

Bluebird Observation Feeder

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Being newly retired, after a long and active career as an aerospace research scientist, I now had a lot of time on my hands and started longing for something I might do with some of that spare time. My wife had suggested that I take up golfing or some other sport. Well, I never golfed or truly enjoyed sports all my life and had no desire to start now! I had been reading a book about bluebirds and the large following these birds had and I decided I might enjoy this strange thing called "bluebirding" as a hobby. Then it began; I started reading all the publications about bluebirds I could get my hands on and learned everything I could about these wonderful birds and the unique people who follow them with a passion.

Since bluebird houses were often discussed in the books I had read, and I already enjoyed woodworking, it only followed that I attempt my first bluebird house in my workshop. I completed it in two days, took a few pictures, and mounted it on a 4½ foot pole in my backyard on a cold, cloudy late February day. Then my daily rituals began. I found myself watching for these bluebirds I had read so much about, and I knew they were around since I had seen them a few times in my new neighborhood. Well it had now been whole week and I had not seen even a single bluebird on my property let alone one near my magnificent new nestbox! Nonetheless I kept up my daily routine, watching for them as much as I could, and hoping I would see just one on my fence, which was about 15 feet from the nestbox.

Then it happened; I had a real bluebird land right on the roof of my creation. I began to wonder; would the bright blue handsome male I had seen on my nestbox like it and, if he did, would he be able to successfully attract a mate? Would she approve of his chosen house and would she participate in the courtship ritual I had read so much about? Well everything worked out swell and I soon had my very own bluebird couple. She built the nest and laid her eggs and all four of them hatched! Papa and momma began bringing the tiny babies food chosen just for them. I was so happy and right then and there I knew *I had finally found a hobby I could really enjoy in my retirement years.*

I was thrilled that the house I had built for my newfound friends was now a *home*. As the days began

to warm I would watch as mom and dad tirelessly flew back and forth acquiring live insects for their babies. I thought to myself maybe I should purchase a bluebird feeder for *my* bluebirds and the next day I bought the finest one I could find. I mounted it on a 4 foot pole about 10 feet from the nestbox hoping I would make it easier for mom and dad to feed their fast-growing babies. I decided to put live mealworms in my feeder since I had read they were a bluebird's favorite food. My bluebirds began using it the same day I put it up and once more I felt accomplished and very happy.

After a few days went by I started seeing other birds drop in for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. One particular bird, which had a white belly and dark wings with white markings, had me concerned. He was fairly large and consuming most of the mealworms and I noticed he would also chase my bluebirds and bully them every chance he got. Not knowing what bird he was I got out my bird identification guide and discovered he was a mockingbird. I had read earlier on that mockingbirds could really wreak havoc on bluebirds and devour their mealworms fairly quickly.

Furthermore I learned they could be tormenters to bluebirds, too, and I was seeing this firsthand. There was not much I could do but I was really bothered by this. Should I take down my feeder or just put up with this mockingbird's bullying and his insatiable appetite for my mealworms? Things were about to get worse; I began noticing blackbirds coming to the feeder in large numbers. They also liked my mealworms and discovered what I called "blackbirds" where really starlings and that they were often seen in flocks. It was looking like this bluebird feeding thing could get very expensive and not enjoyable at all, but I decided to try and put up with these pilferers. After observing these mockingbirds at the feeder daily for a month or so I learned a lot about them, including their feeding habits and the bullying tactics they used daily on my bluebirds, especially at the feeder.

I began wondering what I could do to remedy this feeding situation. Being a scientific person it was natural for my mind to begin wandering into deep thought. I had gained a lot of data from my many hours observing the mockingbirds and starlings at the

feeder. Then it hit me: why not try to design a feeder that would be foolproof in keeping large birds out but at the same time would also be one that my bluebirds might be attracted to and be able to use easily and safely? Could I also design it with additional features that would also appeal to us bluebird lovers? After several long days and nights I now began to see a clearer picture of what the new bluebird feeder should look like and what features it must have.

1. Foremost it must be acceptable and easy to use by bluebirds and of course be inaccessible to larger birds
2. Be able to withstand harsh outdoor weather conditions and be virtually indestructible
3. Be convenient to fill with feed, accept multiple types of feed and keep the feed dry in rainy spells.
4. Be squirrel-proof
5. Allow crystal clear outside visibility for the bluebirds inside the feeder as well as for people on the outside looking in
6. Provide more comfortable feeding conditions in all types inclement weather (high winds, rain, and winter conditions where the bluebirds overwinter)
7. Be easy to clean, both inside and out
8. Be fairly lightweight and easy to mount on a pole
9. Be attractive in and of itself

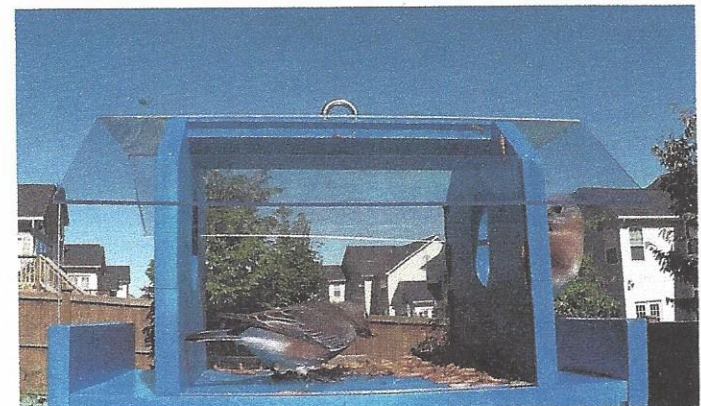
With these nine items in mind I came up with a design I believed would work. The final design was one I choose to name a “Bluebird Observation Feeder.” It had a front, back, and roof made from LEXAN Plexiglas panels and a body made of Cellular PVC and it met all of the properties I described above. I decided to construct one and test it on my bluebirds as well as on the other large birds visiting the feeder, especially the mockingbirds.

I mounted my new feeder on a pole and put in a half cup of live mealworms. Now I would anxiously begin watching them closely to see how they would react to my novel feeder. They discovered it within a matter of hours, fluttering around and landing on the roof looking down through the crystal-clear Plexiglas at the activity just inside. I really got a kick out of them turning their heads side to side observing the wriggling mealworms just below their feet as if trying to figure out what they had to do next.

The next day they started coming to the feeder frequently, still landing on the roof but also perching on either side allowing them to see the mealworms through the entrance holes. They then quickly realized that they had to enter through the elliptical openings for their meal! After the first one entered others followed shortly thereafter. Once they tasted

their favorite food they were visiting every morning at daybreak, throughout the day, and at dusk. Very happy bluebirds and a very happy bluebird enthusiast!

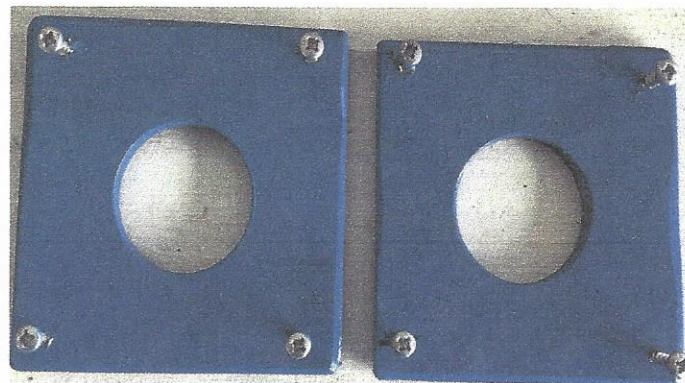
The most I have seen in the interior with the feed at one time was three. There were a few more that perched on the sides but only entered one at a time once one of the three inside exited... Very orderly and well-behaved creatures—and very smart!



Now I had to wait patiently for the *mockingbird* test. I set up my new GoPro high resolution camera (bluebird lovers love toys, too) on a tripod close to the feeder and started recording. It wasn't long before Mr. Mockingbird noticed the feeder. He landed on the top of it and saw the wriggling mealworms



Note the elliptical entrance holes on the feeder at left; once installed, the hole reducers (below) prevent larger birds from entering.



underneath. He then flew haphazardly around the feeder frantically observing the mealworms and finally landed at one the entrance holes. He hesitated but soon hopped right in *as I expected*. The 1½" by 2½" elliptical holes were too large to prevent him from doing so, but I planned for this in my design! The reason I built the feeder with the large elliptical holes was so the bluebirds would be more willing to enter and thus adapt to this unfamiliar feeder much quicker. Once they were comfortable and began to use it frequently I added the hole reducers, which I designed to fit over the elliptical holes, and reduced the hole size to a circular 1½". Since my blues had already become very comfortable with the feeder they didn't hesitate to enter with the hole reducers installed.

The mockingbirds still visit, oftentimes trying to snatch a mealworm they believe is right at their

feet, and get frustrated. They now realize they can't fit through the smaller holes and just give up, and my blues are getting a kick out of their confused neighbors at *their* feeder. I did however put up a *standard feeder* just for them but without mealworms they would gobble down in a few minutes! For the first time I can now say *I really am really enjoying my blues at the feeder and saving a lot of mealworm money too!*

Due to requests from members of Facebook Bluebird Groups the author is currently offering this feeder for sale on eBay. I have named the feeder "Mr Chucks Bluebird Observation Feeder." If you would like to watch two interesting videos I recorded at the feeder you can find them at:

<https://youtu.be/Q0jjITL1tN4> and <https://youtu.be/OkiSmBRilAs>

I have also set up a Facebook Group ("Mr Chucks Bluebird Feeder") if you want to join.

Mozart's Starling

Introduced to North America in the 1800s, European Starlings have spread across the entire continent as a result of their intelligence, adaptability, and aggressiveness in acquiring nest cavities. These traits make them widely despised among North American bird enthusiasts, but in their native Old World home, starlings are admired for those same qualities. In addition, they are skilled mimics, able to imitate the songs of other birds, frogs, coyotes, human voices, car alarms, and other natural and human-made sounds.

Among those other sounds is music. In 1784 the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart purchased a starling that could "sing" part of a Mozart composition. Charmed by this talent, plus the bird's intelligence, Mozart kept the bird as a companion until its death after three years (whereupon he organized a fairly elaborate funeral attended by his friends and family).

The story of Mozart, his starling, and starlings in general is told in an excellent new book by Lyanda Lynn Haupt. Readers willing to set aside (at least temporarily) how the species is viewed in the New World will be rewarded with fascinating insights into our relationships with starlings, birds, and the natural world.

