

Eastern Bluebirds

www.gerlachnaturephoto.com



Figure 1 Two juvenile Eastern bluebirds watch their mother that has landed just above them.

In 2025, during a property search outside Columbus, Indiana, I observed a significant population of Eastern bluebirds at a 7-acre site. The presence of established bluebird

nesting homes erected by neighboring properties contributed to the attraction of these birds. Ultimately, this observation influenced the purchase decision for the property.

With decades of experience in nature photography, I initiated the installation of ten bluebird nest boxes, mounted on wooden posts approximately fifty yards apart, despite conventional recommendations for greater distance due to territoriality. The intention was to provide sufficient options for both bluebirds and alternative species such as tree swallows, thereby reducing competition for nesting sites. All boxes were placed in open areas with short vegetation, aligning with habitat preferences for Eastern bluebirds.



Figure 2 A juvenile Eastern bluebird on the log where I am putting live mealworms in the top of it. I also added the yellow flowers to this setup.

By July 2025, usage of the nest boxes was documented: one pair of Eastern bluebirds, one Carolina chickadee nest, seven tree swallow nests, and one unused box. All chicks successfully fledged. Post-installation evaluations revealed that predator protection measures were inadequate, and future adjustments will include metal rods and baffles designed to impede access by raccoons, squirrels, and rat snakes. Entry holes were sized to exclude starlings, although house sparrows continued to pose challenges.

A perch was initially installed adjacent to the bluebird nest box, which facilitated observation and photography. To encourage bluebird activity near the nest, live mealworms were provided in a bowl positioned two feet in front of the box. After an initial acclimatization period, the birds began consuming the mealworms rapidly. Mealworm quantities were managed to supplement, rather than replace, natural diets and avoid nutritional deficiencies.

Direct nest observations were intentionally minimized to prevent disturbance. After hatching, adult bluebirds actively fed their young, utilizing mealworms as part of their provisioning routine. Upon fledging, the juveniles relocated to nearby trees but returned periodically to the feeding area, presenting opportunities for continued photographic documentation.



Figure 3 It does not take long for juvenile Eastern bluebirds to figure out you have something to do with the mealworms. When they ate all the mealworms, they did this to me. I think this is my cue to bring them more mealworms.

To enhance photographic backgrounds, mealworms were later placed in a cavity atop a wooden log, adorned with seasonal flowers attached via keeper straps and plamps. A blind was set up approximately seven feet from the perches, allowing proximity without unduly disturbing the birds. Over time, the bluebirds associated the presence of observers with food availability, returning promptly after mealworms were replenished.

Photographic sessions were conducted primarily during early morning hours to capitalize on optimal lighting conditions. Typically, juvenile bluebirds and adults were present upon arrival. High-volume image capture was necessary to document fleeting behavioral poses, with subsequent rigorous selection and curation using specialized software. Only a small percentage of images were retained after review.

Camera Gear

Equipment utilized included a Canon R5 Mark II paired with a Canon 100-500mm lens mounted on a Wimberley gimbal head affixed to a Gitzo tripod. Camera settings prioritized silent shutter operation, auto ISO, auto white balance, animal eye detection autofocus, and image stabilization. Shutter speeds ranged from 1/200 to 1/320 second depending on ambient light, with aperture settings adjusted to maximize depth of field and capture multiple subjects in focus.



Figure 4 The male Eastern bluebird

Perch and blind alignment were carefully managed to optimize depth of field, particularly when photographing more than one bird. In cases where birds perched closely together, apertures were reduced to f/16 to maintain sharpness across subjects. Focus stacking

techniques were employed when subjects remained stationary, enhancing overall image clarity.

Photographing Eastern bluebird families was a rewarding experience and my favorite subject in 2025. Their charming personalities make them appealing to observe. To attract and document these birds, install nest boxes in open areas with short vegetation and use predator deterrents like baffles. Many organizations offer helpful resources on hosting Eastern bluebirds.



Figure 5 Male Eastern bluebird among the orange flowers that were growing in a small pot. I strapped the pot to the post to hold the flowers at exactly the best height.



Figure 6 The spotted juvenile Eastern bluebird steadily begs food from its parents.



Figure 7 Young Eastern bluebirds are animated!



Figure 8 The female adult Eastern bluebird is about to give a mealworm to one of its five chicks.



Figure 9 Anytime you have more than one bird and you want both as sharp as possible, stop down from f/8 to f/16 and hope the extra depth of field will sharply focus both.



Figure 10 The happy couple with the less colorful female Eastern bluebird on the left and the male is on the right.



Figure 11 This male Eastern bluebird was especially colorful!

Photo Notes:

All images were made with a Canon R5 II and a Canon 100-500mm lens. A tripod was used to support the camera and lens when I was waiting for a bluebird to arrive on my prop. I was only seven feet from the birds as I was hidden in a hide that I built. The bluebirds soon learned mealworms were available anytime I was at the photo station and that was early in the morning as the sunshine is best at that time of the day. When the last mealworm had been eaten, they would stare at the blind hoping I would come out with more. When I did come out, they flew to a nearby bush, watched me add another dozen mealworms to the hole in the top of the log and immediately return as soon as I turned to walk to the blind. They were always back on the log before I could even get back in the blind and remember, it is only seven feet away.