



A bluebird nesting box.



Eastern Bluebird eggs in a deep nest.

## Success with Bird Nesting Boxes

**N**ATIVE BIRD SPECIES are the modern-day “canary in a coal mine” when it comes to environmental health. According to the American Bird Conservancy, over one-third of all North American birds need urgent conservation action. Providing habitat in the form of native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers, clean water, and nesting boxes can help with this recovery.

While some prairie birds (such as Henslow’s sparrows) are showing dramatic increases with the restoration of native grasslands, other species need boxes to replace the cavities once excavated by woodpeckers in landscapes formerly dotted with trees. Finding the right box for the bird you would like to attract depends on the habitat in both your yard and the surrounding community.

### Then and Now

Indigenous people of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations are believed to have been the first Americans to have provided nesting space for birds, hanging clusters of gourds to attract Purple Martins. With the current population about 10 percent of its mid-1800s level, Purple Martins have been victims of habitat loss and competitive exclusion, according to the Smithsonian’s National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute.

The large white aluminum, multi-nest dwellings used to attract Purple Martins are coveted real estate that quickly become breeding grounds for invasive house sparrows and European starlings

when not adequately monitored. “The farther north of the Ohio River you go, the more areas with open water they select,” says Wild Birds Unlimited Glenview Manager and Head Birdscaper Tim Joyce—noting the success of houses hoisted up pulleys on 14-15’ poles beside 1- to 2-acre lakes and even larger bodies of water.

In one yard, Joyce observed how a martin house placed in a wooded area 50’ from the lake was untouched while another house 3’ from the water attracted a colony of the largest North American swallow. “East of the Rockies, Purple Martins use man-made structures and are dependent on us for their nesting success,” says Joyce, suggesting careful consideration of habitat and upkeep requirements before investing.

### Getting Started

Joyce recommends wren/chickadee boxes placed 30–40’ apart since chickadees are year-round residents of suburbia that use nesting boxes for roosting (resting) during the non-breeding season. Hung from a tree or placed on a pole, wren/chickadee nesting boxes are most successful in yards with hedges, evergreens, and other screening nearby to provide cover for fledglings. Stillman Nature Center Executive Director Mark Spreyer notes house wrens prefer nest boxes with old nests in them, adding male wrens construct up to six “dummy nests” to give their mates options. Chickadee males offer their mates 3-4 choices.

For yards with woodlands bordering agricultural fields, Audubon Great Lakes Conservation Science Associate Stephanie Beilke and Birdscaper Tim Joyce advise installing bluebird boxes and monitoring them to remove nesting materials



A Purple Martin perches on its nesting box.



## Helpful Nesting Box Tips

1. When building a nesting box, follow the directions to the letter. Select a box that will match the habitat in and around your yard. Using the correct hole size will curb predation and takeover by invasive species. “Be sure to include a door on your nest box,” advises Holly Faulkner, Project Assistant, NestWatch. “This makes it easier to clean out after the nesting season is over.”
2. Protect nesting and roosting birds from predators. Leave off the perch, use a predator guard or baffle, and place any feeders at least 10’ away from the nesting box.
3. Monitor: “Point the birdhouse in the direction from which you’re going to view it,” says Joyce. “You should get the reward of enjoying the end result!”
4. To learn more, please visit:
  - [www.dnr.illinois.gov/publications/Documents/00000211.pdf](http://www.dnr.illinois.gov/publications/Documents/00000211.pdf)
  - [www.nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/](http://www.nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/)
  - North American Bluebird Society: [www.nabluebirdsociety.org/](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/)
  - Purple Martin Conservation Association: [www.purplemartin.org/](http://www.purplemartin.org/)

left by house sparrows. Unlike bluebirds that construct neat cups from grass, house sparrows hoard whatever they can find (including wrappers and Easter grass) into a nest that can fill a box!

Placing two boxes within 10’ of each other reduces competition, allowing bluebirds and tree swallows to live side by side. In instances where only one bluebird box is provided every 100’, tree swallows tend to dominate. Their nests cannot be removed because native tree swallows are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Large cavity-dwelling birds appreciate well-placed nesting boxes, too. Eastern screech owls gravitate toward boxes lined with coarse wood shavings near wooded edges for nesting and roosting. Picking feathers over shavings, wood ducks look for cavities 5-40’ above ponds or vernal pools with elliptical openings.



PHOTO: ISTOCK.COM/STEVBYLAND

*A pair of Eastern Bluebirds.*

### What Birds Want

While it might be fun to look at colorful nesting boxes, Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s NestWatch recommends untreated wood (cedar, pine, cypress, or non-pressure treated CDX exterior-grade plywood) held together by galvanized screws. A sloped roof should overhang the front 2-4” and the sides by 2” to allow water to runoff, and 3/8”–1/2” diameter holes in four corners of the floor for drainage. Walls should be at least 3/4” thick but drilled (with two 5/8” diameter holes near the top of each side wall and two of the same size holes near the bottom) to allow cross-ventilation.

“Don’t paint the inside and avoid using dark colors [on the outside] that will make it too hot during the dog days of summer,” says Joyce. Wood inside the box should be left in a natural (untreated) state and on the outside, it should somewhat camouflage with its surroundings. “Do not use tin cans, milk cartons, or metal for nests,” adds the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, except for commercially-made martin and wood duck houses. Unpainted metal makes nesting boxes too hot for eggs and young birds.

### Uninvited Guests

For bluebird and chickadee/wren houses, nesting boxes can be cleaned out in fall or left through the

winter for mice and cleaned out in early March. A protective dust mask and gloves should be worn to remove a deserted mouse nest and followed up by a thorough scrubbing with soapy water.

To keep bees and wasps from using the box, NestWatch recommends “applying a thick layer of nonstick cooking spray or bar soap onto the inside surface of the roof or keeping nest boxes plugged until just before the breeding season of the target species begins.” Baffles or predator guards can help keep squirrels at bay.

### Closing Thoughts


Early spring is the perfect time to start planning where you would like to place a nesting box for both year-round residents and spring migrants. By observing the habitat in your yard and surrounding community and determining the amount of time you’d like to put into maintaining a nesting box, you can make a positive difference for local birds. 

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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