

Get Wild: Our magnificent mountain bluebirds

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Karn Stiegelmeier
Get Wild



A mountain bluebird is pictured in April 2016 in Silverthorne.
Photo by Ruth Carroll

Due to our high elevation in Summit County, we have brighter bluebird days than most of Colorado, and seeing our magnificent mountain bluebirds can make your day even more spectacular. These birds are a treasure of our high mountains. We refer to our most wonderful days as bluebird days and talk about our bluebird skies, which reflect their incredibly bright blue colors.

The male, as usual, is the most brilliant blue, and the female has subtler blue feathers. The mountain bluebird is the state bird of Idaho and Nevada, and it is considered a symbol of love, happiness and hope. Many Native Americans see the mountain bluebird as a sacred symbol because of its azure-colored feathers.

The sight of this beautiful bird does give me a burst of happiness. I am always surprised to see them return to Summit County so early in our snowy springtime. They travel up the rivers feeding on insects and berries to fuel their migration north, arriving in April and sometimes even March. Once in Summit, what can they find to eat? Perhaps the remaining berries from last summer? In July, we all know how many flies, mosquitoes, gnats and other insects are bothering us. Thank you to our bluebirds and other insect-eaters for keeping them under control.

Our mountain bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) are in the thrush family, which includes robins. They have a similar look to the familiar robin with a slightly smaller length, weight and wingspan, and very different colors. The western bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) is blue above and reddish-brown on the throat and chest. It has very similar migration and range in the West but at lower elevations. The eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) has colors much like the western bluebird and is found throughout the eastern U.S.

All three species have declined in numbers with loss of habitat and nesting sites as lands are developed. They nest in open country with some trees, finding a natural hollow or an old woodpecker hole in a tree.

In Summit County, our bluebird populations have improved because of efforts to place bluebird boxes in good nesting locations. We were so lucky to have had the passionate “Bluebird Lady” [Bonita \(Bonnie\) Boex](#), who was a devoted bluebird caretaker. She built and maintained more than 50 birdhouses along the shores of Dillon Reservoir. We are very sad to have lost Bonnie after a tragic car accident in April. Bonnie’s friend, Carolyn Tiller, has taken over care of the many bluebird homes.

I participated in a fun bluebird house building workshop with Bonnie over 20 years ago, and I have had bluebirds in at least one of those houses every summer. Commonly, the tree swallows and violet green swallows will take over the homes if the bluebirds have not established themselves in the house first. But the bluebirds arrive at least a month earlier and will have their pick of real estate.

The female selects the home, lays three to six pale, blue eggs, and incubates for another 13 to 17 days. Both parents feed the young after hatching. The young nestlings are ready to leave the nest about 20 days after hatching and are cared for by the parents for another few weeks. The parents will typically have two broods each summer. In June, you might be able to see the first baby bluebirds leaving the nest.

If you would like to get involved with helping our population of bluebirds, check out the Colorado Bluebird Project at [DenverAudubon.org/cobluebirds](https://denveraudubon.org/cobluebirds).

Enjoy your bluebird days and your bluebird sightings!



Karn Stiegelmeier

“Get Wild” publishes Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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