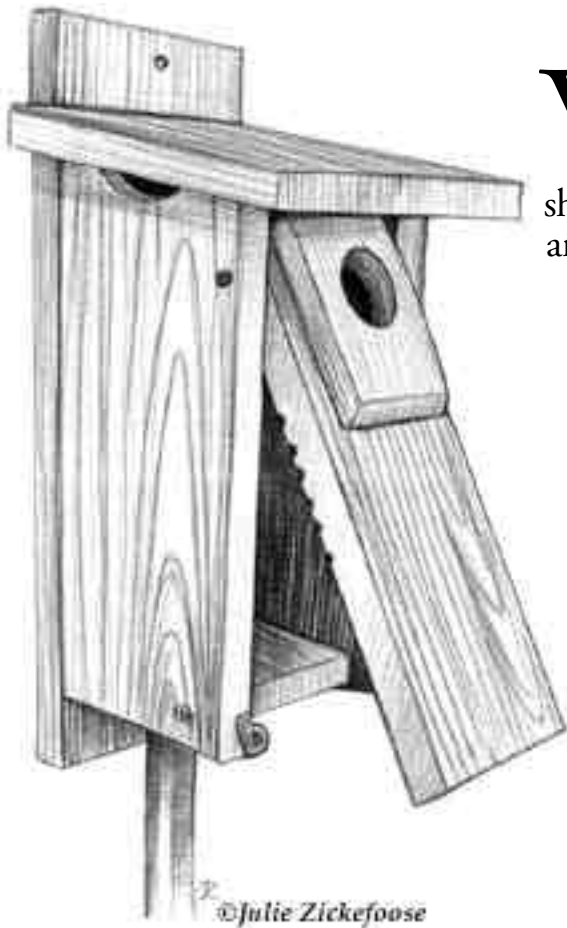


# Nest Box Basics

by Julie Zickefoose



Whether you buy your nest boxes at a store or nature center, or build them from scratch, there are certain characteristics your housing should have to best suit the needs of nesting birds. Here are some recommendations for nest box basics:

- The lumber used should be untreated and at least 3/4-inch thick to protect nests from spring chills and summer heat. Exterior plywood, cedar, and pine work well.
- Do not paint or stain the inside of the box. If you paint or stain the outside of the box, use a light earth tone color so sunlight and heat will be reflected, not absorbed.
- Use galvanized screws to assemble the nest box. It will last years longer than one built with nails or with glue, which will rapidly disintegrate as the wood warps and shrinks.
- Your access to the inside of the nest box should be easy for nest inspections and box maintenance. The best box designs feature a side or front panel that can be swung up or out to gain access to the inside.
- Perches on the front of a nest box are not necessary. All cavity nesters have strong feet and can easily cling to vertical wooden surfaces. Perches only give easy access to house sparrows, starlings, and predators.
- The roof of the nest box should extend well over the entrance hole to protect the opening from driving rain and predators.
- The inside front panel of the box should be deeply scored below the hole to give emerging birds a ladder for exiting the box.
- The floor of the nest box should have at least four 3/8-inch drain holes so the box can drain if it does get wet. The floor should be recessed (as shown at left) so that no end grain is exposed to soak up water in wet weather.
- Ventilation holes near the top allow excess heat to escape. Plug holes with weather-stripping putty in cold weather.
- The nest box should be protected from predators. The best way to protect your nest boxes is to mount them on poles with a predator baffle in place below the box.

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# BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST

## Housing Placement

Once you have acquired housing, you need to place it in the right habitat. Having selected a spot within appropriate habitat, make certain your nest boxes are securely mounted and baffled against predators (more about this topic later). Some species, such as martins and swallows, also require a clear flight path to and from the hole entrance.

Shop our store online to order your own copy of *A Guide to Bird Homes* for more details on house placement.

## Looking Into a Nest Box

You slowly open a nest box and see a black-capped chickadee sitting on its nest. What do you do? Simply close the box, walk away, and record in your notebook that the female was on the nest, probably incubating eggs.

This scenario underscores the reason nest boxes should be easy to open from the front or side. Spending several minutes disassembling a nest box to check its contents can be enough to drive a nesting bird away permanently.

If the female leaves as you approach, or as you open the box, inspect the nest quickly, record your findings, and leave the area. Your complete visit should take no more than 30 seconds. If you are able to keep your visit this brief, the female will return to the nest box shortly. You may even want to watch from about 30 yards away and time how long it takes for her to return to the nest. After the eggs hatch and the parents are bringing food to the chicks every few minutes, you may also want to record their comings and goings.

If you know the species using your nest box, you can find information about its incubation period. If you know the approximate date egg-laying ended and incubation began, you can estimate the hatching date of the eggs. This is important information. Timing is everything for a nest-box landlord. If you visit the nest during incubation or late in the nestling stage, you may cause nest abandonment or premature fledging. A good general rule is to limit nest box visits to the 10 days immediately after hatching. Resist the urge to visit nestlings—appealing as they may be—more often than necessary.

## Monitoring Your Nest Boxes

Observing and recording the progress of active nests is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of being a landlord to cavity nesting birds. For most of the nesting season, a weekly visit to each box will provide an accurate snapshot of the lives of your birds, without undue disturbance.

## Recording Your Observations

Here's how to record your observations: Devote a separate field notebook to your nest boxes, allowing several pages per nest box. Record what you see during your nest box inspections. Include the following information: Is the box being used? By what species? Has courtship or nest building begun? If there is a nest in the box, what is it made of? If there are eggs, how many and what do they look like?