

# How to: Create and maintain a bird box



Photo: Villy Fink via Wikimedia Commons



Photo: Peter Quested

*A worthwhile activity if you do it properly and are patient*

## Target species:

Typical nest boxes serve the need of small birds which in nature would nest in holes in rotten wood. These include blue and great tits, robins, house sparrow, tree sparrows and starlings. More specialist nest boxes will help swifts, swallow and house martins, woodpeckers, owls and even ducks. The bigger boxes are more suited to large gardens or estates where these birds can find food.

## How to do it

- You can buy a huge range of nest boxes from commercial suppliers, starting at about £10, so since you can't have lots of nest boxes in a small garden this may be a good decision.
- Most commercial boxes are wooden, but woodcrete is a good alternative
- Making your own nest box just requires some wood (at least 15mm thick for insulation), a saw, hammer, nails, strip of rubber and big drills. There is a useful RSPB leaflet [here](#) which shows how to make a standard bird box from a plank of wood.
- Nest box roofs should be slanting and overhang the front of the box to keep rain out, and the roof should be hinged so it can be cleaned out.
- Different species require slightly different boxes, especially in terms of the entrance hole diameter
- Some species, including robins and wrens prefer a partly open fronted nest box, but this must be placed well out of the reach of cats.
- Don't use wood preservative on the inside of the box

## Siting your box This is crucial if it is going to be accepted

- Don't put it up in the sun, or it will heat up and cook the nestlings inside
- Put it in a quiet place where the parents will not be continually disturbed. You should consider the bird's feelings more than your own desire to see what is going on.

- Put it above head height and not close to horizontal branches that cats could use to approach it.
- Autumn is a good time to put boxes up, so birds have the winter to find and get used to them

### **How easy is it to do?**

Putting up a commercial box is easy. Making your own is moderately difficult but satisfying

### **How much will it cost?**

Commercial boxes cost from £10 upwards. A new plank of untreated timber suitable for use costs about £10 and is long enough for you to squeeze two small boxes from it, or you could try your local recycling establishments which can charge as little as £1.50 per metre.

### **How effective is it for the target species?**

Effective but only if sited and constructed correctly.

### **Golden rules – what the science tells us**

- Many common garden birds like blackbirds and thrushes don't use bird boxes but make their own nests
- Nest boxes fixed higher above the ground have higher occupancy and hatch more young
- For real breeding success your garden (and your neighbours) need to provide enough food, in the form of seeds and berries for adults and particularly caterpillars and other insects for their young.
- Many species will not tolerate a second bird of the same species occupying another box in the garden
- It is worth providing nesting material. Hair (human and pets) feathers and sheep's wool
- Clean out the box every couple of years, ideally in September or October when nesting has finished and before birds start using it for roosting in winter.

### **What to look for?**

You should be able to hear nestlings, and see parents going in and out – but don't disturb them! Nest box cameras are now available that can be installed inside suitable boxes, and many now use wireless connections to send you live action. These cost from £55 to £120.

### **Things to be aware of**

- Despite your best efforts you may not get resident families in the first year, so be patient

### **Further information**

#### **Website**

RSPB [guidance](http://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/kids--schools/making-a-nestbox-activities.pdf) www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/kids--schools/making-a-nestbox-activities.pdf

Conservation [evidence Provide nest boxes for birds](http://www.conservationevidence.com/actions/155) www.conservationevidence.com/actions/155

BTO [nestbox website](http://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/putting-nest-boxes-birds) www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/putting-nest-boxes-birds

#### **Books**

Gardening for Wildlife Adrian Thomas 2017 Bloomsbury (very good summary)

Nestboxes: Your Complete Guide. Dave Cromack (2018) BTO Services Ltd