

Helping Nesting Birds the Right Way

Bill Thompson, III



Help Nesting Birds the Right Way



Nesting birds need our help—particularly those birds that nest in cavities, such as nest boxes, woodpecker holes, and other natural holes in trees. Competition among birds for limited nest sites is fierce, especially from aggressive non-native starlings and house sparrows. You can help native nesting birds by being an informed, conscientious landlord.

We've compiled some useful tips, information, and resources to guide you as you help nesting birds in your backyard and beyond. We hope you will find this e-guide helpful.

If you love providing for your backyard birds, you should be reading *Watching Backyard Birds*, the only magazine in the world devoted solely to backyard birds and bird watchers. Sample our content at watchingbackyardbirds.com.

Wishing you and your birds a successful nesting season!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill".

Bill Thompson, III
Publisher

Top 10 Tips for Backyard Landlords



1. Spring cleaning. Early spring is the time to get busy with cleaning out your boxes. In some areas, you may find that March or even February is not too early. Sweep all the crud out of the box (making sure it's not this year's nest, of course). If it's still a little grungy, rinse the box with a 1:9 bleach-water solution, using a scrub brush or an old toothbrush if necessary. Rinse well and let the box air dry before



European starlings have taken over this bluebird nest box.

closing. There's no need to place any nesting material inside the box in spring; the birds prefer to do that themselves.

Is it really necessary to do this? After all, natural cavities don't get scrubbed out each spring. That's true, but an empty nest box is more likely to attract a tenant than one that's full of crud, and the box will be a clean and healthy space.

2. Maintenance and replacement. Spring is also the time to repair damaged or worn boxes. I take a Leatherman utility tool with me for tightening screws, bending metal baffles back into shape, and pounding loose nails. Sometimes a box is too far gone and must be replaced. This is the perfect time for an upgrade to a better box, a different design, or a box for a different tenant.

3. Right box, right place, right hole. There are nest boxes that go years without tenants. If you have one of these, your problem could be the box's location. Bluebirds and swallows prefer to use boxes in open, grassy areas. House wrens, Carolina wrens, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and woodpeckers prefer boxes near or in the woods. Note: When mounting a nest box among trees, make sure there are no overhanging or connecting branches that could provide access from above for snakes, squirrels, mice, or other climbing predators. You may also have a box with an improper entry hole size. The ideal universal entry hole size is 1½ inches in diameter. This permits entry by most of the smaller birds that use nest cavities. Entries larger than 1½ inches in diameter will permit European starlings to enter your nest boxes. Recent studies have indicated that most box-using birds may prefer their boxes to



Late winter or early spring is the best time for nest box repair and maintenance.

be oriented so that the entrance is facing east.

4. Predators and pests.

The onset of nesting is also the start of the nest-predator season. Make sure your boxes are mounted on galvanized metal poles with pole-mounted baffles below the box. Also check to make sure that a predator cannot access the nest box by slithering, reaching, or jumping from a nearby perch. Do not use insecticide or pesticides inside or near your bird houses. If your boxes are raided by predators during the nesting season, you should do your best to determine which predator gained access to the box and then take steps to prevent a recurrence.

5. Monitoring notebook.

The very best way to keep track of your tenants is to keep a watchful eye. Do this by making

regular visits to each nest box and recording what you find in your landlord's notebook. A small, spiral-bound pocket notebook and a pencil are all you need. Information to record includes: name of box (see Tip 6), date of visit, time of day, weather conditions, contents of the box, number of eggs or young, age of young, condition of young, presence of adults, presence of parasites, and anything else you can think of that will be a useful reference for future visits. After several years of record keeping you will know and appreciate your most productive boxes and tenants.

6. Numbering or naming. If you have a variety of boxes on your property or an entire trail of boxes (as many bluebird landlords do), it is extremely helpful to name or number and label your boxes. This aids a great deal



Naming or numbering nest boxes facilitates record keeping.

in record keeping and in helping you remember over the years which boxes are good producers. We've named our nest boxes after their locations on our farm: upper meadow box, spring trail box, far orchard box, etc.

7. Other enhancements.

Good landlords know there are certain little things you can do to attract the attention of potential tenants. Most cavity-nesting birds prefer an unobstructed path to the entrance, so make sure that vines and brush do not get in the way. Tree and violet-green swallows use white feathers in their nests, so during nest-building time they will readily take a handful of feathers spread across the lawn. Adult bluebirds always seem to appreciate a snag or T-stand (two dowels, small boards, or sticks connected to form a T-shaped perch) that is located



A Carolina chickadee nest.

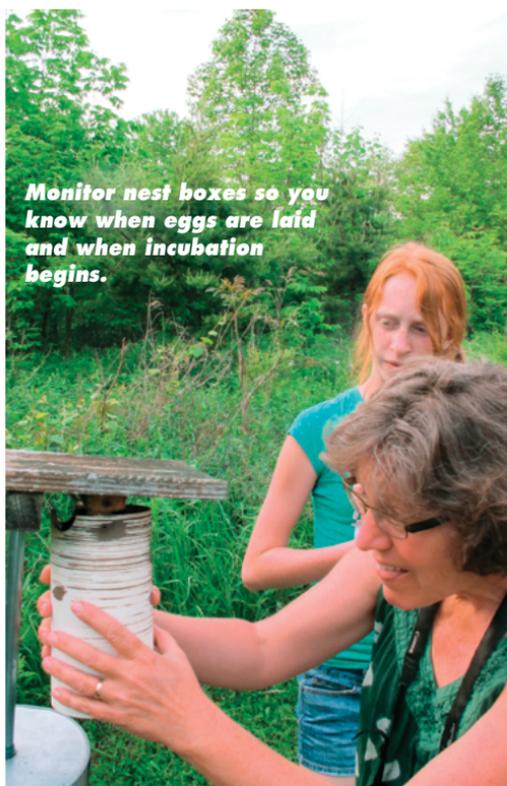
20 to 50 feet from the nest box entrance. This serves as a song and hunting perch and as a place for fledglings to aim for on their first flight from the box. Great crested flycatchers love a good snakeskin to pull into the nest box. Purple martins readily take to perches above their houses and to trays of crushed eggshells, which they eat for grit and calcium. Barn swallows and robins appreciate a nice puddle of mud for nest construction material.

8. Knowing your tenants. It is important to know which species are using your boxes and how long they incubate their eggs. For instance, the time between

incubation and fledging for a bluebird and a tree swallow can differ considerably. Check a good reference book or a reliable website for incubation and fledging times of the species nesting in your boxes. Bluebird and purple martin landlords can also rely on the expertise of conservation organizations devoted to these species, including the North American Bluebird Society (nabluebirdsociety.org) and the Purple Martin Conservation Association (purplemartin.org).

9. Scheduled visits. If you know the dates of your birds' first eggs and when incubation started, you can guesstimate when to visit safely and when to leave the birds alone (near fledging time). A visit to a box full of 13-day-old bluebirds may cause the nestlings to leave prematurely. If you visit a nest and find everyone gone long before the estimated fledging date, you can surmise that the nest met an untimely end. Your familiarity with the birds in your boxes will also help you to know when something is not right, such as when you see an agitated adult fluttering near the entry, but intervention is not as good as prevention in the case of predators. In any case, if you find an empty nest, you can clean it out and prepare it for the next potential tenant.

10. Comparing and sharing data. As you accumulate more and more data from your



Monitor nest boxes so you know when eggs are laid and when incubation begins.

nest boxes, you can compare the boxes with each other and with themselves from year to year. You can also share your data with others through online forums such as Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Nest-Watch project (Nestwatch.org). These kinds of data can give you a glimpse into the lives of our most beloved backyard birds—those species that are willing to accept our offerings of housing and shelter. We owe them the helpful stewardship of being good landlords.

Frequently Asked Questions



Eastern kingbirds commonly nest on snags in or near flooded lakes or rivers.

Q: If I check a nest box, will I scare the birds away? Will my human scent drive the parents off?

A: If you've been monitoring your nest boxes, you should know the approximate stage of progress for the nest. Knowing the hatching day is most useful. It's perfectly fine to look inside a nest box up until about 10 to 12 days after hatching, because the nestlings are not yet ready to leave the nest. After 12 days, it's best to watch the nest from a distance because the young birds are close to fledging, and any sudden disturbance, such as your opening the box, might cause a panicked departure.

Birds do have a sense of smell, but how well developed it is is poorly understood. A parent bird's instinct to care for its young is going to far outweigh any slight disturbance caused by your visiting the nest box. A snake or a raccoon is going to be more likely to follow your scent trail to the nest than a parent bird is to notice it. For this reason, I always recommend that nest boxes be placed on baffled metal poles to prevent predation.

Q: Can a single parent raise the nestlings?

A: It is possible, and we've witnessed it on our farm with bluebirds and tree swallows, but it's far from ideal. Nests that lose one adult have a better chance of success if the loss happens close

to fledging time. Many adult male birds do not participate at all in incubation or brooding, which is done by the female. If a female is killed, the male is unable to incubate eggs or brood the young in her place. If the male is killed, the female may not be able to incubate the eggs or brood the young and forage for herself and the nestlings. The typical result of the loss of one or the other of a mated pair of cavity-nesting birds is a failed nesting attempt.

Q: How long do the parents care for the nestlings?

A: The time between hatching from the egg and fledging from the nest varies widely among cavity-nesting birds. Young barn owls spend almost two months in the nest, while young wood ducks leap from the nest at the ripe old age of one day.

For most songbirds, the time from hatching to fledging is about 10 to 14 days. Cup-nesting birds tend to fledge sooner, while cavity-nesting species, being in a more protected setting, develop more slowly. But for all cavity-nesting birds the parental care continues for weeks after fledging day. Lots of recently fledged birds continue to receive feedings, parental protection, and attention for weeks after leaving the nest.

Q: Should I leave my nest boxes up all winter?

A: Yes. Nest boxes provide valuable roosting sites for many birds in winter. We always get downy woodpeckers roosting in our nest boxes—a species that has never actually nested in our boxes. If the winters are cold where you live, you may consider doing a few things to make the inside of the boxes more comfortable for the birds. Using flexible weather stripping, plug the vent holes to reduce the draft of cold air and increase the retention of body heat inside the nest box. Place a few inches of dried grass or wood chips on the bottom of the box for additional insulation and comfort.



Responsible landlords regularly monitor nest boxes.

Q: Should I clean out last year's old nest?

A: This is a topic of some debate among nest box researchers. Messy, dropping-covered old nests should definitely be removed for health reasons. See Tip 1 above. Some researchers believe that a bit of nesting material inside a box enhances its attractiveness to prospecting pairs of birds. Others claim that nest building is an important part of the courtship and breeding process and so we should allow our tenants to build their own nests. We split the difference on our boxes. If the old nest is clean and well built, we leave the nest. More commonly, however, if the nest is soiled or even a little bit gross, we remove it, brush out

the box to remove bug bits, poop, and discarded feathers and feather sheaths, rinse with a weak bleach solution, air dry, and let the birds start from scratch.

Q: Do I really need to baffle my nest boxes?

A: If you read Tip 4 above, you know I'm going to say yes! The places I've lived and put out nest boxes have all had high numbers of nest box predators, so any unbaffled boxes were very vulnerable. However, if you know you do not have nest box predators in your area (and I'm not exactly sure where that might be), go ahead and try it. Just expect me to say: "I warned you!" when you open up a nest box to find that a predator has visited. Baffles



Wood, especially western red cedar, is great for nest box construction.

require a bit of extra work, but I'd rather do that work than find that some of my "babies" have been eaten by a hungry rat snake or raccoon.

Q: Why are there no tenants in my boxes?

A: There are many reasons why a nest box might not be used. It could be in a poor location that makes birds feel unsafe, such as near a busy road, or too close to a busy doorway. The entry hole might be too small to permit your local cavity nesters to enter. Perhaps the box itself is not built to the proper specifications. Or there may be a nearby predator that keeps birds from feeling safe about using your box. If the

housing specifications are correct, try moving the box to a different location and watch to see if there's any increased interest.

Q: What's the best material for building a nest box?

A: Most nest boxes are made from wood. The best wood to use is wood that weathers well, such as cedar. Pine is cheap and easy to get, but it cracks easily if it is not sealed and stained or painted. Hardwoods such as oak, walnut, and cherry also tend to dry out and to warp. A material that is being used increasingly is PVC pipe. It stands up to weather very well and is lightweight. Plywood might seem like a really good wood to use for building



Paint protects wood from weather, but bright colors can attract predators.

nest boxes, but it tends to fall apart after a season or two of harsh weather.

Q: Can I paint my nest boxes?

A: Yes. Painting or staining on the outside will help your nest boxes last longer by protecting the wood from sun and moisture. Lighter colors deflect the heat of strong sunlight in summer. Boxes placed in shaded habitat can be painted any color, as long as it does not make the house more visible to predators. Many nest box authorities (and I concur) discourage the painting of the inside of nest boxes. Paint

or stain can be toxic to featherless nestlings, which come into regular contact with the inside walls of a nest box.

Q: Can I use pesticides to get rid of mites?

A: No. The use of any chemical inside a nest box when nestlings are present is a bad thing. If you find a nest box that's infested with mites, lice, blowflies, or some other pest, remove the nestlings and place them in a temporary nest (a bowl lined with tissues works). Remove the infested nest and replace it with a nest cup made from fresh, clean materials, then replace the nest-

lings. In the case of mites, dash out the empty box with hot water and swab it out with a paper towel, then replace the nesting material with tightly packed dried grass formed into a nest cup. Check on them in a day or two to see if they look better. Featherless nestlings absorb chemicals through their skin, and they are highly sensitive to chemical poisoning. When nestlings do come into contact with pesticides, the result is often tragic.

Q: I found a dead bird in my nest box. What do I do with it?

A: The easiest and safest thing to do is to dispose of the bird by burying it or throwing it in the trash. While humans are not in immediate danger from avian disease transmission from dead birds, it's wise to be cautious.

Handle dead birds with gloves or plastic bags on your hands. Some scientific institutions and natural history or university museums welcome donations of dead birds for their collections and research. If you find a dead bird that is recently deceased (such as a window strike) and you know a local institution that accepts "salvage" birds, save the bird in a sealable plastic bag and place it in your freezer until it can be donated. Always document the date, location, and cause of death, and write this in waterproof ink on a slip of paper inside the bag with the bird. Please note: It is illegal to possess a native or migratory bird without holding special permits. If you cannot find an institution that accepts donations of dead birds, it's best to dispose of the carcasses properly: Bury it.

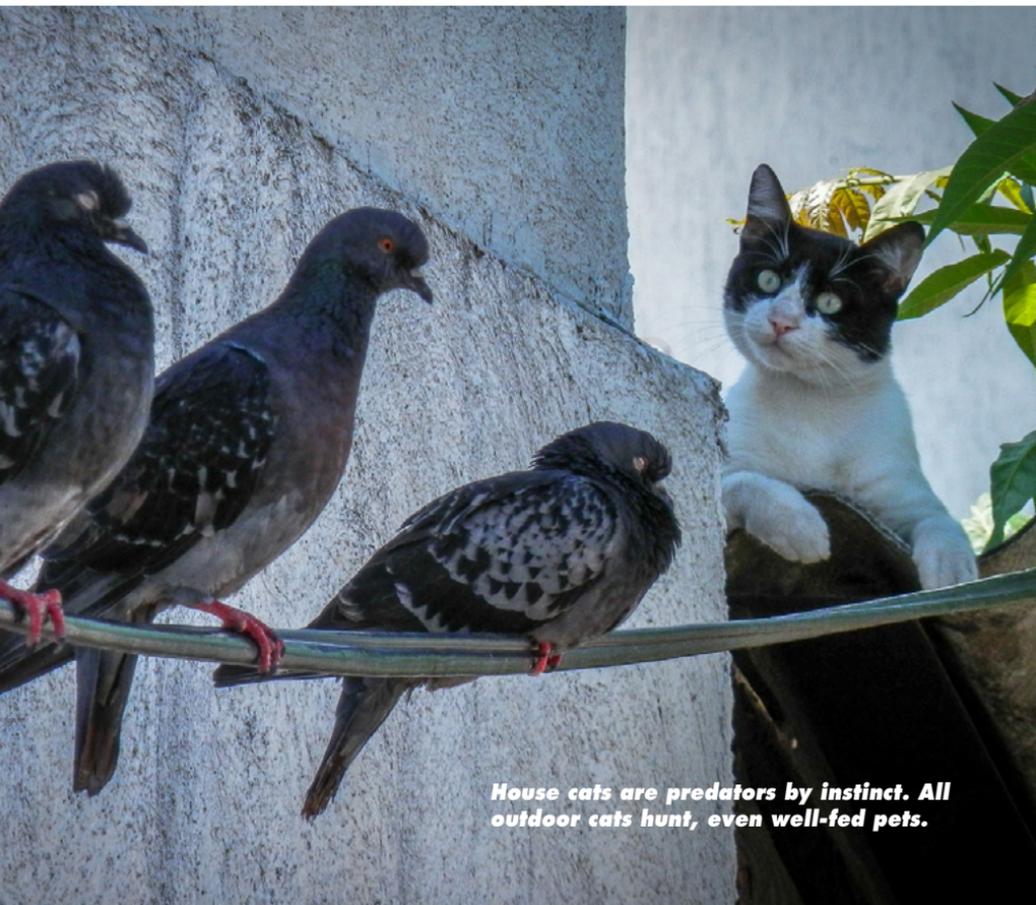


Prothonotary warblers nest in tree cavities in swampy habitat.

Q: I've lost several birds to outdoor cats. How do I keep cats away from my bird feeders and nest boxes?

A: Free-roaming cats kill millions of birds each year. If it's your pet doing the killing or injuring of birds, consider keeping it indoors, where it's safe from disease, busy streets, and encounters with stray animals and predators. If it's a neighbor's cat, ask them to restrain it. If this does not work, and the cat is still attacking birds in your yard, you may need to try something a bit

more creative. Catch the cat in a live trap and return it to the neighbor with a further request that it not be allowed to roam. If the problem persists, you can always recapture the cat and take it to the local humane society. Or if this seems too harsh, fill a super soaker squirt gun with a 50/50 blend of water and white vinegar. Give the cat a blast with this stinky concoction. Cats dislike getting wet, and this one will dislike the taste when it tries to lick itself dry. The owner should get the message, too.



House cats are predators by instinct. All outdoor cats hunt, even well-fed pets.

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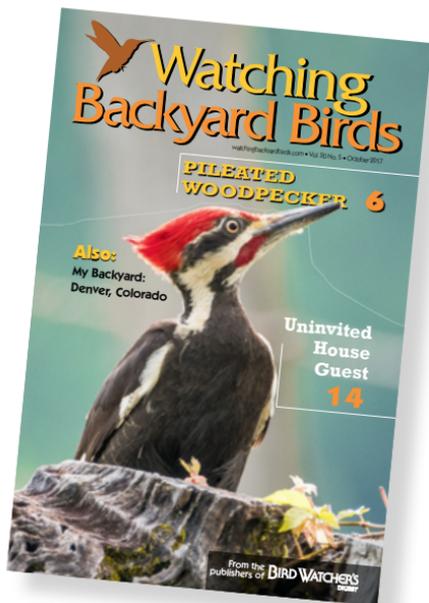
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