

U·FACTS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION IN LANCASTER COUNTY

"HELPING YOU PUT KNOWLEDGE TO WORK"

Build a Nest Box to Attract Birds

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In the springtime in Nebraska some birds, like robins, build an open nest, but others prefer nesting in cavities in decayed trees or stumps. Cavity-dwelling birds, like woodpeckers, chickadees, house wrens, and bluebirds, will substitute a nest box for a tree cavity. Natural nest sites have disappeared as weakened or dying trees are removed from our landscape. Depending on other attributes in your landscape, providing an appropriately sized nest box may help attract some bird species to your yard.

Although elaborate designs for boxes are available, you can successfully attract birds by building

an inexpensive, simple, six-sided box. Whatever the design or material used, the boxes must be strong, weatherproof, and securely fastened.

Single-compartment nest boxes are the easiest to build and the most frequently used by birds. When you are building the box, be sure to allow easy access for cleaning and occasional observations. You can use the same basic box design for all species (see the diagram). Table 1 gives the proper dimensions and hole sizes that are appropriate for different species.

There is no need to put nest material into the box in the spring because lining the box is often part

of each species' mating ritual. For some birds (woodpecker, owl, chickadee, and duck families), a layer of wood chips or shavings (not saw-dust) about 1-inch deep may be placed in the bottom of the box.

Drainage and ventilation are important features of a nest box. Drill a few small holes just below the roof overhang and in the floor of the box near the walls.

You can suspend the box from a tree, mount it on a pole, or attach it to a building 3-ft below the roof. Find a location that is protected from the sun for part of the day, and turn the entrance away from the usual direction of wind and rain.

Protect your boxes from predators. The most common predators are squirrels, raccoons and cats—all of which are excellent climbers. Do not place a platform or perch below the entrance hole of the nest box because these structures provide a support

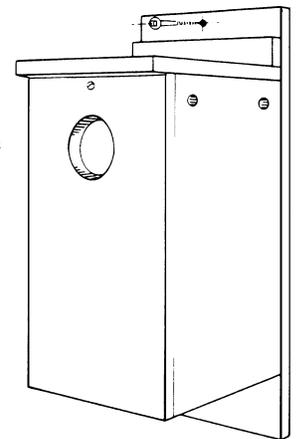


Table 1. Dimensions for nest boxes for some species of birds found in Nebraska

| Species | Entrance hole diameter (inch) | Width of floor panels (inch) | Height of wall panels (inch) | Minimum height above ground (feet) | On pole or tree near shrubs | On pole or tree in open areas |
|------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| House Wren | 1 | 4x4 | 6 | 5½ | yes | - |
| Chickadee | 1¼ | 4x4 | 5 | 5½ | yes | - |
| Nuthatch | 1¼ | 4x4 | 5 | 5½ | yes | - |
| Downy Woodpecker | 1¼ | 4x4 | 5 | 5½ | yes | - |
| Eastern Bluebird | 1½ | 5¼ | 10 | 6½ | - | yes |
| House Sparrow | 1½ | 5¼ | 10 | 6½ | - | yes |
| Starling | 2 | 5x5 | 12½ | 9 | - | yes |
| Common Flicker | 2½ | 6x6 | 15 | 9 | - | yes |
| Screech Owl | 3 | 8x8 | 17 | 14 | - | yes |
| American Kestrel | 3 | 8x8 | 17 | 14 | - | yes |
| Wood Duck | 3x4 oval | 10x10 | 20 | 7 | yes | yes |



for animals raiding the nest. Place nest boxes on poles at least 15-ft away from trees and shrubs to stop squirrels from jumping to the roof of the box. To prevent raccoons from raiding wood duck boxes, make the entrance hole oval in shape and erect the pole in water near the shore. Protect boxes that are placed on poles with a predator guard, such as a large inverted cone or a 1-ft. strip of metal wrapped around the pole. A large clean plastic bottle (e.g., a bleach container) with the bottom cut out and nailed to the pole at the neck would also work.

Parasites, like lice and mites, are common in most nests, and

parasites by sprinkling diatomaceous earth in the nest box. This nontoxic substance scratches the outer covering of many parasites, causing them to die of dehydration. It is completely harmless to other life-forms.

Maintenance

Occasional and careful inspection of the box during the nesting season will enable you to check on the progress of the babies. Do not inspect the box during the first five days of incubation as the adults are susceptible to disturbances during this period and may abandon the nest. Carry out inspections as quickly as possible, preferably when the adults are away feeding. If any

improve the chances of attracting a nesting pair.

- Chickadees prefer their nest boxes set close to shrubs or bushes. They will not tolerate any other chickadees in the vicinity of their nest.

- Bluebirds may attempt a second nesting and would benefit from the chance to lay their next clutch in a second box.

- Wood Ducks prefer a nest box near (or standing in) water. The young leave the nest within 48 hours of hatching by climbing up from the floor to the entrance hole and tumbling to the ground. Horizontal sawcuts or a piece of hardware cloth stapled to the inside wall between the floor and the entrance are essential for these species.

Source: Nest Boxes for Birds,

Canadian Wildlife Service, <http://www.ec.gc.ca/cws-scf/hww-fap/nestbox/nestbx.html>. Another excellent publication that gives diagrams of do-it-yourself bird houses is *Shelves Houses and Feeders for Birds and Mammals*, North Central Regional Publication 338. It is available for \$4 from the extension office. For more specific information about bluebird nesting, contact Bluebirds across Nebraska; P.O. Box 67157; Lincoln, NE 68506. (BPO)

| Species | Number of eggs in a clutch | Incubation period (days) | Age when the young leave the nest (days) |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------|--|
|  House Wren | 6-8 | 13 | 12-18 |
| Chickadee | 6-8 | 12 | 16 |
| Nuthatch | 5-9 | 12 | 18 |
| Downy Woodpecker | 3-5 | 12 | 24 |
| Eastern Bluebird | 2-3 | 12 | 15-18 |
| House Sparrow | 10 | 14 | 12-14 |
| Starling | 10 | 12-14 | 16-18 |
| Common Flicker | 5 | 14-16 | 25-28 |
| Screech Owl | 2-3 | 26 | 24-26 |
| American Kestrel | 2-3 | 28 | 24-26 |
| Wood Duck | 10-15 | 29 | 1-2 |

their numbers increase as the season progresses. Young birds usually leave the nest before parasites become a major problem. If weather and food conditions allow the adult pair to start a second clutch, and the eggs are laid in a box already infested with parasites, the young may not survive. Providing a second box approximately 15-20 ft away will give the birds an alternative nesting site that is free from parasites. Leave the second box closed until about two weeks after the first eggs have hatched. You can help control

nestlings have died in the nest, it is best to remove them. Sometimes predators will follow a human's trail to find eggs and young in nest boxes. If you are worried about predators, postpone your inspection until after the nesting season. At the end of the nesting season, remove the nesting materials from the interior of the nest box.

Tips to improve the nesting of these species:

- Wrens like to build "dummy" nests before they choose one to lay eggs in. Provide more than one box to