Nest Boxes for Small Cavity Birds

**What is a nest box or bird box?**
A bird box is a wooden box that gives birds a place to nest. Many common birds used to nest in holes in decaying trees and wooden fence posts, but these “cavity” nest sites have decreased because of changes in rural and forest habitat.

Most of these birds need a nest box with a 1 ¼” entrance hole – large enough for them to enter, but not large enough for the competing House Sparrow. The information given here is mainly about this kind of box.

Near Corvallis, Swallows, Wrens, Chickadees or Nuthatches may want to nest in a box you put up. Bluebirds also use nest boxes, but require a different size entrance hole of 1 ½”.

All are beneficial because of the large number of airborne and ground-dwelling insects which they eat and feed to nestlings.

**When should boxes be put up?**
Don’t wait for a “best time” to put up your bird box. Put it up immediately and leave it in place year round.

Some cavity nesters which are also winter residents, like the Chickadee and the Nuthatch may roost in the boxes during bad weather. Some species select a nesting territory as early as March.

**Where do boxes go?**
Place the box on, or hang it from, a garden or pasture fence post, a pole, tree, or the side of a building, about 5 to 6 feet from the ground, measuring to the bottom of the box, or higher for swallows and Chickadees. Head-high would be ideal, so that you can check the box easily on a regular basis.

If you place the box on top of a post, allow space between the bottom of the box and the post for drainage.

If you are not putting the box on a post, use a predrilled hole in the back of the box to hang it from a nail you have put in whatever supports it, tack the bottom of the box lightly to the support. You can then remove the box or move it to another place without tearing it apart. Use nails and screws that resist rusting.

Birds prefer a natural cedar finish, but we recommend treating the outside of the box so that it can withstand Western Oregon’s rainy, cold winter and spring weather. Use a nontoxic wood sealer or finish.

Both the inside and the outside of the front should be relatively rough so adults can cling to the outside and the young can climb up the inside to
the hole to fledge. Don’t install a perch, as it invites House Sparrows, which will attack parents or baby birds of other species.

Birds are fun to watch from a distance when they are nesting and feeding their young. You may want to place the bird box so that you can see it from a kitchen or dining room window. However, we suggest that it be placed facing trees into which the young can fly when leaving the box for the first time.

Also, the box entrance should face east, northeast, or away from the normal storm direction; this will also shade the opening of the box from hot afternoon sun.

A good rule thumb is to place boxes about ten yards or more apart. Boxes should not be put near feeders, as this may discourage nesting, but a nearby bird bath is desirable.

Swallows like open, sunny locations with short cropped grasses and nearby perches from which they can hunt insects and also defend the nest. Wrens prefer brushy sites. Chickadees and Nuthatches like open wooded areas.

Protection
Predators can destroy an entire clutch of eggs or brood of young. Don’t let dense ground cover grow near the nest box where cats can lurk beneath the box. Cats, by their very nature, will hunt if given the opportunity and will even jump to the top of a box, preventing adult birds from attending to their young. Putting PVC pipe, sprayed with a Silicone spray, over a metal fence post before attaching the box may keep cats or raccoons from climbing up the post.

Vines growing on a post may make it easier for Gopher snakes to climb into a box. Carpet tack strips, found at carpet stores, are inexpensive and can be nailed to a wooden post to deter cats, snakes, or other predators.

Earwigs supposedly do not hurt nesting birds, but smearing the post with Tanglefoot, a non-toxic sticky substance, may prevent them and ants from infesting the box. Yellow jackets and wasps may also try to use the box. Carefully remove them at night using no insecticide. Rubbing a bar of Ivory soap over the area of the removed wasp nest may help prevent a new nest from starting.

A light dusting of 1% rotenone may be used to kill the feather mites found in many Swallow nest.

Upkeep
Scrape out nesting material and feathers with a scraper after every nesting. Open clogged drainage holes. Always check boxes in the fall whether you think birds have used the box or not! Repair boxes at this time.

Inspect boxes again in early spring to see if it had been used as a roost or if any birds died in them during the winter. Scrape out all droppings. Don’t dump nesting material on the ground under the box when cleaning it out – take it away to reduce the chance of predators finding the box.

Competition
House (English) Sparrows and Starlings were introduced to this country from Europe and are now numerous across the U.S. Sparrows should be actively discouraged from using bird boxes by removing their nests as often as necessary. A box with a 1 ¼ " hole will discourage both House Sparrows and Starlings. House Sparrow is more aggressive than our native cavity nesters, and will kill the parents or nestlings in a box they want. Boxes 5 to 6 feet off the ground are less attractive to Sparrows than high ones. Starlings can’t get into the box with a 1 ¼ " or 1 ½" hole, but they Harass other species by sitting on or near the box.

Neither of these introduced species – Sparrows or Starlings – is protected by law. Native songbirds and other migratory nongame birds are protected under federal and state law, and may not be killed, harassed or possessed. Permits are required for the handling and banding of these birds.

Checking a box
To increase your enjoyment of the nest box, start keeping a record of activity at the box right away, even before the nesting season begins. This will later enable you to determine the ages of nestlings, so that you do not disturb them at a crucial time. Record what you see. If you are not familiar with birds, use a field guide book to identify them.

At first, you will be opening the box to see if there is a nest, and then eggs. Watch the box for a few minutes, and listen at the box before you open it—there may be birds inside. Tapping gently on the box will alert an adult bird so it can leave.

If there are a few pieces of grass or straw inside, a nest may be starting. If there is a nest, or a nest with eggs, try to determine what kind of bird it belongs to, using the identification Guide.

Check once a week if birds seem interested in the box.

Determining the status of the nest
There will be times when you may be concerned about events taking place at or near the nest box.
IT IS INADVISABLE TO OPEN A BOX AFTER THE NESTLINGS ARE 12 DAYS OLD EXCEPT IN AN EMERGENCY.

You can determine the status of the family by noting whether or not both parents are feeding the young, by sounds coming from the box, and by the behavior of the adults. It is wise to check out a problem if the adult birds seem agitated by something other than your presence, if you notice an unpleasant odor near a box, if the nest itself seems dirty or sticky, if there are flies near it, or if other birds are attempting to enter the box. Be prepared to remove eggs, living young and/or dead birds.

How to recognize nesting success
You will seldom get to enjoy the sight of nestlings leaving the box for the first time. This is called fledging; signs of it are:
- Nest will flattened after young have gone.
- Droppings in the nest. Some birds are very clean and the adults remove most of the fecal sacs (bird droppings); Swallows leave a very dirty nest, not cleaning up the last few days.
- Pinfeather dust in and under the nest. This grayish material is a sheath covering the feather when it erupts from the skin. It slowly flakes off and filters down through the nest to the bottom of the box. The length of time the young are in the box, the amount of droppings and of pinfeather dust vary with the number of live nestlings.
- Finding no evidence of predation, such as nest torn apart.
- Knowing that the nestlings remained in the nest for at least 14-22 days. This must be determined only by listening for the birds and observing the adults at the nest or nearby. The box must not be opened if the young are more than 14 days old. They may jump out of the box prematurely, unable to fly, putting their survival in jeopardy.

Swallows
You may see Swallows and Bluebirds competing for a single bird box. If so, you may make peace by putting up a box nearby with a 1 ¼” hole for the Bluebirds. Tree Swallows use habitat similar to Western Bluebirds, although they are more fond of being near streams and ponds.

Violet-green Swallows also nest in open areas, but are more likely to nest in town than other species. A bird box placed in the open, high on a house or other building is likely to attract Violet-green Swallows. Under the eaves of your house may be suitable if there is plenty of open space out front.

While Bluebirds feed on or near the ground, Swallows spend most of the time catching insects on the wing, and they demand plenty of air space around their homes. They also are well aware that cats and other four-legged predators can jump from trees or projecting roofs to rob nests, so they prefer nest holes that are well out of reach.

Swallows winter in Central America and other points south. When they return to Oregon in March or April, they begin seeking nest cavities. They nest from April through July.

Black-capped and Chestnut-backed Chickadees
Both species of Chickadees are little acrobats that entertain us all year round. They prefer open understory wooded sites. Chestnut-backed Chickadees are more apt to be found in firs at higher elevations. Chickadees can excavate a cavity in a soft decaying tree, but they willingly take nest boxes on low branched trees where they can find easy cover. They glean trees and brush for insects, eat fruits and seeds, and hog black-oil sunflower seeds at backyard feeders. Suet may replace the protein of insects in winter.

When nesting, Chickadees are quite secretive and often hide eggs or young under a mossy cover when out foraging for food.

House Wrens
“Jenny Wren” is much loved perky songster, and is a welcome harbinger of Spring, arriving from the sun belt soon after the Western bluebirds take up residence and Tree and Violet-green Swallows return.

Wrens prefer brushy sites with tree cavities or boxes lower to the ground than Swallows. They glean many insects from trees and bushes and feed their large broods ground-dwelling insects. The are, however, very aggressive in establishing territory, going so far as to remove other birds’ eggs and nesting material from boxes they choose to use.

We do not recommend placing a box for the House Wren at sites preferred by other cavity nesting species. They may not be good neighbors and could drive other species away.

How to begin
If Bluebirds try to use the box with the 1 ¼” hole (which is too small for them), call Elsie Eltzroth at 541-745-7806 or Paula Vanderheul (541-752-0470) to get a box or more information. A tax deductible donation of $15 for each box is appreciated.

For information about the Western Bluebird go to: HTTP://www.nabluebirdsociety.org.