

Tim Herd's

Watchable Wildlife Guide

wildlife observation in the right place at the right time

Week of March 18-24, 2007

Harbinger's return



Photo by Joe Kosack / PGC.

With its bright blue back and sweet simple song, the eastern bluebird has long been known as the harbinger of spring: Its return north is always a welcome and cheery sight in the muddy month of March.

Watch for its heralded return: The courting male sings and flutters in front of a female, tail feathers spread wide, then perches beside her and attentively preens her. They then assemble a loose nest in an abandoned woodpecker den or other tree cavity for the first of two annual broods.

Once a very common sight in open farmland and

roadsides, its population dwindled as mechanized farms obliterated old fencerows, along with many of the bird's favored nesting sites. Competition with starlings and house sparrows, both non-native species, for the few remaining suitable sites almost did the bluebird in.

But the lively songbird is now making a comeback, largely due to manmade nest boxes erected in suitable habitats. Properly built, they discourage starlings because the hole is too small, and house sparrows because there is no perch. To obtain free plans to build a bluebird box, log on to www.naturenewswatch.com.

WHERE TO OBSERVE

Oak Mountain State Park, Ala.
 Bull Shoals State Park, Ark.
 White Clay Creek State Park, Del.
 Weldon Springs State Park, Ill.
 Land Between The Lakes Nat'l Rec. Area, Ky.
 Heartland State Trail, Minn.
 Delaware State Park, Ohio
 Susquehannock State Park, Pa.
 Cedar Hill State Park, Texas
 Branbury State Park, Vt.
 New River Trail State Park, Va.
 Lake Kegonsa State Park, Wisc.

LOOK FOR

stocky, short-tailed, blue songbird
male: bright blue on back, wings, tail; underparts rusty orange; belly white
female: similar to male but paler; back tinged with brown

LISTEN FOR

soft musical whistles of "chur-wi" or "chiti-wewidoo"

Eastern bluebird

Sialia sialis

6-7 inches

Habitat: open woodlands, croplands, orchards

Range Key: ■ Breeding ■ Year-round ■ Nonbreeding

