



BIRDHOUSES FOR SOUTHERN ONTARIO

INTRODUCTION

It doesn't matter whether you live in an apartment, townhouse, or detached house, in a city lot or have land in the country... you can still provide housing, water and feeding for birds in your area. And if you want to know why you should, just stand still and listen: it's difficult to imagine life without their sweet songs filling the air.

As forests are cleared to make way for development, habitats essential for the survival of many birds are being destroyed. Because there is intense competition among cavity-nesting birds for a limited number of breeding sites, many of these species are decreasing in population. Non-native cavity-nesting birds, such as House Sparrows and European Starlings make this competition even more intense. In addition, all cavity nesters must compete with other animals, including squirrels, mice, bees, and wasps, which also rely on natural cavities for their existence.

There is a personal satisfaction from seeing Bluebirds or Tree Swallows nesting in birdhouses that you have built. Also, the nest boxes provide excellent learning opportunities about birds and the natural world. This plus the fact that you are helping your fellow creatures and doing something worthwhile for the environment.

The information that follows is designed to help both individuals and groups build suitable nesting boxes for birds in southern Ontario. However, please note: even though we live in a country that has adopted the metric system, lumber is almost always ordered using the British system of measures. When you go to a lumber yard to order wood, you do not normally ask for a piece of 1.9cm x 20.3cm x 2.4m... you ask for 3/4" x 8" x 10ft. Therefore, within this reality, ***all of the measurements given here utilize the British system of measures.*** If you wish to convert, you may do so by multiplying all inch measurements by 2.54 to find the value in centimeters.

Many birds that visit feeders and baths don't nest in boxes (e.g. robins, oves, orioles, cardinals), but you can still help them by hanging a wire cage full of nesting materials (fiber scraps, twigs, wool, or feathers) in the spring. Or you can build nesting shelves (especially for robins and barn swallows... see later).

However, more than twenty southern Ontario birds will nest in birdhouses. The following information will help you build homes to accommodate many of these native species... along with providing opportunities for other wildlife... including bats. Why bats? One bat can eat thousands of mosquitoes in a night.

In building birdhouses there is no such thing as "one size fits all." You need to decide which bird you want to attract, then build a house for that particular bird.

Wood is a good choice for building bird houses. It's durable, has good insulating qualities, and it allows some air transfer. One-half inch to 3/4" cedar and exterior grade plywood are best (preferably 3/4" because of its greater durability)... or order 1" pine boards. Do not treat the insides or the entrance hole with any paints, stains or preservatives since the fumes may harm young chicks... though it is best to preserve the outside with a coat of water-based exterior latex paint. White is the color for purple martin houses. Tan, gray, or dull green works best for the other cavity nesting species. The dull, light colors reflect heat and are less conspicuous to predators.

Regardless of which wood you select, gluing all the joints before you nail them will extend the life of your bird

house. Galvanized or brass shank nails, hinges, and screws resist rusting and hold boxes together more tightly as they age.

Resist the temptation to put a metal roof on your bird house. Reflective metal makes sense for martin houses up on a sixteen-foot pole, but when it's tacked onto a roof of a wood chickadee house, the metal is more likely to attract predators.

All birdhouses should be provided with ventilation, drainage, and easy access for maintenance and monitoring. The interior walls should be rough wood or grooved. Floors should be recessed where possible to prevent the nest from getting wet.

Unless you care about aesthetics... and want to spend large amounts of money on fancy one-of-a-kind birdhouses that have many levels and entrance holes... the birds, for the most part don't care. They only care about safety and the right dimensions: box height, depth and floor, diameter of entrance hole, and height of hole above the box floor. In fact, only Purple Martins like to share... other cavity nesters don't like to share.

Never put up a bird house with a perch below the entrance hole. Perches offer starlings, house sparrows, and other predators a convenient place to wait for lunch.

Boxes that open from the top, side or front provide the easiest access. Opening the box from the top is less likely to disturb nesting birds. While side- and front-opening boxes are convenient for cleaning and monitoring, they have one drawback: the nestlings may jump out.

If you clean out your nest boxes after each brood has fledged, several pairs may use the nest throughout the summer. Many cavity nesting birds will not nest again in a box full of old nesting materials. Leaving your wood and concrete houses outside provides shelter for birds, flying squirrels, and other animals during winter.

Proper box depth, roof, and entrance hole design will help minimize predator (raccoons, cats, opossums, and red squirrels) access. Often an angled roof with a three-inch overhang will discourage mammals.

Where you put your bird house is as important as its design and construction. Cavity nesting birds are very particular about where they live. No matter how perfect your nest box, if you don't have the right habitat, the birds aren't likely to find it. Just about anyone will have the property to attract a robin, titmouse, wren, or chickadee.

Often there's a wide range between how high and low you can place a nest box. Pick a height that's convenient for you. After all, you'll want to watch what goes on and keep the box clean. If you want to watch chickadees from your second floor window or deck, fifteen feet is not unreasonable but it's a lot easier to clean out a box at eye level.

Here are some tips on where to put bird houses:

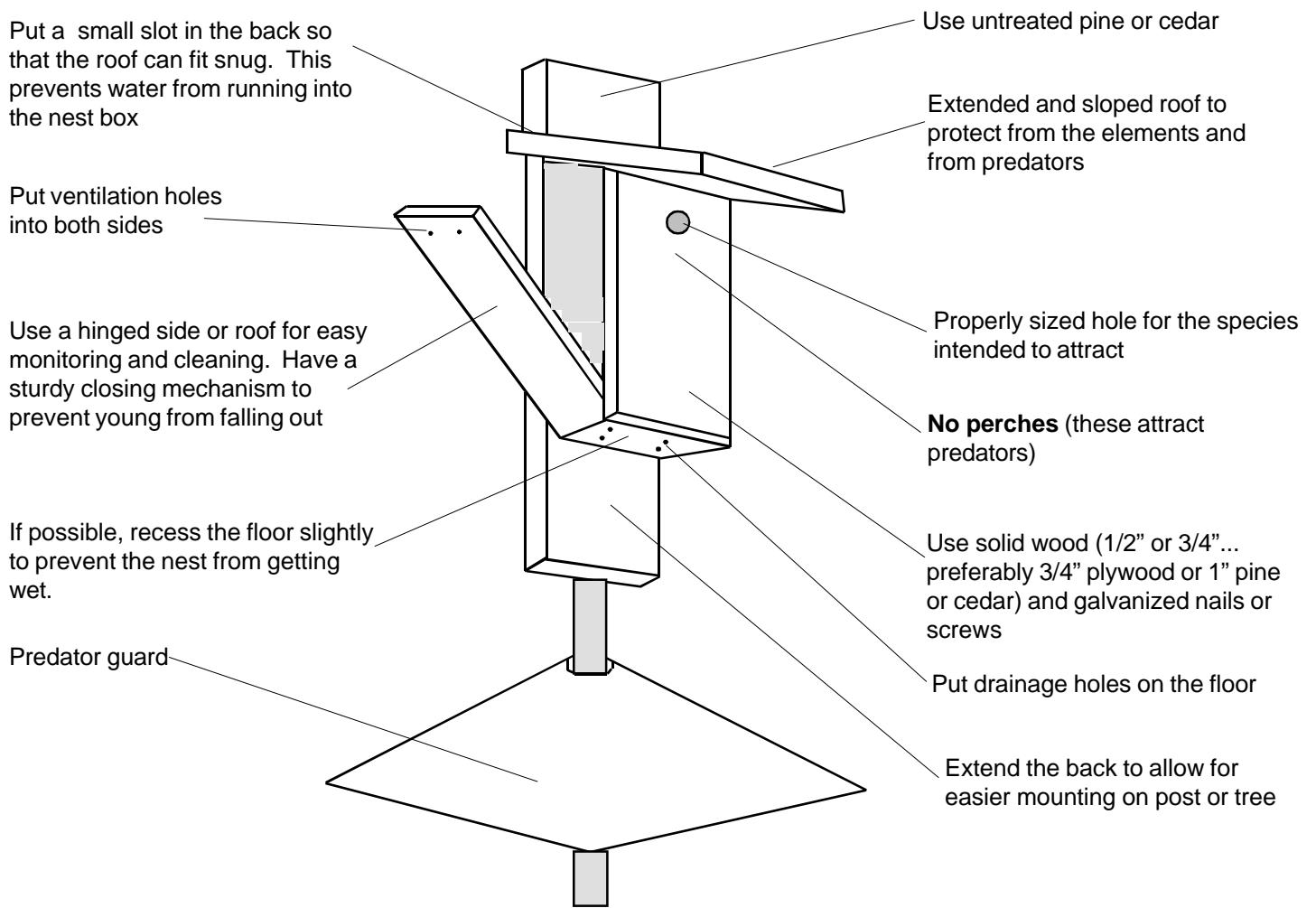
1. Houses mounted on metal poles are less vulnerable to predators than houses nailed to tree trunks or hung from tree limbs.
2. Use no more than four small nest boxes for any one species or one large box per acre.
3. Put about 100 meters between bluebird boxes and 75 meters between swallow boxes (if you have both species, "pair" the houses with one bluebird box 8 meters from a swallow box. Put the "pair" 100 meters away).
4. Don't put bird houses near bird feeders.
5. Don't put more than one box in a tree, unless the tree is extremely large or the boxes are for different species.
6. Because we have hot summers, face the entrance holes of your boxes north or east to avoid overheating the box.

Watch out for Starlings and House Sparrows. If you don't discourage them, these two pest species introduced from Europe will bully or kill cavity-nesting birds.

If you are new to building nest boxes, you might want to monitor from a distance for 10 - 20 minutes each day in order to determine the type of bird using the nest box. If the nest box is not readily observable, you might want to check the nesting material in the box, or the colour of the eggs, to make the determination (when the adult is not around). For example:

- **Bluebird** nests are made of fine grasses or pine needles with a fairly deep nest cup. Eggs (4-6) are powder blue or occasionally white;
- **Tree Swallow** nests are also made of grasses (though often coarser than the bluebird nests). Nest cup is more shallow and is usually lined with feathers or scraps of paper. Eggs (3-7) are white and smaller than bluebird eggs;
- **House Wrens** fill a nest with sticks and line the deep nest cup with fine plant fibers or feathers. The eggs (6-8) are tan, speckled with brown. "Dummy nests"... without the nest cup... are often built in various cavities within the male wren's territory;
- **Chickadees** build a nest of moss and fine plant material... with the nest cup lined with hair. Eggs (5-8) are white covered with brown speckles. Eggs are often covered with moss when the female leaves the nest;
- **House Sparrows** build a tall nest of coarse grass, often with a piece of scrap paper, cellophane, or other litter. The nest forms a canopy with a tunnel-like entrance to the 4-7 cream coloured eggs with brown markings;
- **Wood Ducks** don't bring materials into the nest box, but do add a layer of their own grayish-white down feathers to the cavity. Eggs (9-11) are creamy-white or buff coloured;
- **American Kestrels** do not build nests. Eggs (4-5) are white, cream, or pinkish-white with fine brown specs and spots.

MAKING A GOOD BIRDHOUSE



The information that follows is divided into eight sections:

1. **Individual Production**... for the person who wants to build only one or two nesting boxes to attract specific birds to their area. This section also describes some of the birds that can be accommodated.
2. **Building the Nesting Shelf**... specifically for robins and barn swallows
3. **The Purple Martin House**... to attract one of the most sought after species for bug control
4. **Batting for Bats**
5. **Winter Roosting Boxes**
6. **Building Feeders**
7. **Planting Food for Birds**
8. **Large Scale Production**... designed for groups, classrooms, or energetic environmentalists. By providing specific cutting diagrams, it is possible to maximize the number of birdhouses produced with minimum wastage and cost.