

Siting nest boxes

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Observing nesting birds is a rare treat for many of us since, with the disappearance of trees and undisturbed areas from our gardens, many species are finding it hard to find natural nesting sites in our vicinity. You can redress the balance with the aid of well-positioned nest boxes, which you can either make yourself or choose from an increasingly sophisticated selection offered by commercial suppliers.

The key point to keep in mind is that most nest-boxes are specific to one or several species of bird. The combination of hole and overall box shape and size will act as an excluder for many species, while making it suitable for others. In addition, the location in which you place the box can act as a further excluder due to habitat and behaviour preferences. So careful positioning is key- if the bird that likes the box doesn't like the location it won't choose to nest in it. Follow this guide, and to increase your chances place different types of box in different places in your garden.

Rules for all species

Think like a bird –some rules apply to all species. The box must appear to be safe. Place in a quiet, relatively undisturbed place, out of the reach of cats and predators. It must be sheltered, face the entrance away from mid-day sun, prevailing winds, and driving rain. Allow for a clear flight path from the entrance. It must be easy for the birds to spot and easy to defend –avoid ledges and perches on the actual box, they attract invaders and most birds don't need them. Know the species your box is suitable for and position accordingly.

Low nesters, below 2m

Robins and wrens go for open fronted nest-boxes. Position these low, less than 2m high and hide them well in vegetation.

Mid-height, 2-4m

This caters for sparrows, starlings, tits and spotted flycatchers. Fix the nest up a tree or wall and, in the case of flycatchers, provide some screening by vegetation without obstructing the flight-path.

High nesters, 5m

This includes woodpeckers (3-5m) and larger species such as owls and kestrels. Site barn owl and kestrel boxes on isolated trees or the outsides of buildings near woodland or overlooking open ground, with good visibility from the nest. Mount at

least 3-5m high or higher if there is risk of vandalism and take safety precautions as these boxes are large and heavy.

If your garden has mature trees or is set in woodland, try a nest-box at a similar height to attract tawny owls. Nest the box among branches as tawny owl chicks will explore around the nest well before they are able to fly. Avoid attracting these birds in gardens with small children as they become aggressive if they, or the nest, are approached.

Eaves

The location of choice for house martins, also popular with starlings and house sparrows. These birds are all colonial nesters so you can even place 2-3 boxes on the same site as long as they are well spaced out. Fix house martin nest cups (house martins build their nests out of mud but you can buy artificial alternatives) on east or north-facing walls, under the eaves so that they sit flush in the corner. And beware, don't place sparrow boxes anywhere near your house martin nests as sparrows are aggressive and likely to harass the martins.

Barns

Barns and disused buildings are used by barn owls and a few other species –make sure there is a permanently open window or opening into the barn, site the nest away from the entrance and make sure that the building is not regularly used.

Health hazards

Nests mean droppings and some birds, like house martins, will provide large deposits under the nest. Avoid sighting over windows and doorways, and build a shelf 2m below the nest to catch droppings if they become a problem. When cleaning nests always avoid breathing in dust and keep contact with dried droppings to a minimum. Beware of thorns inside nesting material when emptying.

Maintenance

Avoid interference with the nest while it is in use. Empty when deserted, clean with boiling water and leave to dry to ensure fleas and parasites don't remain to infest next year's hatchlings.

The Law

Many birds are protected by law, this includes house martins and barn-owls. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 provides for fines of up to £5,000 and even custodial sentences, avoid disturbing these birds and do not interfere with nests until no longer occupied.

Timing and success

Placing new nest-boxes is best done in autumn as birds will investigate and may even roost in potential nests over winter. Tits are an exception- they tend to start investigating nest sites only in February-March. Whatever the time of year, do place the box, it may not be used that season but the extra time will increase its chances of being used the following year.

And don't be discouraged if the nest isn't used in the first season despite being mounted on time, this happens and the nest may well be used in the following years. Mount more than one box to maximise chances and once you get it right keep the nests in the same location, as birds may re-visit.

Interference and predation

Keep sparrow boxes away from other birds, and protect against mammalian predators by placing rose clippings or gorse around the box, or investigate deterrents from commercial suppliers. And keep in mind, the birds will judge your placing and safety provisions for themselves before choosing to nest there, so don't worry too much and let nature take its course. After all, we're only giving it a helping hand...

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