

# Bird Houses



MN DNR

Eastern bluebird using bluebird house.

Building a bird house is one of the most common wood working projects for children and adults. But it is important to understand that these houses need to be properly built, installed and maintained or they can remain unused, attract harmful bird species or be dangerous to desirable birds.

Installing bird houses is becoming increasingly important to replace lost habitat. For instance, many birds use holes or cavities in old trees as a place to nest. But in some areas, these trees are removed for safety and aesthetic reasons. At the Living Lab many of the trees that were here 50 years ago were removed for firewood, to slow down the spread of Dutch elm disease and to provide habitat for grazing sheep. In some areas, as the demand for wood increases, trees are not allowed to become old before they are harvested. In Minnesota and North Dakota about 40 species of birds will use bird houses or artificial nesting cavities. Houses can also be built for mammals such as bats or squirrels.

In some cases we install bird houses and feeders because we want to learn more about them or just because we enjoy watching wildlife!

Bird houses can be made or purchased. In either case make sure they are appropriate for the species you want to attract. Even some of the commonly purchased houses are improperly built and can result in harm to desirable birds.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) offers some suggestions:

- Build and install houses for specific species of birds. Birds have different houses size and entrance hole requirements.
- Provide a hinged roof or side so that the house can be cleaned and checked each year.
- Most houses should have drain holes on the bottom.
- Most houses should be firmly fastened to a tree or post and not suspended by a rope. Bluebird houses should NOT be placed in trees where predators such as cats or raccoons can reach them. Use posts instead.
- Do not use houses with perches. They allow non-desirable species such as house sparrows and starlings to use the house.
- The top front edge of a house should overhang to protect the entrance hole from wind driven rain and to discourage cats from reaching in from above.

- Except for Wood duck houses, install a ventilation hole on the top right and left sides of the house.
- Build houses with the appropriate high quality fasteners. Screws usually work best. Nails and staples often loosen up in a few years.
- To prevent water damage, the sides of a birdhouse should enclose the floor. On most houses recess the floor ¼ inch.
- Do not use metal or flimsy material such as milk cartons for houses. They can heat up and kill the occupant. However, aluminum is acceptable for Purple martin houses.
- The best all around material for construction is wood, preferably cedar. Some wood preservatives and treated wood can be harmful to birds.
- Some birds defend territories. Houses intended for them must not be located too close together.
- Discourage wasps and bees from using bird houses.
- When they become established, remove blowfly eggs and larvae from bluebird nests.
- Leave songbird houses open in the winter to discourage mice from taking over the nest.
- When measuring boards, allow for the width of the saw blade and remember boards are usually smaller than their stated measurements. For example a 1"X6" pine board actually measures ¾"x 5 ½"

- Wood chips, not saw dust, should be used in the bottom of owl and wood duck boxes and changed yearly.
- The correct size and shape of bird houses entrance holes is extremely important.

The greatest challenge to someone providing bird houses is competition from house sparrows and starlings. Both of these birds are nuisance exotic species that will kill or drive away desirable native species. Proper house construction and trapping are the two most common ways to keep these pests under control.

House cats and raccoons are the two most common mammal predator pests. Live trapping and various guards installed on bird houses or on supporting trees or posts are some of the ways to keep these pests from killing birds.

MN DNR and North Dakota Game & Fish are two sources for excellent reference material to use when purchasing or building bird houses.



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Saw Whet owl using nesting box



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Purple martins using bird house.