

Nestboxes

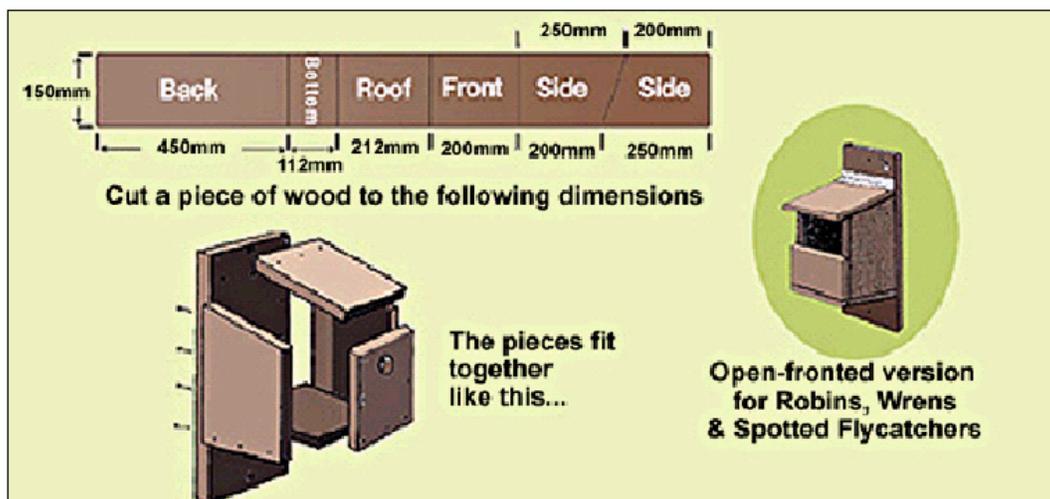


Although you may have plenty of birds coming into your garden to feed, there may not be anywhere suitable for them to nest. Modern houses have few holes or crevices for nesting, and old trees, which may have suitable holes, are often felled. Nestboxes provide the ideal solution and make excellent substitutes for natural nest sites for hole-nesting birds. They can be designed to suit the requirements of a range of different species, but the most popular are the ones which have an entrance hole suitable for the members of the tit family.



Building a nestbox

For the usual hole-nesting type of box use a plank about 150mm wide and 15mm thick: see the diagram below. Bear in mind that the inside of the box must be at least 100mm square and the bottom of the entrance hole must be 125mm from the floor. If it is less, young birds might be scooped out by a cat. Hinge the lid with a strip of leather or rubber (a piece of old inner tubing from a bicycle tyre would be perfect for this).



When constructing the box, use screws instead of nails if you can; galvanised nails are better than wire ones. A good catch to fasten the lid is essential. Wood preservative applied each autumn will prolong the life of the box. Ideally, a brace and bit should be used to drill the entrance hole, but if this is not possible you could use a fretsaw instead. By altering the size of the hole you cut you can determine which species will be most likely to use the box. The following is a guideline to which size holes certain species generally prefer (hole size given in mm): Blue Tit (25mm), Coal Tit (25mm), Great Tit (28mm), Tree Sparrow (28mm), House Sparrow (32mm), Starling (45mm).

Make the same box with the upper half of the front taken away altogether for Robin, Pied Wagtail and Wren. Spotted Flycatchers prefer a somewhat shallower open-fronted box. Some other species will use specifically designed nestboxes or platforms, including Swift, Swallow, Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Kestrel, Barn Owl, Jackdaw and Treecreeper; for further details of how to construct boxes suitable for these birds please contact BirdWatch Ireland.



When & where to put up your nestbox



Put your nestbox up well before the start of the breeding season, as many birds begin searching out nest sites from February onwards. Don't be too disappointed if nothing uses the box in the first year or two. Ideally the box should be located at least 2m from the ground (preferably 3 - 5m) to ensure that cats and curious people can't disturb or look into the nestbox. Place the nestbox on a wall, fence or tree trunk away from your bird table and in a quiet area. Do not nail a box to a tree but instead use a wire strap, and remember to check it every year to ensure the wire isn't cutting into the tree trunk as it grows. It is best to have the box angled forward slightly and kept away from the wall or tree by a strip of wood.

Unless the site is very sheltered the box should be fixed facing between north and south-east to avoid the hot sun and the wettest winds. There is no hard and fast rule as to how many nestboxes to put up, because it all depends on the surroundings, but for Blue and Great Tits a density of 2 to 4 boxes per acre would generally be enough. In all but the largest gardens only one box of each type is likely to be used, perhaps one by tits and one by Robins. On the other hand, two nestboxes quite close together are sometimes occupied at the same time if they are both at the edge of a territory. Also, take care not to put a box too close to a bird table. If you have to, because your garden is small, then stop putting out food once birds show interest in the box; otherwise they will spend all their time chasing other birds attracted to the food, and may eventually give up trying to nest altogether.



Care of your nestbox

If birds take up residence in your nestbox you should resist the temptation to keep having a quick peep, as this could potentially result in the parents abandoning the nest. Instead, watch the comings and goings of the birds from the safe distance of your kitchen window: they will behave more naturally and you will enjoy and learn more this way. The box can be opened from the end of October and cleaned out. Empty out old nest material and any unhatched eggs and clean the inside of the

box with boiling water (which should kill most parasites that may be lying in wait, ready to infest next year's brood). In cases of severe parasite infestation it may be necessary to use one of the less harmful insecticides, such as pyrethrum powder, but this should be avoided unless thought absolutely necessary.

A small handful of wood shavings placed in the box may encourage some birds to roost in it during the cold winter nights. Don't use straw as this will get damp and turn mouldy in the box over the course of the winter.

Why do some garden birds lay so many eggs?

In the natural world only the strongest individuals survive. Many bird species lay a surprisingly large number of eggs (for example, Blue Tits and Great Tits can lay as many as 14 or more in a single clutch), but the survival of all these chicks would be almost impossible, due to the limited food supply and to the natural tool taken by predators and disease. By laying so many eggs, the adults can ensure that at least some of their offspring will survive to breed the following year.



Why, when I came to clear out the old nest, did I find a number of young birds dead inside? Why did the birds desert the nest with eggs/young?



The main reason that parent birds desert their nests is because they have felt threatened by predators. The list of potential predators of nestboxes include cats, squirrels, rats, mice, stoats, and members of the crow family. Nestboxes can be afforded some protection against squirrels by fixing a metal plate around the entrance hole. If the box is fastened to a tree it may be kept free from cats by winding barbed wire loosely round the tree beneath it.

Alternatively, bundles of gorse tied round the tree above and below the box offer protection from most mammalian predators. Do not have a perch on the nestbox; it is of no use to the nesting birds and simply gives predators easier access to the eggs or chicks inside. Humans can also cause a nest to be abandoned, so please do try to resist the urge to peek inside the boxes and only remain in the immediate vicinity of a nestbox for a few minutes at most.

A sudden onset or a prolonged spell of cold weather in the late spring can also lead to the death of chicks, and nests are frequently abandoned in such conditions. This is generally due to lack of suitable natural food for the young or the death of one of the parents.

Why do the tits hammer at the entrance hole?

This is probably partly an instinctive action in natural sites where the entrance of the nest hole may need enlarging, and the behaviour may occur even in nestboxes where it is not necessary. It could also be part of the tits' constant search for small insects.



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