



BIRD NESTBOXES



AGRICULTURE AND FOOD DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Bird Nestboxes

Many birds nest in holes in trees, cliffs and old buildings. Nestboxes are substitutes for these holes which, with the removal of old trees and building renovations, are becoming scarce in the countryside. Over 30 species are known to have used nestboxes in Ireland.

Nestboxes placed in suitable habitats on the farm provide safe nesting sites for many bird species. When planning to put up nestboxes, give priority to providing boxes for species of conservation concern. Many of these will also be used by common bird species.

Features

There are many different types and designs of nesting box for even one species of bird, but all share similar features. The material that the box is constructed from should be well insulated to protect chicks from very hot or very cold weather conditions.

- Use exterior-quality plywood or 25mm (1 inch) thick wooden boards.
- Put a metal hinge or rubber flap hinge on the roof of hole-fronted boxes to facilitate opening for cleaning.
- Drill small holes in the bottom of boxes to allow water drain away.
- Treat only the *outside* of boxes with a water-based wood preservative, that is known to be "animal-friendly" (such as *Sadolin*).

Where to Site Nestboxes

- Face boxes somewhere between north and east, away from prevailing south-westerly wind and away from the midday sun (south).
- Locate at least 2.5 metres above ground away from predators and vandals, still accessible from a small stepladder. For some species such as Spotted Flycatcher, the higher the box is the better. Take care when using ladders near nestboxes - for your own safety as well as any nesting birds!

Cleaning

Clean nestboxes every year, after the breeding season has finished. Some birds may make more than one nesting attempt in a year, and may use the same site for a second, third or more clutches. Birds may also use a nestbox during the winter in which to roost. Clean boxes in October and November. If you find a box with cold eggs, leave untouched, check a week later to see if there are more eggs, or if the eggs are warm. Many birds lay one egg a day, and only incubate when the clutch is complete. If the same number of cold eggs remain, it is probably safe to remove them with the old nest and clean the box.

Conservation of Birds and Nests

All birds, nests, eggs and nestlings are fully protected under the Wildlife Act 1976 (2000). Wilful destruction of an active nest (subject to certain exemptions) from the building stage until the chicks have fledged is an offence.

Barn Owl

The Barn Owl, fondly known as the “white owl”, has declined in numbers hugely in recent years. While they may be present in every county, most are restricted south of a line from Galway to Dundalk. Report Barn Owl sightings to BirdWatch Ireland. Barn Owl boxes should have an interior space of minimum 450mm wide, 450mm high and 750 mm deep, with an entrance hole at least 120mm square. An exercise platform should be positioned below the entrance. Site boxes only where there is suitable habitat - below 150m altitude and at least 3km from major roads. Locate boxes around buildings, where human disturbance is low, or on trees or poles at a height of 3-5metres. Clean out boxes in November, leaving a 1cm layer of bark chippings on the base. Keep disturbance to a minimum at other times.



Barn Owl exterior nest box

Kestrel

These small falcons often seen hovering over grasslands, use a large, open-fronted box. Internal dimensions should be 150mm wide, 500mm deep and 300mm high. The front lip should be 150mm high. Fix a branch to the top lip of the front for use as a perch. Locate boxes 3-5 metres up in trees to give a good view of open countryside, or high in open buildings such as haybarns.



Kestrel nest box

Swallow

This smaller cousin of the Woodpigeon is restricted mainly to tillage areas. The interior should have a 200mm square base, and be about 450mm high, with a 150 mm hole near the top of the front. Fix on trees or buildings with the front facing an open area of grassland. Jackdaws may also use this type of box.



Swallows

Swallow & House Martin

Swallows build mud nests *inside* buildings; House Martins build mud nests *outside* buildings, often under eaves or an overhang. Although it is possible to construct or buy artificial mud nests for them, providing small ledges for them to base their nest cup on may be all that is needed.

In modern farm buildings of concrete and metal, fixing wooden boards vertically to the roof with 1cm square beading along the lower edge provides Swallows with a site to build. A similar ledge affixed to the top of a gable wall under the eaves (at least 50cm from the eaves) may encourage House Martins to nest.

Spotted Flycatcher

This small, greyish bird, often only seen in the tops of trees where it catches insects in mid-air, spends the summer in Ireland, migrating to southern Africa for winter. It nests in a small, open-fronted box with a base 120mm square and a height of 175 mm. The lip at the front should be no more than 25mm. Site the box high up on a building or tree, preferably partly concealed by ivy or other foliage. Robins also use this type of nest box.



Spotted Flycatcher



Spotted Flycatcher nest box



Starling nest box

Starling

Although still a common sight in both summer and winter around Irish farms, Starlings are on the amber list due to population declines throughout Europe. Often a nuisance nesting under roof tiles, they readily take to nestboxes, allowing them to be relocated elsewhere in the farmyard where they are less of a problem. Nestboxes should have a base 150mm square and should be 300 mm high, with a 45mm hole.



Sparrow nest box

House & Tree Sparrow

As with the Starling, both sparrow species are declining in Europe. The House Sparrow is a familiar bird across Ireland; Tree Sparrows are more restricted in range, principally to the east coast. They both use the same type and size of box (120mm square base and 175 mm high with a 32mm hole). Several boxes can be grouped together (both species nest in loose colonies), but must be located in an undisturbed part of the farm, preferably in or near the farmyard. This type of box will also be used by a wide range of small, hole-nesting species, such as tits and Wrens.



Tree Sparrows

Further Information

Contact your local Teagasc office or www.teagasc.ie.
Published by Teagasc, Oak Park, Carlow, June 2008

Contact BirdWatch Ireland (0)1 2819878 www.birdwatchireland.ie
BirdWatch Ireland's *Wings Giftshop* also sells nestboxes for all species described here, along with boxes for other species of birds and also for bats, insects and other mammals.

Photos: A Copland, J Lusby, E Dunne, C Timmons, O O'Sullivan, S Connolly, RSPB