



Avian Housing

The Los Gatos Birdwatcher is here to help...

General Guidelines

Not all birds use nest boxes. All birds have specific nesting instincts. Some will nest on the ground (juncos and towhees). Some will nest in shrubs and trees (bushtits, hummingbirds, robins, and many others). Still others will nest in tree cavities or nest boxes (chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, swallows, wrens and some woodpeckers).

Habitat

Habitat is the single most critical factor in whether or not you will be successful in attracting certain bird species. The kinds of trees and vegetation, both on your property and in the surrounding area, will determine what kinds of birds will nest on your property. Feeding birds and noticing what species come to the feeders is an indication if a nestbox will be attractive to the resident birds. Cavity nesters are most likely to use a nestbox as dead trees or snags are not readily available in most of our local area.

Size and design

Along with habitat, nestbox dimensions are extremely important in determining what kinds of birds will nest in the box. Boxes designed for specific species are better than a "one size fits all" approach. If you are interested in designing your own avian housing, see the table of recommended dimensions on the reverse side. The size of the entrance hole is particularly crucial. Make it too large and you'll likely lose the box to starlings and house sparrows. Make it too small and the birds you want to attract will look elsewhere for accommodations.

Perches near the entrance hole are not advisable as they primarily assist house sparrows and other predators such as jays. Cavity nesting birds are perfectly capable of clinging to the outside of the box, exactly what they would do in the wild when using a tree cavity.

Ventilation and drainage are two other important features of properly functioning nestboxes. Simplicity and natural wood are also crucial. If you do want to paint the outside of the nestbox, use lead-free paint and leave the inside of the hole and the inside of the box unpainted.

What makes a good nestbox?

Wood is the best material for nestboxes. Pine, cedar, and redwood are commonly used. Cedar and redwood are often considered to be more desirable because these woods are more weather resistant and don't warp. Wood is a good insulator and doesn't overheat in hot weather like metal or plastic can. The roof should overhang slightly to channel off rain. The box should be designed so that it is easily opened for monitoring and cleaning; access can be through the bottom, top, side or front of the box. Generally, hanging birdhouses are not as attractive to most birds as stationary ones. Wrens do like hanging boxes, however. For other birds, use a stationary box that will be attached directly to a post or tree trunk.



Mounting the nestbox

Nestboxes should go on a tree, a pole, or possibly a fence. For most woodland species it is helpful if you can mount the nestbox within ten to fifteen feet of shrubs or other trees, so that the nesting birds will have a nearby perching spot. Try to place your boxes away from feeder activity or high traffic areas around your

house. Most woodland birds prefer that the box be mounted between five and ten feet above the ground. (See table for specific guidelines.) Mount the nestbox so that the entrance hole is away from the prevailing wind. If you are putting up more than one nestbox on your property, don't mount them too close together.

Nestboxes should go up in the fall or winter. Birds start sorting out nesting territories even before warm weather hits, so your nestboxes should be in place as early as possible. For the majority of birds, nesting season begins in February and continues through July.

Predators and Competitors

Nesting birds are vulnerable to many predators during nesting season. Raccoons, squirrels, cats, snakes, and other birds such as crows and jays will prey on eggs or nestlings. Baffles, obstructive devices fitted on poles, can keep raccoons, squirrels, and sometimes cats from getting to nestboxes if the pole is isolated and not accessible from nearby structures or branches of other trees. Some nestboxes are made with a thick block of wood surrounding the

entrance hole to make it more difficult for predatory mammals to reach in and get to the eggs or nestlings inside. A metal plate or hardware cloth surrounding the entrance will discourage squirrels from chewing and jays and woodpeckers from pecking to enlarge the opening.

It is extremely important to keep cats away from the nesting area, especially close to fledging time. Keep your cats confined indoors and ask your neighbors to do the same. Feral cats should be reported to a local rescue or humanely live-trapped and taken to an animal shelter.

Make sure to give your nesting birds plenty of privacy. If there is too much human activity around the nestbox, it may cause the parent birds to abandon the nest site. Assist children in watching the nest box activity from a distance,

such as through binoculars or a spotting scope, rather than directly investigating the box. In this way, your entire family can enjoy the thrill of watching nesting birds in your backyard.

Pests

House sparrows and European starlings are two non-native bird species that were imported from Europe in the 19th century. These birds have now populated the entire North American continent. They are extremely aggressive and will drive off native bird species from available cavities or nestboxes. In some cases, they will kill the existing bird nestlings in the box or even the parent birds in order to claim the space and eliminate competition. House sparrows and starlings have contributed substantially to the decline of many native birds, particularly bluebirds and woodpeckers. Because of this, we recommend you think twice before

encouraging house sparrows or starling to nest on your property. If these birds attempt to take over a nestbox, you can repeatedly remove their nesting material to discourage them from nesting there. Neither house sparrows nor starlings are protected by law, and you may legally trap and relocate them if they continue to interfere with other nesting birds.

Join Cavity Nesters Trail Group

Through the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, you can join the **Cavity Nesters Recovery Program** and monitor boxes put up in neighborhood parks. For more information, visit their website www.scvas.org.

Resources

Los Gatos Birdwatcher has several books on building nest boxes, as well as kits to make a variety of boxes yourself.

Recommended Dimension for Birdhouses

| Bird | Entrance Hole Diameter (inches) | Above Floor (inches) | Floor Dimensions (box interior) (inches) | Total Height of box (inches) | Height off ground (feet) |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|--|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Bewick's Wren | 1" oval | 4-5 | 4x4 to oblong | 6-9 | 5-10 |
| House Wren | 1 to 1-1/2 | 6-7 | 4x4 to 5x5 | 9-12 | 5-10 |
| Chestnut-backed Chickadee | 1-1/8 to 1-1/4 | 6-7 | 4x4 to 5x5 | 9-12 | 5-10 |
| White-breasted Nuthatch | 1-1/8 to 1-1/2 | 6-7 | 4x4 to 5x5 | 9-12 | 5-10 |
| Oak Titmouse | 1-1/4 | 6-7 | 4x4 to 5x5 | 9-12 | 5-10 |
| Downy Woodpecker | 1-1/2 | 8-12 | 4x4 | 9-12 | 5-20 |
| Nuttall's Woodpecker | 1-1/2+ | 8-12 | 5x5 | 9-12 | 5-20 |
| Tree Swallow | 1-1/2 | 6-7 | 4x4 to 5x5 | 9-12 | 5-10 |
| Violet-green swallow | 1-1/2 | 6-7 | 4x4 to 5x5 | 9-12 | 5-10 |
| Western Bluebird | 1-9/16 | 6-7 | 5x5 | 11-12 | 5-10 |
| Hairy Woodpecker | 1-3/4 to 2 | 10-14 | 5x5 to 6x6 | 14-16 | 8-20 |
| Northern Flicker | 2-1/2 to 3 | 10-20 | 8x8 to 9x9 | 16-24 | 10-20 |
| Western Screech Owl | 2-1/2-4 | 10-12 | 6x6 to 8x8 | 15-18 | 8-30 |
| Northern Saw-whet Owl | 2-1/2-4 | 10-12 | 6x6 to 8x8 | 15-18 | 8-20 |
| American Kestrel | 3 | 10-12 | 8x8 to 9x9 | 14-16 | 20 |
| Barn Owl | 6-8 oval | 8 | 12x24 | 17 | 15-30 |
| House Finch | Hanging basket or shelf | | | | |
| Mourning Dove | Hanging basket or shelf | | | | |
| Black Phoebe | Shelf | | | | at eave |
| American Robin | Shelf | | | | at eave |