

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Backyard Notes:

HUD for the Birds

Late winter is the perfect time to be thinking about cleaning out and installing new bird houses around your yard (Bluebirds are already house hunting). Remember ... there are four basic needs that birds have - food, water, shelter and a place to raise a family - we'll call it a Housing and Urban Development Plan for the Birds. Here are a few things you need to consider when choosing birdhouses.

Size

A birdhouse should be the right dimensions to admit the bird, hold nesting material, and be deep enough so there are several inches between the top of the nest and the entrance hole. The entrance hole should be just big enough to accommodate the bird but small enough to keep out predators (1 1/2 inches is a good size for most common birdhouse users like chickadees, wrens, titmice, swallows and bluebirds).

Materials

Wooden nest boxes constructed of cedar (insect resistant) or pine insulate birds/nestlings from excessive cold or heat are best. Choose wood that is 5/8 to 3/4 inches thick. Don't construct the box of, or stain it with materials that could be harmful to the birds like lead-based paint, creosote, or pressure treated lumber and avoid metal or ceramic boxes. Do not paint the inside of the box.

Proper Ventilation

There should be ventilation holes or a slit made near the top of the sides of the birdhouse.

Drainage

Drill holes in the bottom of the box so any water that gets in will drain out.

Opening

The box should be easily opened from the front or side in order to check on the progress of the chicks and clean out nesting material after the breeding season is over.

Color

Birds perceive color and this may influence their choice of houses. Many birds will accept birdhouses that have bright colors or patterns, but it is best to provide houses with muted colors or natural wood.





Inside

Inside the box under the entrance hole there should be horizontal grooves or slits, like a ladder, to help the young birds climb up to the entrance. Perches are not needed!

Overhang

There should be a 1-2 inches roof overhang above the entrance hole to keep out rain and provide shade.

Location

Where? - Place the house in the right habitat for the bird you are trying to attract. For example, chickadees, titmice, and wrens nest in wooded areas. Bluebirds and tree swallows nest in open areas. If you are trying to attract some of the woodland species, try to place the box within ten to fifteen feet of a shrub that can serve as a perch for the birds as they come to and go from the house.

When? - The best time of year to put up a birdhouse in the Carolinas is late January or early February.

How? - Attach birdhouses to a post or pole. Place a length of PVC pipe (4" in diameter) around the pole as a baffle to keep predators like raccoons from climbing the pole. Stovepipe or a wide metal cone can also be used below the box as a predator guard. Suspending the birdhouse from a wire can work well for the smaller birdhouses, such as a wren house (Hang it from two wires secured to different ends of the house to prevent it from twirling around). For birds that are particularly tolerant of humans, such as wrens, the birdhouse may be mounted on your house, garage, shed, etc.

How High? - Most birds will accept birdhouses placed from 5 to 50 feet high - but its best to place it at a height you can reach for cleaning/monitoring purposes.

What Direction? - Place the birdhouse away from the prevailing winds, to prevent rain from blowing into the house. Generally this means facing the box to the South or East.



When Will Birds Use It?

If a birdhouse is put up prior to or just at the start of the breeding season, there is a good chance it will be used. However, since there are a myriad of factors that affect this, if a house is not used within two years, change its location.

How Many Birdhouses?

The number of birds that might nest on your property at any one time depends on the number of species in the area, how many cavities or birdhouses there are, and the number of habitats available on your property. Bear in mind that birds are also territorial when breeding. They will keep birds of their own species out of their territory, but will tolerate birds of different species nesting close by.