



# Bluebird Monitor

OBS encourages good stewardship  
by **Monitoring our Trails**

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## House Sparrow Management Techniques

By Paula Ziebarth, aka Madame Wingnut



I have been monitoring Bluebird trails for over 20 years in House Sparrow (HOSP) populated areas. HOSP are non-native, aggressive nest box competitors. When they claim a nest box, they often kill adults, eggs and/or young native birds such as Eastern Bluebirds. I have learned a lot over those years regarding HOSP management techniques and would love to share them with you.

Some people will tell you not to install nest boxes in areas where HOSP are found. I believe these areas are few and far between and much prefer to trap and dispatch HOSP whenever possible. This makes an area much safer for all of our native cavity nesting birds.

Some manage HOSP by removing nest boxes they try to use. I view HOSP interest in nest box as a great trapping opportunity. If given the choice between "use it or lose it", I will use that nest box by installing a 1-1/4" hole reducer on it. This allows HOSP access, but excludes Eastern Bluebirds.

### Deterrents

- DON'T site nest box for native cavity birds near stiff needled evergreen trees or dense shrubs.** HOSP are drawn to these trees, nesting or roosting in them. Also keep nest boxes a distance away from human houses or outbuildings.
- DO remove potential HOSP nesting or roosting areas wherever possible:** install hardware cloth over fan/dryer vent exhausts; remove nests from gutters; block access behind signs;



Juvenile male house sparrow on the left has beginning of a black bib and juvenile yellow bill. Adult male on the right has pronounced black bib and black bill.

prune trees and shrubs that harbor groups of HOSP, etc.

- DON'T feed seeds or other food that HOSP eat during nest season.**

Thistle seed, sugar water for hummingbirds and a few mealworms occasionally are fine during nest season. Feeding other foods during fall and winter months is fine.

- DO carefully consider other native cavity nesters' territory and habitat requirements** when siting multiple nest boxes in an area. The more boxes

you have in a given area, the more attractive they are to HOSP so why load up an area if boxes will realistically not be used by native birds?

- DO provide a solitary tree or perch near the box for the Eastern Bluebird or other native bird to use as a sentry post.** A native male bird perched nearby may be able to chase HOSP as it approaches box.

- Removing HOSP nest and eggs is not much of a deterrent.** Removing the nest seldom drives the male HOSP away. Male HOSP can stay with "their" box for months before they give up. Emptying box of all nest material can set "ecological trap" for native cavity nester. They enter the HOSP's box, and he follows them in. Seed cracking beak is excellent head cracking beak. I find Tree Swallows (TRES) are especially susceptible to being killed by HOSP in this manner.

- DO NOT let HOSP reproduce in your boxes.** Because they are a non-native invasive species, they are not protected by law. Although native cavity nesters are protected under the federal migratory bird act, HOSP are not. Inbox trapping is the best practice to control HOSP, but if unwilling to do this, remove their eggs once or twice per week and leave the nest.



Mature male house sparrow. This seed cracking bill is an excellent weapon to kill native cavity nester adults/young or eggs.

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8) **Install monofilament line on front of nest box** as shown in downloadable PDF document on the [ohiobluebirdsociety.org](http://ohiobluebirdsociety.org). The diagram also shows you how to install line on the roof to dissuade HOSP from perching up there and harassing Bluebirds.

9) **If HOSP are especially numerous in your area, install a sparrow spooker on active native nester's box.** After first egg of native cavity nester is laid, sparrow spookers can be used to help deter HOSP from killing eggs/young/adults.



House sparrow nest - Hallmarks include upswept sides into a eventual domed nest. Heterogeneous mixture material usually with grass seed heads.

### 6) TRAPPING TIPS:

- Have all nest boxes ready for trapping. Box(es) should be fitted with trap set screws if using Van Ert Universal Sparrow Traps. Manufacturer recommends using #10 Pan Head screws, 1/2" long. This makes it easy to slip in a trap when needed. Make sure side vents are not too wide or HOSP will escape through them when trap is sprung.
- If monitoring multiple boxes, start your trip by checking boxes most prone to HOSP usage. That way you can set traps and return at end of monitoring trip to retrieve trapped birds.
- When approaching nestbox, if you see nest material up near hole or vent, you have a House Sparrow (HOSP) nest. Quickly block hole with hand, plastic grocery bag, or small rag and you may get lucky by trapping HOSP inside.
- As you open box to set trap, ignore HOSP that is watching you – don't make eye contact – pretend you don't notice HOSP and hide trap from view.
- Reduce HOSP nest to top inch or so of material so trap can spring freely shut
- Replace any eggs they have laid or add plastic craft egg to back of box where they can see it.
- Scatter attractive HOSP nesting material on ground in front of box. HOSP love fluffy feathers, white or colored.
- Put single blade of grass in box hole
- Set trap and leave quickly – don't linger by box long.
- Time of day - setting trap early in the morning or at dusk will almost certainly capture male as he is energized in early morning to go into "his" box. Setting trap at dusk is very effective way to capture the HOSP. This is the one trapping protocol where you do not need to check box until an hour or two after dawn.
- When retrieving trapped birds, always put mesh laundry bag over box and cinch tight at pole before opening – insures no escapes (especially if you have trapped both of them).

### Best Practice = Trap and Dispatch

- 1) **Learn to identify both female and male HOSP.** Get to know the male's "song". A good place to learn both is: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/House\\_Sparrow/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/House_Sparrow/id)
- 2) **DO NOT install only one nest box.** It works well to have an empty nest box for the HOSP to "try" to use where you can trap it. Otherwise, he/she is more likely to evict your nesting Eastern Bluebird (EABL): killing eggs, young and adult(s) in the box. Consider dedicating a box specifically for trapping HOSP. Install a 1- 1/4" hole reducer on a standard nest box and site it near a stiff needled evergreen tree (ex: Austrian pine, blue spruce), bird feeder, human structure, shrubby or brushy area where they roost, etc.
- 3) **DO use inbox trap to capture HOSP as soon as there is evidence they have been in a box.** Evidence of HOSP activity will include one or more of the following: HOSP seen in or on the box; male HOSP chirping enthusiastically beside the box; HOSP nesting material in the box; HOSP roost evidence (white dry feces, about 1/4" long white chow mein noodles). It is not necessary to wait for nest material to be added to capture them.
- 4) **My favorite inbox trap is the Van Ert Universal Sparrow Trap** which can be purchased through this website: [vanerttraps.com](http://vanerttraps.com). DON'T allow male HOSP to declare territory and wait for him to attract female and lay eggs. His singing attracts not only a female, but plenty of new males who are interested in his "find".
- 5) **DO check every hour or two when trap is set in a nest box during daylight hours.** Birds should be dealt with quickly and humanely. Native birds may become trapped and must be released as soon as possible.



Eastern bluebird eggs depredated by house sparrow, pecked open and discarded at base of box.

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- 7) **When trapping, if you capture the female HOSP, DO reset your trap immediately** as the male will likely return shortly. After you capture the male HOSP, DO remove all nesting material and trap from the box.
- 8) **After capturing a HOSP, DO NOT release him/her elsewhere.** You will be transferring your problem to someone else and the HOSP may just beat you home.
- 9) **After capturing a HOSP, DO quickly and humanely dispatch the animal.** Methods are explained in this excellent website: [sialis.org/hospdispatch.htm](http://sialis.org/hospdispatch.htm)
- 10) **DO recycle the HOSP if possible.** Bag them and put in a freezer immediately after dispatch. Our local wildlife rehab center really appreciates this food source for injured Cooper's and Sharp-Shinned Hawks. These hawks eat birds in the wild, and are not very fond of the mice that are fed to the raptors at the center. It is very important that no chemicals (car exhaust, etc.) be used and no BB's or pellets for any HOSP you wish to recycle. Call your local wildlife rehabber first to see if they can use them.
- 11) **If you accidentally capture a native bird, you can easily tell through your mesh bag.** Simply release the bird

unharmd. Capturing a native bird in a nest box that has obviously been claimed by a HOSP can save their lives. IF the HOSP follows the bird into the box without a trap in there, the HOSP will kill it by pecking it in the head. Sprung trap provides safe barrier to keep HOSP away from the native bird until you can release him/her. The native bird is released immediately and after that trauma, hopefully will not be back for awhile (another good outcome because box is NOT safe until you catch HOSP).

- 12) **If HOSP are especially prevalent on your property, you may want to use a repeat bait trap** (baited with white bread or millet seed) to reduce their numbers. This is especially effective starting in late summer (after nest season is done) through late fall. A wonderful repeat bait trap can be found at [www.sparrowtraps.net](http://www.sparrowtraps.net) Another great bait trap is the wire sparrow trap available at <https://www.purplemartinproducts.com/> This trap is compact and easy to use. During nest season, I often capture problem House Sparrows by baiting with fluffy white feathers only, or with a single male House Sparrow. I trim primary flight feathers, and keep bird(s) fed, watered and covered at night when they are in a bait trap. The live bird attracts others.