

# Providing habitat for the birds in your backyard



## Provide habitat

Providing high quality habitat, including safe places for birds to nest, is one of the best ways we can support Minnesota's native bird populations. Many birds are dependent on dead and dying woody vegetation for shelter and forage. Chickadees, bluebirds, woodpeckers, wood ducks, wrens, owls, kestrels, and many other birds use cavities for nesting. Nuthatches and woodpeckers will search for grubs and beetles inside the bark of dead and dying trees. Loss of trees for shelter and food is a leading cause of the decline in many bird populations.

In urban, suburban, and even rural areas, suitable nesting cavities may be scarce. We tend to remove dead and dying trees for our own safety, but this means there are fewer places for birds to nest. You can help the birds in your area by creating temporary brush piles using short sticks or installing nest boxes in your yard.



*Mourning dove*



*Song sparrow*



*Cerulean warbler*

# Build a bird house



When you think of a nest box, you may be thinking of a traditional bird house that looks like a miniature of your own house with a perch on the front. In reality, nest boxes for birds are more often shaped like wooden boxes, platforms, or cones. Each box must be created with a specific bird species in mind.

Bird houses should be made of untreated wood, preferably cedar, and galvanized screws for construction. Thick walls, ventilation holes, a sloped roof, recessed floor, and drainage holes keep the

house warm and dry. To help songbird fledglings climb out of the nest box when they are ready to fly, create horizontal slits in the inside wall of the nest box to act like a ladder.

Depending on the habitat available on your property, there are dozens of birds that you could attract with a specially made nest box! Below is a list of breeding species in Hennepin County that you could create a nest box for.

- American kestrel
- American robin
- Barn owl
- Barn swallow
- Barred owl
- Black-capped chickadee
- Canada goose
- Eastern bluebird
- Eastern phoebe
- Eastern screech-owl
- Great blue heron
- Great crested flycatcher
- Great horned owl
- Hooded merganser
- House wren
- Mallard
- Mourning dove
- Northern flicker
- Northern saw-whet owl
- Osprey
- Pileated woodpecker
- Prothonotary warbler
- Purple martin
- Red-breasted nuthatch
- Tree swallow
- Tufted titmouse
- White-breasted nuthatch
- Wood duck



*Tree swallow*

Visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's NestWatch ([nestwatch.org](http://nestwatch.org)) to download the nest box plans for each of these species. Their site includes plans, installation requirements, and other tips for creating the ideal nest box.

## Place your bird house



Certain species of birds prefer their homes to be in specific areas, such as in the open, in areas of dense vegetation, or near the water. Take note of the species of bird that you are trying to attract and refer to [nestwatch.org](https://www.nestwatch.org) for the nesting habitats that they prefer.

Try to place your nest boxes by mid-March to allow migrating birds a chance to use them. Don't be discouraged if birds don't use the nest box right away. Sometimes it can take several seasons for them to find the home you've built for them. Rest assured, breeding pairs will often use a nest box for years once they find the perfect spot.

Do not place your nest box near anywhere that pesticides or herbicides are used. These chemicals can reduce the supply of food for hungry nestlings and harm both parents and their chicks.

## Clean and maintain your bird house

Once you have a nest box established, it needs minimal but very important maintenance. Over time, a buildup of nesting material and fecal matter can overtake a nest box. Unclean nests can also harbor parasites that can spread to other birds. Here are some tips for keeping your nest box in good working condition:

- During the breeding season, in the spring and early summer leave the nesting material in your nest boxes.
- At the end of the season, remove the material and scrub the inside with mild detergent and water.
- If the nest is very soiled, scrub it with one part bleach to ten parts water.
- Replace any parts of the house that are damaged or rotting.
- Make sure the house is still well secured to the pole.
- Wood duck houses need four inches of fresh cedar chips every year.



*Robin eggs*



*Wood duck*

## Keep out unwanted guests

Once you've created the perfect nest box, the last thing you want is for it to invite guests such as predators or invasive species.

Common nest box predators include raccoons, chipmunks, cats, squirrels, snakes, and larger birds.

### To avoid predation by these animals:

- Never include a perch on the outside of your nest box.
- Mount your nest box on a pole high enough from the ground and far away from trees.
- Outfit your nest box with predator deterrents such as baffles, mesh guards, or entrance hole extenders.
- Keep your cats indoors.



### To keep out invasive species:

- Be sure to construct your nest box with the appropriately sized hole for your target bird species.
- Avoid feeding invasive species to prevent attracting them to your property.
- Plug the entrance of your boxes until migrating birds return in the spring.



### To exclude unwanted species such as rodents, bees or wasps:

- Keep your nest box plugged until bird breeding season.
- Spray the top inside of an empty nest box with cooking spray to discourage bee and wasp nests.

### If any of these invasive or unwanted species are already established:

- Wait for stinging insects to leave before cleaning out the box.
- Clean out old mouse nests in the spring and wear gloves and a dust mask.
- Wait for squirrels to finish raising their young before removing the nest.
- Install deterrents such as baffles to discourage future rodent nesting.
- Never spray insecticides into a nest box, even if it's empty. The effects of the insecticide will linger and could harm young birds in the future.

## Other ways to help birds

If you're interested in further helping birds (and other wildlife), consider the following tips:

- If they don't pose a safety concern, leave dead trees and brush standing.
- Provide water and multiple different food sources using bird feeders and make sure they are cleaned regularly to prevent disease.
- Plant native vegetation.
- Make windows more visible to birds with curtains, screens, and other markings to prevent window strikes.
- Turn off lights that you're not using, especially at night and during bird migration.
- Don't use pesticides. They can poison or kill birds or their food source.
- Keep your cats indoors. Cats are one of the most common causes of bird casualties, particularly young birds.
- Contact the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Minnesota ([wrcmn.org](http://wrcmn.org)) for advice on what to do with an injured bird, or any other wildlife.
- Record your bird observations through the NestWatch app at [nestwatch.org](http://nestwatch.org).
- Send pictures of the birds using your nest box to [nicole.witzel@hennepin.us](mailto:nicole.witzel@hennepin.us).



Golden-crowned kinglet

## Contact us

Nicole Witzel  
Wildlife Biologist  
[nicole.witzel@hennepin.us](mailto:nicole.witzel@hennepin.us)

### Photo credits

Right inside flap: Tree swallow (bottom left) by Vinny Simard

Inside left: Sparrow on sign (middle left) Marilyn Miller, Mourning dove (upper right) by Allison Zon, Cerulean warbler (bottom right) by Paul Roots

Inside middle: Blue bird house by Diego Huet, Nest by Hila Taylor, Woodduck house by Doug Brush

Inside right: Non-native starling by Gerhard G.

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Hennepin County  
Environment and Energy

[environment@hennepin.us](mailto:environment@hennepin.us)  
612-348-3777

34-406-09-22

