as the starling and the house sparrow. Now, area bluebirders have formed the Louisiana Bayou Bluebird Society to help increase the bluebird's population.

BUILDING BLUEBIRD BOXES

Here are some tips on making and erecting bluebird boxes. They come from "The Backyard Bird-Lover's Guide" by Jan Mahoney. It's published in a $24.95 softcover edition by Storey Books.

- Erect box in late winter or early spring.
- Entrance hole should be 1 1/2 inches in diameter.
- Don't attach a perch, it will encourage unwanted visitors.
- The box floor should be 4 inches by 4 inches or 5 inches by 5 inches.
- Place the box 3 to 5 feet from ground level.
- Place boxes 300 to 400 feet apart.
- Set box in the open, with a fence, tree or shrub 25 to 100 feet away from the entrance hole for safe first flights.
- Houses out in the open should be light-colored to prevent overheating.
- Clean out the bluebird box between broods.
Bluebird boxes are available at many home and garden centers, and they're fairly easy to build on your own. For free bluebird box plans, check out the Web site of the North American Bluebird Society at http://nabirdsociety.org.

FIRST MEETING SET

The inaugural meeting of the Louisiana Bayou Bluebird Society will be held from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday at the Wadill Refuge, 4142 North Flannery Road.

The public is invited, and admission is free.

Guest speaker is Tena Taylor, a member of the North American Bluebird Society Speakers Bureau.

The society is dedicated to increasing the population of bluebirds across Louisiana and the rest of the country. The group also plans to raise awareness and knowledge of the bluebird by providing information and programs to schools, clubs, and other groups and individuals.

For more information about joining the Louisiana Bayou Bluebird Society and Saturday's meeting, contact Dave Cagnolatti at 225-769-5222 or dcagnolatti@cox.net.

Dave Cagnolatti removes a bluebird box along University Club's golf course so that it can be cleaned and refurbished. Bluebirds like plenty of space around their boxes, which makes open places such as golf courses ideal.

By DANNY HEITMAN
Advocate Staff Writer

Not long ago, Shane Marcotte thought that he might be seeing ivory-billed woodpeckers outside his house near Watson. The woodpecker is widely assumed to be extinct, though there have been rumors of the bird in Louisiana’s Pearl River Wildlife Management Area.

After a little bit of Internet research, Marcotte realized that the woodpeckers around his property were a more common species, the piliated woodpecker. But like a lot of visits to the Internet, Marcotte’s research took a few side trips, and he eventually learned a lot about bluebirds, too.

Unlike the ivory-bill, Louisiana’s Eastern bluebirds aren’t reputed to be extinct, though they face numerous threats from predators and development. That’s why Marcotte has joined bluebird enthusiasts from around the state to form the Louisiana Bayou Bluebird Society, a preservation group that has its first meeting Saturday in Baton Rouge. (See accompanying article for more details.)

"While doing my search on the Internet for the ivory-bill, I ran across lots of pictures of lots of different birds that are native to our area," said Marcotte, an area frame and trim carpenter. "This triggered my memory of seeing bluebirds on the wires near my home. Bluebirds being such a beautiful species was enough to grab and keep my attention. I was especially intrigued to learn that the male bluebird shows the female bluebird four to five potential nest sites before she finally chooses one to use."

After seeing Marcotte’s newfound interest in bluebirds, his wife, Emily, gave him a bluebird box as a surprise gift.

Bluebirds are second-cavity nesters, which means that they make their homes in pre-existing cavities such as woodpecker holes or holes in fence posts, Marcotte said. "This is due to the fact that they do not have the beak required to make a suitable hole of their own," he said.

Because they simulate naturally occurring cavities, bluebird boxes are popular sales items at home and garden centers. Many of them have hinged tops that allow for easy inspection of nests and cleaning. But homeowners often have poor luck in attracting bluebirds to their boxes, at least partially because of improper placement.

Like many novice bluebirders, Marcotte initially hung his bluebird box incorrectly. "First off, it had no predator baffle, no pressure on the pole to keep out ants, and no wax on the inside to deter wasps from nesting," he recalled.

Marcotte eventually refined his technique and enjoyed success in attracting bluebirds during the recent nesting season, which typically lasts between February and the end of July.

"I mounted my nest boxes facing east so that they will be cooler late in the day," Marcotte said. "They are approximately 5 feet off the ground. While there is an active nest, I monitor it every other day. I check for predator abuse from snakes, ants, house sparrows and other enemy birds."

"When there are fresh eggs, I feel them each time"
I check the box,” said Marcotte. “When the eggs are warm, I know that the mother has begun incubating. I always install a predator baffie that consists of an 8-inch stove pipe, with hardware cloth around the pole. I put grease on the mounting pole to keep ants out. I keep written records to show the date the eggs are laid, when they hatch, any and all pertinent info. When the babies have fledged, I clean the old nest out and clean the box with Clorox and allow it to air out a couple of days.

“I was very successful with a couple nesting in three nest boxes,” Marcotte said of his inaugural effort this year. “They produced three broods, which fledged 11 babies or fledglings.”

In attracting bluebirds, the old real estate principle of “location, location, location” quickly comes into play. They are mostly birds of the country, since they prefer wide, open areas around their nesting boxes.

Marcotte’s home sits on a half-acre lot that’s part of a 12-acre tract owned by his in-laws. “I have access to all 12 acres for bluebird nest boxes,” he said.

Bluebirds will nest in more populated areas, though, if enough open space is provided, such as in large backyards or golf courses, Marcotte said.

Bluebird trails require large areas, since the boxes must be sited many feet apart. Jan Mahnken, author of “The Backyard Bird-Lover’s Guide,” suggests that bluebird boxes be placed 300 to 400 feet apart.

“That distance is important because bluebirds have strong territorial drives and will engage in spirited disputes with one another if houses are too close together,” Mahnken tells readers.

Dave Cagnolatti, another member of the newly formed Louisiana Bayou Bluebird Society, maintains a trail of bluebird boxes along the University Club golf course.

“The summer of 2002 was my second full season with nest boxes on the golf course,” Cagnolatti said. “The management of the University Club allowed me to place the boxes on the golf course and helped me locate good sites that would not interfere with their maintenance.

“Six of my boxes had nests this year, and four of those six had repeat nests,” he said. “I’m getting a better idea of what kinds of locations are more likely to attract birds, and I hope to increase the number of active nest sites each year by moving boxes to better locations.”

Because bluebirds require generous amounts of room, they’re especially vulnerable to loss of habitat from development. “Human population growth, especially in the eastern United States, has destroyed a large amount of bluebird habitat,” Mahnken writes.

“Plus, the arrival of immigrant house sparrows and starlings heavily increased the competition for nesting sites, since all three birds have similar requirements.”

“Education is the key,” Marcotte said. “We need to educate the public about the bluebirds’ needs, which include how to protect them from numerous predators and enemy birds,” he said. “We want people to understand that they cannot just erect a bluebird box and let it be.”