

Wildlife Express!

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Boisterous Bluebirds



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Let's Look at...



The Mountain Bluebird

Have you ever seen a flash of blue on a fencepost? If you have, then you might have seen Idaho's state bird, the mountain bluebird.

Mountain bluebirds are one of three bluebirds found in the United States. They get their name from the fact that they live mostly in the mountains of the western United States. Their scientific name is *Sialia currucoides* (Sigh-A-lee-a cur-a- COY-dees).

Mountain bluebirds are easy to recognize. They are six to eight inches long and have a longish tail. The male is bright sky blue on his back with pale blue underneath. The female is gray with blue on her wings and tail.

Mountain bluebirds like open areas with some trees. Places like meadows at the edges of forests are perfect bluebird habitat. They even live at elevations of 12,000 feet if there are open spaces. Open areas give bluebirds the perfect place to find food. They hunt for insects such as beetles, weevils, ants, wasps, caterpillars, grasshoppers, and crickets. Bluebirds also eat fruits like currants, grapes, elderberries, and serviceberries.

Mountain bluebirds catch insects three different ways. One is called "ground-sallying" where a bluebird uses a perch to watch for insects. When an insect is spotted, the bluebird swoops down to catch it. Mountain bluebirds also "flycatch" by flying from a perch and catching insects right out of the air. They also hover over the ground as they search for insects. No other kind of thrush does that!

Along with a good food supply, bluebirds also need good places to nest. All bluebirds nest in cavities. Old woodpecker nests, a hole in a tree, a hole in a fencepost, or a nest box all make good nest sites. A nest cup is built inside the cavity. It is made of grasses lined with soft bark, hair, or feathers. This nest cup holds five to six pale blue eggs that the female incubates for 13 days. About 18 to 21 days after hatching, the young bluebirds leave the nest. They can fly as far as 300 feet on their very first flight!

Mountain bluebirds were in trouble a number of years ago. A lot of their habitat was destroyed when settlers cleared land for farming. Dead trees that contained nest cavities were cut down. Non-native house sparrows and European starlings took over bluebird nest sites. Idaho's state bird was disappearing. People noticed that all three North American bluebirds were in trouble. They put up nest boxes to help provide nesting cavities. And it worked! Nest boxes gave bluebirds new places to nest. People stopped cutting down dead trees, so bluebirds would have natural cavities. The bluebirds came back. Just watch for a flash of blue on a fencepost next time you are out in Idaho's lands!

State Symbols

Do you know all of Idaho's state symbols?

One of our state symbols is the mountain bluebird. Nevada also has the mountain bluebird as its state bird.

State symbols usually have special meaning or value to the people of the state. The mountain bluebird became Idaho's state symbol on February 28, 1931. Bluebirds are often used as a symbol of love, happiness and renewed hope. During the 30s, our country was going through a time of hardship. Many people were having a difficult time. The bluebird might have been chosen as our state symbol because people saw it as a symbol hope and renewal. At that time in history, people needed hope for the future.

A symbol might also be chosen because it is important to the state's economy. Idaho's state vegetable is the potato. Our climate is perfect for growing high-quality potatoes. This crop has made Idaho famous throughout the world. It also brings billions of dollars into our state every year.

Sometimes a state symbol has historic and scientific importance. We have a state fossil, the Hagerman horse. This fossil came out of a fossil bed that is known for some of the world's best fossils that are 3.5 million years old! People come from all over the world to look at Idaho's horse fossils.

For something to become a state symbol, it first must be proposed to the Idaho legislature. Elementary students have proposed many of Idaho's state symbols. They researched their proposed symbol and collected information on it. Then they found a legislator to write a bill proposing the new state symbol. The legislature then votes on the bill. It takes a lot of time and hard work, but it is worth it. That plant, animal or gem will forever be remembered as an important part of Idaho.

For more information on Idaho's state symbols, visit the Idaho state web site at <http://gov.idaho.gov/fyi/symbols/>



Meet the Thrushes

Our state bird belongs to the Thrush Family. This is a large family of birds with over 330 different species. Thrushes are found all over the world, except in Antarctica. North America is home to 18 species, eight of which live in Idaho. One of our most common thrushes is the familiar American robin. If you take a good look at a robin, you will notice its longish tail and beak and its upright posture. Robins also look plump around the middle. You can see these "field marks" on other thrushes.

Besides looking alike, thrushes also like to eat the same things. Biologists say that thrushes are "generalists" (GEN-RA-LISTS). This means that they eat just about anything. We all know that robins eat worms, right? But did you know that they also eat insects, spiders, snails, and fruit? Many thrushes love fruit. Some species eat so much fruit that they are important in spreading the seeds of plants like juniper, mountain-ash, and serviceberry.

Most thrushes are long-distance migrants. They spend the winter in Central and South America. Bluebirds travel shorter distances to spend their winter in the southwestern United States. But the robin and the Townsend's solitaire often spend the winter right here in Idaho.

Except for Idaho's two bluebirds, our thrushes are not very colorful. Most of them are brownish with spotted chests and sides. This dull coloration makes sense, because many of them feed and nest on the ground. Being brown helps hide the thrush as it searches for food or cares for its young.

What thrushes lack in color, they make up in song. The thrush family includes some of the finest singers in the bird world, including the European nightingale. One of Idaho's thrushes is the hermit thrush. Many people say their song is the most beautiful of all bird songs. Even our familiar backyard robin has a beautiful song. The robin's song is loud and sounds like "cheerily, cheer, cheer up, cheer up." When you hear this song, you will know that spring is on its way!

Nifty Nests

This time of year many birds are busy making nests. Birds use many different materials to build their nests. They may use grass, twigs, moss, spider webs, plant seeds, animal hair, feathers or manmade materials.

Nests are grouped according to how they are built and the shape that they take. The most common nests are cup shaped nests. Songbirds, like robins, usually build cup shaped nests.



Cavity nests are the safest nests. These nests are found in holes in trees or buildings. Can you think of a bird that nests in cavities?

Scrapes are shallow spots scratched into the ground. Birds sitting on these nests are usually well camouflaged to blend in with the ground and plants around them. Snipe and sage grouse make scrapes.

Platform nests are usually built on and in trees. Some platform nests may be huge. Eagle nests can be nine feet across!

Adherent (ad-HIR-ent) nests are what barn swallows make. They are a cup nest that is plastered with mud to buildings and stone ledges.

Nests that look like a basket and hang from forks in trees are called pensile (PEN-siil) nests. Little birds called vireos make these nests.

Another nest that hangs from a tree is called a pendulous (PEN-ju-les) nest. They look like bags. Orioles are known for weaving beautiful pendulous nests.

When you see a nest, think about the bird that built it. A lot of work went into making the nest to keep the bird's eggs and young safe.

Excellent Eggs

When you think of eggs, you might think of the eggs in your refrigerator, but eggs come in many colors, shapes and sizes. There are about 9,000 different kinds of birds, and each bird lays its own special egg.

The colors and patterns on eggs may help camouflage them from predators. Snipe eggs are speckled with brown to help them blend in with the ground. Saw-whet owls lay eggs that are bright white. These owls lay their eggs in dark cavities in trees. The bright white color helps the owls see their eggs.

The shape an egg takes can also be important. Birds that nest on cliffs lay eggs that are smaller at one end than the other end. This helps the eggs to roll in a circle and not fall off the cliff. Birds that lay their eggs in deep nests usually lay eggs that are round. They don't have to worry about their eggs falling out of the nest.

Eggs may look different on the outside, but the insides are similar. The shell is hard to protect the growing chick inside. The chick inside the egg is called an embryo (em- bree-o). As the embryo is developing inside the egg, its food is the yellow yolk. The egg white is kind of like a big pillow. It cushions the chick and yolk.

So as you can see, there's a lot more to eggs than just what's in your refrigerator.



Snags: Nature's Recycling Center

Does your family recycle things like soda cans? If you do, you know why recycling is important. But did you know that Mother Nature has her own recycling center? Just take a close look at a dead tree.

Dead trees might just look dead. But the insides of a dead tree are buzzing with plant and animal activity.

Standing dead trees are called "snags." When a tree dies, insects such as wood boring beetles, carpenter ants, and termites begin making tunnels in the wood. Soon, fungi and bacteria arrive, helping to soften the wood. Before you know it, many small creatures such as spiders, centipedes, worms, pillbugs, and springtails are living in the dead tree. These small animals help the fungi loosen the bark from the dead tree. Loose bark becomes a shelter for salamanders, frogs, snakes, mice, shrews, bats, and small birds.

The insect activity attracts woodpeckers that chisel into the wood to catch their prey. Large woodpeckers, such as the pileated (PIE-LEE-A-TED) woodpecker, excavate big holes that become nesting sites for small owls, kestrels, flying squirrels, and bluebirds. Other cavities are formed when dead branches drop off. These might be used by birds or mammals like raccoons. Chickadees and nuthatches make their own nest holes by chipping away the decaying wood. Exposed branches are used as perching or roosting spots by many birds from songbirds to hawks.

Over time, the tree will become so decayed that it will fall down. But even on the ground, it will continue to be used by many creatures. Finally, the nutrients that were stored in the dead wood will be returned to the soil where they will be recycled by other plants and animals. So, while a dead tree may look dead, it is actually very much alive!



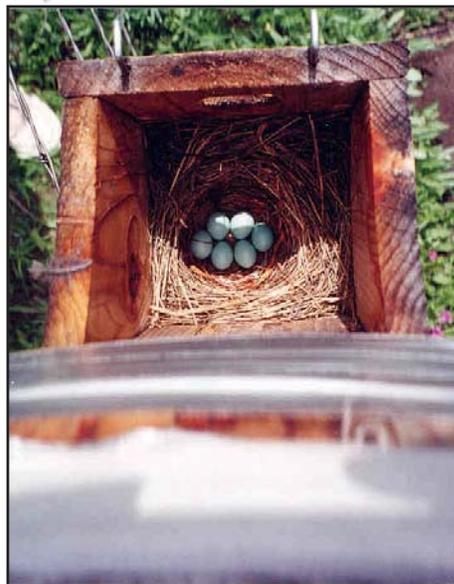
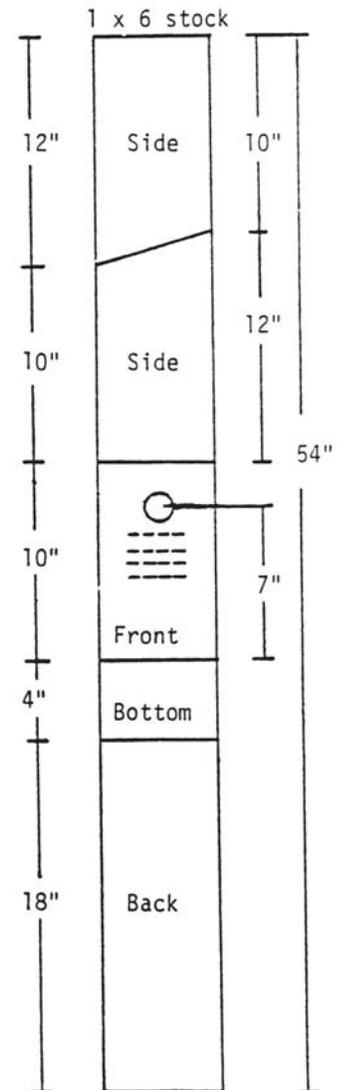
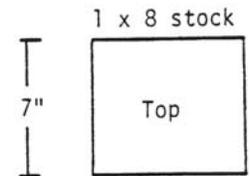
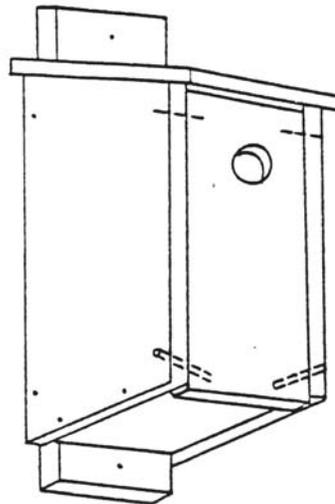
Build a Nest Box!

Bluebirds are a bit picky about where they build their nests. Sometimes it is hard to find a nice hole. You can help bluebirds out by building them a nest box. Here are the plans to build a home even the pickiest bluebird will love. So grab an adult and build a bluebird nest box! Once your box is made, put it on a post or tree four to 15 feet from the ground. Pick a spot that has some afternoon shade. Boxes should not be placed any closer than 100 yards. Bluebirds don't like close neighbors! If a bird does use your box, remember to clean it out in the fall. That way the box will be ready when the birds return in the spring.

The front of this nest box swings up to allow for easy cleaning. The hinge nails on the top should not be driven in too tightly and should be directly opposite each other. The bottom of the front is held in place by nails inserted at an angle into drilled holes. Remember you will need to remove these nails to clean the box, so don't drive them in all the way. Leave a 1/4-inch gap at the top under the eave for ventilation.

The box is made from scrap 1-inch by 6-inch lumber. A plank four and one-half feet long will make one box. To avoid the nails from splitting the boards, drill holes slightly smaller than the nails to get the nails started. The roof of the box should be cut at an angle so the roof fits snugly against the back. Bluebirds use a 1 1/2 inch hole cut six inches from the bottom. Cut grooves beneath the hole on the inside of the box, so the bluebirds can get out of the box easily.

Good luck building your bluebird box!





Spring Has Sprung!

It's getting warmer outside. The grass is green. Birds are singing. Flowers are popping up. It's a sure sign. Spring is here!

Spring is a refreshing time of year. It is a time to take a deep breath and soak in the warm sun after a gloomy and cold winter.

For wildlife, spring can also be refreshing. Now is the time when grass starts to sprout. Trees start to get new leaves, and wildflowers begin to poke out of the ground. For animals that eat plants, the new plant growth is great. It is like walking into a candy store. The plants are sweet and full of water. This is just what elk and deer need after months of eating dry grass and branches off bushes.

Spring is a time when some people do some serious house cleaning. Does your family "spring clean" your house? What about animals? Do they clean out their homes? Many birds do! Right now birds are busy making places to lay eggs and raise a family. Some birds, like sparrows or robins, go to work building a new nest. They collect grass, twigs, mud and fluff to build their nests. Other birds clean out their old nest and add to it. Osprey and bald eagles may use the same nest year after year. They just keep adding new sticks. Their nests can get huge.

Many animals seem to be busier in the spring. You may notice that you see more wildlife, too. Animals that left for the winter are coming back, and animals that slept through the winter are waking up and moving about. Every animal is busy finding food and shelter. They may also be looking for a mate.

Spring can be a busy time of year - both for people and wildlife. If you are out working in your yard or playing in the park, look for animals. You might see birds singing or bees buzzing. Maybe you will see ants collecting bits of plants to take into their nests. Spring is a great time to see wildlife!

Let Them Be

One sign of spring is more animals are about. Many people and animals have been cooped up all winter. Everyone wants to get out to enjoy the fresh air. Walks, bike rides and fishing trips can take us closer to wild animals.

When you hear people talking about enjoying animals, remember it is especially important that we leave them alone. Let them do the things they need to do in the springtime or anytime.

As humans, we have an urge to take care of things we think are helpless. If you see a stray animal, don't assume it has been abandoned. Most of the time, this isn't the case. Elk and deer leave their young hidden the grass while they go away to eat. If the mother stayed close to her baby, she could actually draw the attention of a predator towards the baby. You may have scared the mother away. She will return once "danger" has passed.

If you know that an animal is orphaned because the mother has died, call your local Fish and Game office. They will take the animal to a wildlife rehabilitator. Chances are if you take an animal home, it will die. Caring for a wild animal is not the same as caring for a pet. They need special foods, and wildlife rehabilitators are specially trained to care for them.

Wildlife should not be handled, fed, chased or disturbed. If an animal will let you close enough to pick it up, it may be sick. Do not pick up a wild animal - dead or alive.

Wild animals are just that - wild! They survive on their own without any help from people. Wild animals are unique and wonderful, view them from a distance and leave wildlife in the wild.



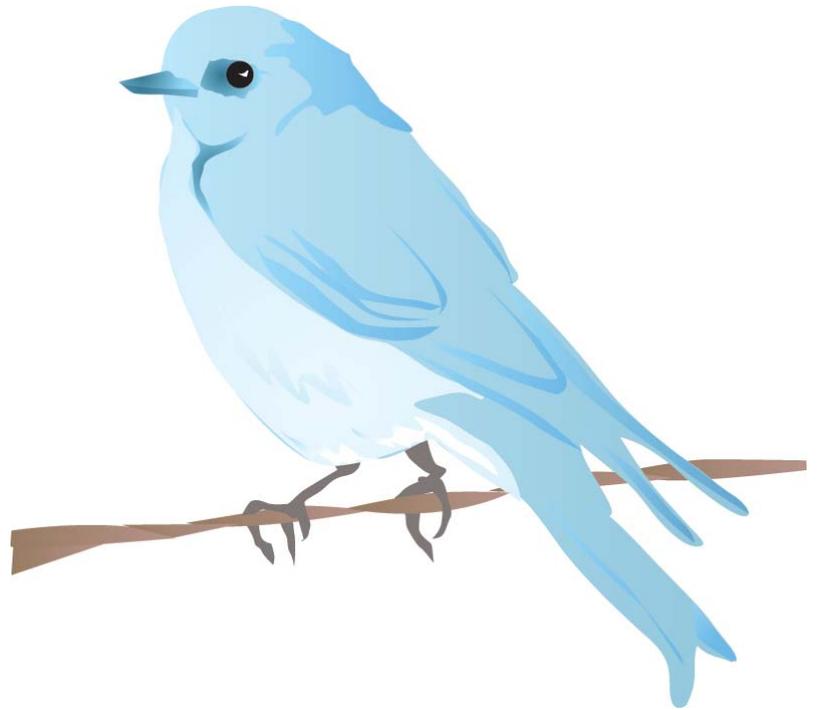
Bluebird Blitz

Find the words. Find a question in the two top lines of the puzzle and write it below. Answer the question.

D	W	H	A	T	I	S	M	O	U	R	L	I
A	R	T	P	E	B	O	I	L	R	D	O	N
I	A	I	H	R	U	M	U	E	C	H	B	S
E	Q	S	B	N	E	F	F	G	Y	Y	M	E
M	J	X	T	E	I	D	Y	G	H	Q	Y	C
C	Y	A	F	T	U	E	A	S	G	G	S	T
V	I	D	U	G	X	L	M	T	T	N	E	S
N	B	A	Z	H	K	L	B	X	O	I	T	Y
L	E	H	S	U	R	H	T	B	E	R	A	G
B	N	E	S	T	B	O	X	I	F	P	T	V
R	V	T	S	E	N	P	U	C	H	S	S	P
S	G	A	N	S	G	G	V	K	B	M	O	E

Words

Beautiful	Bluebird
Cup nest	Eggs
Insects	Mountain
Nest box	Predator
Snags	Spring
State	Symbol
Thrush	



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU !

If you have a letter, poem or question for *Wildlife Express*, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to the address printed above!