

NEST MONITORING – GENERAL INFORMATION FOR ALL NESTS

Examination

Contrary to popular belief, birds rarely desert nests or abandon eggs because of disturbance. The easiest, most effective way of monitoring nest boxes is to lift up the top and look inside. Opening the boxes briefly will enable you to obtain accurate counts of eggs and nestlings for certain songbirds (i.e., bluebirds, wrens, chickadees, and titmice). It only takes a few minutes at each nest box to open the box and record the information on a data sheet.

You should:

- Check the nests every week.
- Initially make some soft noise as you approach the box to give the female a chance to fly away.
- Tap gently on the box before opening to warn the female of your approach.
- Only open the box briefly to count eggs.
- Make the final egg count after the female has begun to incubate. Songbirds do not generally incubate until the clutch is complete (i.e., until all the eggs have been laid).
- Remove the old nest from box shortly after the young have fledged to allow the adults to reuse the box for another brood.
- Several species, including bluebirds and house wrens, will raise more than one clutch each breeding season.
- Clean out all nest boxes each year. Only a few bird species will nest in a box that already contains a nest.
- Record the information on a data sheet.

You **should not** open the nest box if:

- The weather is cold or rainy.
- The young are about to leave the nest.
- The nest box contains screech owls, barred owls, kestrels, great-crested flycatchers, or other species that should not be disturbed during the nesting cycle.

By understanding the normal nesting cycle for individual species you can anticipate the activity at the box. Regular monitoring allows identification of problems if the expected activity is not observed.

Potential Problems and Solutions

Predators:

Cats, raccoons, snakes and red squirrels are all predators. Evening raids on nest boxes by raccoons suggest that these animals may learn to use human scent as a guide for locating nests that contain eggs and young. The nests can be protected by using post baffles/guards and/or post coatings such as Tanglefoot. **Predators may be thrown off your scent by walking indirectly to each nest site. When approaching a box, continue 8 to 10 feet beyond it and retrace your steps taking a last large step sideways to the box.**

Other Cavity-Nesters:

Other unwanted birds may compete for the box, going as far as to destroy or puncture eggs. House (English) sparrows are the greatest threat. They are messy nest builders, using bits of plastic, string, and loose vegetation. Bluebirds on the other hand, make neat grass cups. If you discover a house sparrow nest, remove it from the box and take it out of the immediate area. Do not build a perch on the box as this encourages sparrows and is not necessary for songbirds. Trapping and eliminating English sparrows and European starlings is more effective than simply removing their nests. If you are uncomfortable with removing the nests or the birds, another option is to shake the sparrow or starling eggs and leave them in the nest so that they will not hatch. The adults will continue to incubate the eggs and not attempt to build another nest.

It is against the law to remove nests or eggs of birds other than sparrows or starlings. Monitors need to be positive of bird and egg identification before taking action to remove them. A brief description of different species' nests and eggs is included at the end.

Parasites:

Blowfly larvae attach themselves to the feet, legs, underside of wings and beaks of newly hatched fledglings and draw out blood and other fluids. The female blowfly will lay 50-200 eggs in a grass nest. If the infestation is severe, fledglings may be killed or seriously weakened. A wire mesh screen placed in the bottom of the nest box will prevent the larvae from travelling back up through the nest once they have fallen through the screen. Parasites can transfer from one nest to the next, and it is therefore essential that the old nest is removed after the young fledge. Wear gloves when removing infested nests.

Bad Weather:

Continued rain for several days may cause the nest to become very wet and young nestlings may die - especially if it is before their feathers develop. Native cavity-nesting songbirds have a very poor sense of smell, and therefore, will not object to the wet nest being removed and replaced with dry grass clippings from the area. Especially hot weather can also be detrimental to nesting success. It is important that nest boxes contain ventilation openings on the bottom as well as the top of the box. A new technique to improve air flow and protect the box from bad weather is placing a dark shingle on the lid of the box. The shingle absorbs heat, creating warmer conditions near the top of the box. This, in effect, creates an air flow from the bottom ventilation openings to the top openings. Certain sites have found this increased ventilation to be effective at combating extreme heat and humidity.

HOW TO IDENTIFY NESTS AND EGGS BY SPECIES

Eastern Bluebird: The 1-4 in. tall nest is built with fine grasses or pine needles with a fairly deep nest cup. Eggs (4-6) are powder blue or occasionally white, 21 mm in length.

Tree swallow: Their nest is also made of grasses but they may use somewhat coarser fibers than a bluebird. The nest generally has a flatter cup than the bluebird's and is usually lined with feathers or occasionally scraps of paper. Eggs (5-7) are white and smaller than those of a bluebird.

House wren: Wrens fill a nest box with sticks and line the deep nest cup with fine plant fibers or feathers. "Dummy nests" without the nest cup are often built in all other cavities within the male wren's territory to reduce competition for resources. The eggs (6-8) are tan, speckled with brown and quite small.

Black-capped chickadee: Chickadees build a nest of moss and plant down with the nest cup lined with hair. They lay 5-8 white eggs covered with brown speckles. Eggs are often covered with moss when the female leaves the box.

House sparrow: House sparrows build a tall nest of coarse grasses, often with pieces of scrap paper, cellophane, or other garbage. The nest forms a canopy with a tunnel-like entrance to the 5-7 cream-colored eggs with brown markings.

Above information has been excerpted in its entirety from the North American bluebird Society.

This information has been provided to you by the North American Bluebird Society. Be a part of the conservation solution. Contact the NABS headquarters:

North American Bluebird Society
The Wilderness Center
P.O. Box 244
Wilmot OH 44689-0244

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Please visit these websites for more information:

The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection –
<http://dep.state.ct.us/burnatr/wildlife/factshts/bbird.htm>

Audubon Society of Omaha - The Bluebird Box – <http://audubon-omaha.org/bbbox/index.htm>