

Bird Boxes

“Do nest boxes in gardens really serve any useful purpose?” The answer to that question is definitely yes! Gardens are becoming an increasingly valuable habitat for our wildlife, including many birds. The pressures of modern impacts means that traditional nesting sites such as trees, hedges and old buildings are in decline. So nest boxes placed in gardens can make a real difference to the success or failure of a breeding species in a given area, especially when accompanied by wildlife-friendly gardening. As building them requires no great carpentry skills, this can provide a simple but significant helping hand.

Building a simple bird box

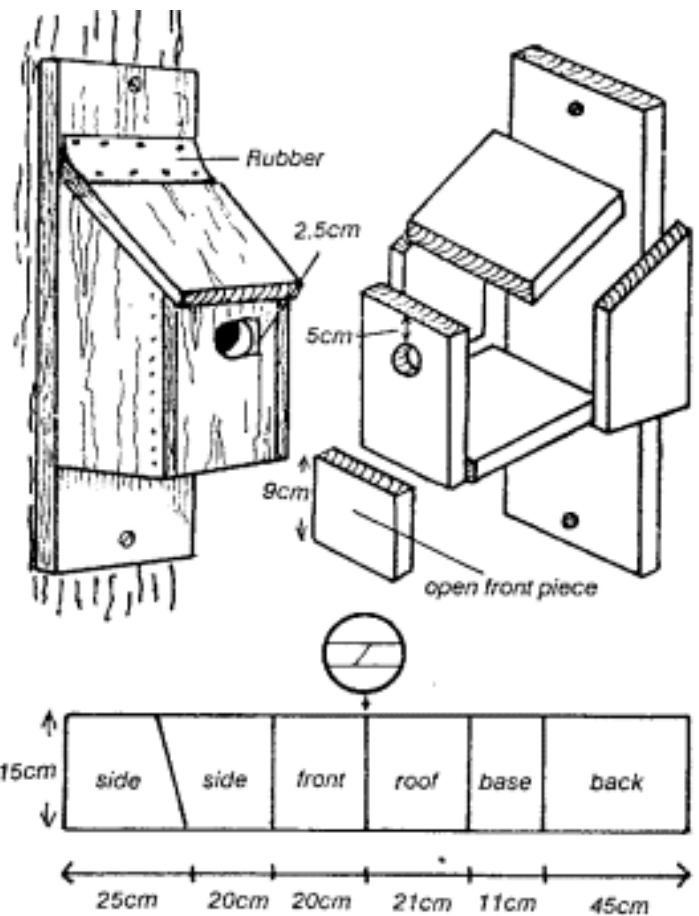
Nest boxes need to be secure, weatherproof and protected from predators but there is no standard, accurate design and different bird species favour varying types and locations of nesting sites. However, the following basic designs for small hole- and open-fronted boxes will accommodate most common garden birds. The particular species attracted will depend on its local distribution and population, on the size/ shape of the opening, and where you site the box.



Photo: Tamara Weeks

Small open-fronted nest boxes attract species such as robin, wren and pied wagtail.

Small hole-fronted nest boxes with an entrance hole of 25mm may attract blue tit, coal tit and marsh tit; 32mm may be used by great tit, house sparrow and nuthatch.



Nest boxes for other species

Many different types of nest box can be installed and it's best to do some research. Other species which may benefit from the use of suitable nest boxes include stock dove, jackdaw, starling, great spotted woodpecker and kestrel, together with little owl, tawny owl and barn owl. Internal nest boxes for species such as swift, house sparrow or starling can also be fitted into the design of new buildings or extensions.

Buying a ready-made bird box?

Make sure it:

- Has a floor space measuring 100x100mm
- Has a liftable lid or side panel, for cleaning
- Has the entrance no less than 125mm from the floor
- Is made from wood at least 15mm thick
- Is made from sustainably sourced (FSC certified) wood or even better Woodcrete (a mixture of concrete and sawdust), which is cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

Materials you will need:

- Untreated timber 15cm wide x 150cm long x 15mm thick
- Rubber for the hinge e.g. from an old bicycle tyre
- Galvanised 20mm nails
- Carpentry saw, hammer, hand brace or drill with 25mm or 32mm diameter bits, pencil and ruler, scissors for cutting rubber.

Construction

- Mark out the panels of the nest box with pencil and ruler to the dimensions shown above.
- Write the name of each panel onto the marked out wood. Where possible try to ensure that the grain will run vertically in the finished box; this will help with drainage.
- Saw the panels apart. Note that you will need to make a slanted 30° cut between the front panel and the roof.
- Now decide which species you want to attract: either use a drill to make a round entrance hole of 25mm or 32mm, or simply saw 75mm off the top of the front panel to make an open entrance.
(Note: the entrance hole should be no less than 125mm from the floor level)



Bird boxes with a CCTV camera are now available - great for watching all the activity inside!

Photo: Terry Dunstan

Next....

- Nail one of the sides onto the back plate through the back, then nail on the floor panel. Nail on the other side panel. This can be fairly tricky so take care to avoid splitting the wood.
- Nail the other panels into place except for the roof panel.
- If all your joints fit snugly you may need to drill a few small holes in the base for drainage purposes.
- Fix on the roof panel with a hinge made from the rubber. This should cover the join between the roof and back plate completely to ensure that it's waterproof. The roof should open and close like a lid. Open-fronted boxes don't need a hinge as they can be cleaned through the front entrance.
- Drill a screw hole through the roof into the front of the nest box so that you can temporarily screw down the lid. This will prevent predators gaining entry to the box and will enable you to clean the box every year in the autumn.
- Wood treatments and preservatives can be hazardous to wildlife and fatal to bats that may use your nest box. Even without treatment a box should last many years.

In spring, put out odds and ends which birds can use to build their nests such as feathers, wool (not cotton wool), string, moss and pet hair.

Location, location, location....

Whether fixed to a tree or a wall, it's important to put your bird box up in the right place. Make sure the box is clear of inquisitive humans and away from overhanging branches to avoid predators such as cats. Although the height above ground is not critical to most species of bird, hole-fronted boxes are best sited between one and five metres above the ground, with a clear flight path.

Open-fronted boxes can be situated lower down but should be hidden from view amongst cover such as ivy or a thorny bush. Remember that you will need to reach it to check the contents and remove old nesting material. Ensure your nest box is sheltered from prevailing wind, rain and strong sunlight. A position facing between north and east is usually best. The box should be tilted slightly downwards to prevent rain from entering. To avoid damage to the tree, attach your box using aluminium nails or use wire (with a piece of rubber or hose) around the trunk or branch, which also allows easier removal for maintenance and cleaning.

Regularly inspect the fittings to make sure the box remains securely attached and allows for tree growth. Do not place a nest box near a bird feeder or bird table as all the activity of visiting birds could disturb nesting pairs. If you put up different types of box, you can attract several species. Even the smallest garden can support at least one open-fronted and one hole-fronted nest box. If you have space for more, avoid placing the same type of box too close together. Many species are fiercely territorial, such as blue tits, and will not tolerate another pair close by.

Maintenance and hygiene

Most bird nests eventually harbour a variety of parasites such as fleas, lice and ticks, which can remain to infest hatchlings the following year. Annual cleaning is best carried out in October or November, at the end of each breeding season.



Photo: Terry Dunstan

All nest boxes should be taken down and old nesting material removed using gloves. Clean the box use boiling water to kill any remaining parasites. Do not use flea powder or insecticides.

If there are any unhatched eggs they can only be removed legally between August and January and must then be destroyed (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981). When the nest box is thoroughly dry, put in some clean hay (not straw) or wood shavings before replacing it, as it may be used during the winter by small mammals for hibernation or birds for roosting.

For further information

Wildlife Information Service (WIS)
Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall
and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS)
Five Acres, Allet, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9DJ

Tel: (01872) 302 250
Email: wis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk
Web: www.ercis.org.uk

Other useful contacts

- British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)
www.bto.org
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
www.rspb.org.uk

Nest box suppliers

- www.vinehousefarm.co.uk
- www.gardman.co.uk
- www.jacobijayne.com

Get involved

Share your sightings with us
Online Recording for Kernow and Scilly
(ORKS) www.ercis.org.uk/ORKS

Become a member of Cornwall Wildlife
Trust at www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk