

BIRD HOUSE BASICS

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According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, at least 50 species of our birds are known to use nest boxes and shelters. Many of these are hole-nesters, using abandoned woodpecker holes in dead and dying trees for their nests. Because such trees are problematic in residential areas, nest boxes, a.k.a. bird houses, are a good substitute.

Along with offering food and water, as well as planting native flowers, shrubs, and trees, providing shelter is one of the means of attracting birds to your yard. Most perching birds, regardless of what they eat as adults, feed their young insects, thus reducing the need to use pesticides.

Although bird box construction is fairly simple and straightforward, different species of birds have different preferences as to dimensions and placement. Many books and websites treat these preferences in more detail than I'll attempt here, but the following information should start you on your way to building nest boxes for your yard birds.

(To the right: A Northern Flicker, a species of woodpecker, in its nest hole in a dying oak tree. Flickers are the largest woodpeckers typically seen in our area.)



CONSTRUCTION BASICS: Wood is the preferred building material; cypress, pine, and poplar are easy to work with, but I've had success using scrap wood from remodeling projects. Boxes exposed to direct sun can be painted white to keep them cool (e.g., for Purple Martins), but otherwise dull, muted colors work best, and you may decide not to paint the box at all. Covering the box with bark is an alternative. Avoid bright, "cute" designs: Most birds will avoid these, if for no other reason than they attract the attention of predators. Also, avoid perches, as these encourage House Sparrows, a species most of us prefer not to encourage.

The thickness of the wood can vary between 1/2" to 1". The roof should be tilted slightly to shed water; the roof should also protrude to cover the entrance hole. If the roof is flat, cover it with enough coats of paint to make it waterproof. To prevent the box from overheating, a few small holes should be drilled toward the top to allow hot air to escape.

The area below the entrance should be roughed up with a chisel to allow the nestlings

to climb out of the box when they are ready to fly. Another approach is to nail bark beneath the hole.

PLACEMENT: Few birds nest close to others of their species, so erecting boxes of different sizes and separating boxes is advisable. Birds prefer boxes placed on poles over those placed on tree trunks, because squirrels and other predators easily access boxes in trees. A squirrel guard, such as used for bird feeders, is a good idea.

Boxes should also be placed where they can be easily reached by a ladder for cleaning. Finally, houses should be placed facing the south and tilted slightly forward, as this protects them from driving rain.



CLEANING: Bird boxes attract a number of other creatures, including rodents and wasps. Squirrels, mice, etc., can simply be dumped out. Birds won't share a box with wasps, so it may be necessary to use a pesticide on the wasp nest and then remove it (but take precautions!)

Clean out boxes in late winter or early spring, and then again after the birds have left the nest. Birds are plagued by a number of parasites, so washing the box with vinegar and then rinsing it with water after cleaning it will reduce the number of parasites.

(Above: A pair of Eastern Bluebirds at a box in a DuPage forest preserve. The preserves often place several such boxes fairly close to each other; Tree Swallows, a desirable native bird, will usually start nesting before the bluebirds. The swallows will keep other swallows from occupying a nearby box: This makes it available to bluebird! Sometimes a family of bluebirds will overwinter in our area. They share a box at night, which helps conserve heat.)

PROTECTION OF BOXES: Dogs, squirrels, starlings, jays, crows and cats--especially cats--pose a threat to nesting birds. Pets can be restrained; others pose a greater challenge to which there may not be a humane solution. Starlings and House Sparrows can be evicted, but they are persistent! For four-legged threats, one suggestion is to plant **native** roses around the bases of poles.

SHELTERS: Robins, catbirds, and thrashers are not hole-nesters, but they are attracted to and will use shelters that are essentially shelves. A 6"x 6" or 8"x 8" shelf placed under projecting building eaves at least six feet above the ground will attract these birds if other sites (crotches in trees) are unavailable.

NEST BOX DIMENSIONS

The following dimensions are species-specific preferences, but birds seldom read books, so a pair may use a box with different dimensions.

Species	Floor of cavity	Depth of cavity	Entrance above floor	Entrance diameter	Height above ground
	<i>Inches</i>	<i>Inches</i>	<i>Inches</i>	<i>Inches.</i>	<i>Feet</i>
Bluebird	5 x 5	8	6	1 1/2	5-10
Chickadee	4 x 4	8 to 10	6 to 8	1 1/8	6-15
Nuthatch.	4 x 4	8 to 10	6 to 8	1 1/4	12-20
House Wren	4 x 4	8 to 10	6 to 8	1 1/4	6-10
Tree Swallow	5 x 5	6	1 to 5	1 1/2	10-15
House Finch	6 x 6	6	4	2	8-12
Phoebe	6 x 6	6	<i>Leave one or more sides open</i>		8-12
Crested Flycatcher	6 x 6	8 to 10	8 to 10	2	8-20
Flicker	7 x 7	16 to 18	14 to 16	2 1/2	6-20
Redheaded Woodpecker	6 x 6	12 to 15	9 to 12	2	12-20
Red-bellied Woodpecker	6 x 6	12 to 15	9 to 12	2	12-20
Downy Woodpecker	4 x 4	8 to 10	6 to 8	1 1/4	6-20
Hairy Woodpecker	6 x 6	12 to 15	9 to 12	1 1/2	12-20
Robin	6 x 8	6	<i>Leave one or more sides open</i>		6-15

Several larger species of birds, e.g., Wood Duck, Screech Owl, Kestrel, also will nest in manmade boxes. Go on-line for more information. Also, the Purple Martin and Chimney Swift will nest in manmade structures; again, go online for detailed information.

(To the right: A Tree Swallow perches on a box in a DuPage forest preserve. Note how the box is attached to the pole.)

