



The Nest Box Project



If you build it, they will come...
Birds will readily take up residence on your property if you provide places for them to nest. Nest boxes—bird houses that are built to specific dimensions—are easy to make, mount, and monitor, and the results of your efforts will be most rewarding.

Putting up nest boxes is an easy and economical way to increase bird nesting success, help balance loss of natural habitat, and take an active role in conservation and enhancement of the environment. In addition, attracting birds to your property and observing their behavior is an exciting process that can be enjoyed year after year. The following information will provide you with the necessary details about cavity nesting birds, assessing habitat, and placing and monitoring nest boxes.

What are “cavity-nesting” birds?

Though the majority of birds build their nests amidst the branches of shrubs or trees or hidden in taller grasses on the ground, certain species prefer to nest in hollow cavities. These birds are called “*cavity-nesters*.”

Woodpeckers can make their own nest holes by excavating them in dead trees (snags). However, there are many other cavity-nesting birds, such as chickadees, bluebirds, and house wrens, that cannot make their own holes. These birds rely on old woodpecker holes and natural cavities in dying trees for nesting sites.

Why build nest boxes for cavity-nesting birds?

Unfortunately, the number of these natural nest sites has been steadily declining over the years. Many forests and farms where tree snags were once common have been developed to make way for homes, businesses, schools, and shopping centers. And because dead trees are often considered “eye sores” or hazards, they are commonly removed by land managers.

The reduction in the number of available nesting sites has increased competition among birds for the remaining sites. For example, the North American bluebird population declined by nearly 90% from 1930 to 1980. Loss of habitat and competition with house sparrows were significant causes of this decline. Fortunately, nest box placement for bluebirds has now reversed declining bluebird populations.

How do nest boxes help cavity-nesting birds?

Nest boxes are bird houses that are specifically tailored for cavity-nesting birds. The size of the opening and the dimensions of the box have been calculated to fit the size of the bird and its nest. For example, the standard songbird box is sized to fit a number of small birds, but the entrance hole is too small for the aggressive European starling.



Bluebirds prefer nest boxes placed in open areas. Their nests are constructed of finely woven grasses.

Putting up a nest box is an easy and economical way to increase nest sites for cavity-nesting birds and to help them achieve nesting success. In addition, watching and encouraging birds and their young is an exciting process that can be enjoyed year after year.

Getting Started

To begin a nest box project, you must determine what type of birds you are likely to attract, how many boxes you want to put up, and who will build, monitor, and maintain the boxes.

1. Survey Habitat

Start by surveying the types of habitat available on your property. For example, locate open areas, woods, and areas with water, such as ponds or streams. After surveying your property's habitat, you can then identify which birds are likely to take up residence and how many boxes the property can support.

Habitat Preferences of Cavity-Nesting Birds	
Habitat Type	Bird Species
Open Areas (lawn, field, farm, golf course, school yard)	Bluebirds, House Sparrows, Kestrels
Wooded Sites/Edges	Wrens, Chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, Nuthatches
Areas with Water (pond, stream, wetland)	Swallows (Tree, Violet Green, Purple Martin), Wood Ducks

2. Choose the Correct Nest Box

The basic songbird nest box will house all of the birds listed above except for wood ducks and kestrels. These larger birds need bigger boxes. We can provide you with special information and nest box plans for these birds if you wish.

If you choose to purchase a nest box, check the dimensions carefully to make sure it is built for the birds you want to attract. Often, bird houses sold in department stores are simply not built for birds. Many lawn and garden stores sell suitable nest boxes, as do bird specialty stores and mail order businesses.

In addition, be sure that you can *open the box easily*. This is essential for cleaning out old nests and monitoring the nesting birds. Nest boxes should be hinged on one side or on the top to facilitate opening, cleaning, and closing.

3. Mount Your Nest Boxes

Follow these tips for successful nest box placement:

- Mount nest boxes on metal poles, trees, or fence posts. A metal post is more difficult for predators, such as raccoons, cats, and snakes, to climb.
- Mount the boxes four to five feet above the ground. Keeping the boxes within easy reach will make checking and cleaning them much easier.
- The nest box opening may face in any direction, but positioning the entrance hole away from prevailing winds will help keep the nest dry.
- Most birds begin searching for nesting sites in February in the South and March in the North, so boxes should be up by early spring. Boxes that are placed by late spring are also valuable and may attract birds ready to begin their second brood.
- Consider the first year of your nest box project an experiment. Some boxes may go unused while other boxes may be eagerly sought out by several birds. Try placing your boxes in a variety of locations to see which ones are most successful. As a general rule, place boxes away from areas of high traffic.



Record nesting activity using to keep track of how many birds fledge from year to year and document the success of your nest boxes.

Also keep in mind that birds have different territorial requirements which affect how many birds of the same species will use a given area. Boxes can be placed in pairs, ten to twenty feet apart, to reduce nest site competition between different species.

4. Monitor Your Nest Boxes

Once you put up nest boxes, it is important to monitor them on a regular basis to help ensure nesting success. During the breeding season, from mid-March through August, open the box once a week or every two weeks. When you open the box, you can count the number of eggs or young, detect predator problems, and discard old nests once each group of young has left the box.

Opening the boxes **will not** frighten the birds into abandoning the nest. Just open the box, take a quick look inside to count the number of eggs or young, check for disturbance, and close it again.

The only time to refrain from checking the boxes is after the young are about 12 days old. Opening the box during the 12 to 18 day period after birth may provoke the young to leave the box too early.

Remove the old nest once the young birds have fledged. Since the box is used as a cradle, rather than a house, the young birds do not need it once they are old enough to fly. Cleaning out the box will prevent a buildup of mites and other parasites that prey upon birds.

Record information about your nest boxes to learn more about the birds using them and keep track of the number of birds successfully fledged. Copy the nest box chart on the back or use a 5x7 note card for each box to record information about bird activity.

Territorial Requirements for Nesting Birds	
Bird Species	Nesting Territory
Bluebird	100-150 yards
Chickadee	10 acres
Wren	1/2 - 1 acre
Tufted Titmouse	2 - 5 acres
Nuthatch	20 - 40 acres
Tree Swallow	Nest site only
Flycatcher	Not known
Purple martin	Nest site only
Wood duck	Nest site only
Kestrel	250 acres
Screech owl	Nest site only

Nest Box Record						
Box #	Bird Species	Nest Built Date	Number of Eggs	Number of Young Hatched	Number Fledged	Comments
1	Blue Bird	5/15/05	5	4	4	
2	Tree Swallow	5/30/05	4	4	4	
3	Tree Swallow	5/21/05	5	0	0	Predator

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