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Eastern Bluebird

Birds of Barrington:

EASTERN BLUEBIRD

LOTS OF PEOPLE ASK ME what my favorite bird is. I don't hesitate to answer. It has been and, I expect, always will be the Eastern Bluebird, the species that Henry David Thoreau accurately claimed, "carries the sky on its back".

When I came to Barrington in 1974, one of the first things I did was to nail a bluebird nest box to a small oak in our front yard at the edge of a Cook County Forest Preserve. Others told me that it was for naught: bluebirds had left the area years before. Imagine my euphoria when a pair of Eastern Bluebirds found the box and raised a family the following spring. The joy was short-lived, however. On Memorial Day of that year, I made a tragic discovery—a raccoon had climbed the tree, torn off the roof of the box, and dispatched the entire brood. I was heartsick.

It was several years before bluebirds showed up at our place again. But those were the years when a movement was growing to re-establish the Eastern Bluebird east of the Mississippi. Many, many people were putting up bluebird nest boxes and building "bluebird trails" with multiple boxes, specifically designed to ward off raccoons and other predators.

Those efforts bore fruit. Today, the Eastern Bluebird can be readily seen around the Barrington area. While it prefers rural and semi-rural haunts,

bluebirds have nested in recent years at Bakers Lake Savanna in town and can often be found in the naturalized portions of Ron Beese Park south of Bakers Lake. Citizen for Conservation's Grigsby Prairie and Flint Creek Savanna have hosted bluebirds regularly for at least 20 years.

What is it about the Eastern Bluebird that I find so appealing? Color would have to be near the top of the list. The blue plumage of the male is, for me, of nearly unspeakable quality. Every time I see it, as on a walk last fall when a group of males perched in trees with golden leaves, I nearly gasp in wonder.

The female is of more muted color, but she shares with the male what would be second on my list, which is the sweet gentleness of the species. Bluebird pairs seem uncannily synchronized in their nest-making, nest-tending, and food gathering. It's difficult not to think of them in anthropomorphic terms as a devoted pair.

Third, but not last, is the gurgling song. There is melody and pathos and beauty in the bluebird song. When I first hear it in the spring, my heart leaps. Even on fall days as they gather and prepare to fly to more southern latitudes, bluebirds vocalize—and while not their full breeding season song—nonetheless sing with notes that brighten an already luminous landscape.



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Bird Walks and Nest Boxes

Join Wendy Paulson in the Barrington area for bird walks. Her schedule and details can be found at qbarrington.com. To learn more about nest boxes, see April Anderson's Open Spaces article on page 142.

What is especially encouraging 45 years after we first welcomed bluebirds to a nest box is that many are now nesting in natural cavities. I see more and more Eastern Bluebirds active where there are no boxes nearby, often entering and exiting holes in trees and fenceposts. They are regular local breeders. So, take advantage of spring and summer opportunities to hike in local preserves. Keep an eye out for flashes of blue and listen for the lilting notes of a cerulean beauty. U

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Wendy Paulson is a teacher and naturalist who has lived in the Barrington area for over 40 years. She revived the Nature Lady program in District 220 schools, started and directed

the education program for Citizens for Conservation, and has led regular bird walks in Barrington and Chicago, as well as in New York City and Washington, D.C. She currently teaches the Birds in My Neighborhood, a program she helped start with Openlands in Chicago Public Schools.