

Deter Bird Drilling with Nest Boxes

For general information on bird boxes, and their installation and maintenance, scan down to the section titled “Bird Nest Box General Information”.

Pygmy Nuthatch Nest Boxes: Something constructive you can do to combat Pygmy Nuthatch drilling is to offer them a roosting or nesting box. Although there are no guarantees, an attempt at coexisting peacefully is certainly worth the effort and can be your best chance of a solid solution. If late winter or early spring is the time you discover holes being drilled by Pygmies, nesting is most likely the primary purpose of the hole. A range of box sizes might be used by these birds, but the inside dimension of the box that is ideal for nesting is probably 4 x 4” with a hole that is 1 1/4” wide. Pygmy Nuthatches will also sometimes nest in a standard bluebird box, however bluebird-sized boxes can be more attractive for roosting (see below). If putting up only one box, and doing this in the spring, put up a standard nuthatch box. Place approximately two inches of tightly packed wood shavings in the bottom of the box.

Pygmy Nuthatch Roost Boxes: If late summer or fall is the time holes are in process, roosting is most likely the primary purpose. Often, larger boxes are selected for roosting because sometimes large groups of Pygmy Nuthatches will roost together. If putting up only one box, and doing this in late summer or fall, put up a bluebird-sized box. Finally, plans for making your own boxes can be readily found online. Boxes with inside perches that are sold as “roost boxes” do not work well for Pygmy Nuthatches. Because they prefer to layer themselves on the bottom of the box, a nesting box with no inside perches works best. Place approximately two inches of tightly packed wood shavings in the bottom of the box.

Pygmy Nuthatch Box Purchase: Boxes for Pygmy Nuthatch nesting can be purchased online or from a wild bird store. For roosting, any box made to bluebird box specifications will work well.

To increase the chances your larger box is used only by a Pygmy Nuthatch, and to help prevent the door from being drilled out by a woodpecker, purchase a 1 1/4” metal door portal to screw over the box entrance.

Pygmy Nuthatch Box Placement: It is recommended you hang nuthatch boxes on the side of your home. Pygmy Nuthatches are more apt to use an alternative hole that is as high off the ground and as close to the site they have already selected as possible. By hanging the box from your home, you can often come very close to accomplishing this. Hang the box underneath the highest accessible window, closest to the existing hole and a minimum of 10 feet off the ground. Note the conditions of the existing hole (i.e. shade/sun, wind protection, access to nearby trees) and try to recreate this in the spot you place your box.

Since Pygmy Nuthatches often want boxes for two reasons and two seasons, it can be effective to hang them in more than one area. If your home is being targeted in multiple spots, consider hanging at least two boxes. A box that gets full sun, especially on a south facing wall, may not be selected for a nesting site because of the heat, however this site may be chosen for a winter

roost. A north facing wall may be selected for nesting, yet not for roosting, because it may be too cool. An eastern, or south eastern facing wall is probably the best bet to be used because it stands a better chance to be used for both nesting and roosting, however it is usually best to choose the wall with the existing holes, regardless of the direction it faces.

A few days after placing boxes, fill all existing holes in your stucco. It can be effective to stuff them with steel wool and to cover them with fine wire mesh before patching. If there is an active nest or roost hole in your walls, it can take much longer for birds to transition to boxes. **DO NOT** fill Pygmy Nuthatch holes in your stucco from April through August as they may have nests with babies inside. It is against the law to disturb an existing nest of a native North American bird.

If a Pygmy Nuthatch has been successful in roosting within your stucco in the past, it can sometimes be very hard to get them to accept a box. If the birds continue to drill in areas where holes have been filled, even with an available box, you may want to hang a temporary rectangular piece of fine wire mesh – possibly even in the form of a window screen - over the entire area being attacked. You can remove it once the birds have adapted to the nest box.

Pygmy Nuthatch Box Maintenance: In September, when cleaning out a box that has been used by Pygmy Nuthatches, if it looks clean and is lined with feathers leave it untouched and close or re-hang it. Sometimes Pygmies will clean boxes out themselves immediately after nesting and start to ready the same box for roosting. Examine the box again in late March. If it appears clean and is still lined with feathers, again, leave it alone and re-hang it. At this point, the birds may continue to roost in the box, or they may convert it to a nesting box. Pygmy Nuthatches will often stuff ventilation and drainage holes with fur or plant material to help insulate the boxes in winter. Don't remove this material during cold months of the year, however do remove it in late April, being careful to make sure you are not disturbing an early clutch of eggs.

Woodpecker Nest Boxes: With woodpeckers, just as with Pygmy Nuthatches, you may also consider putting up a nest box to discourage drilling. Often woodpeckers will transition over to a man-made box. Using the information on page one, determine exactly what kind of woodpecker it is that is doing damage. You can find information about the nestbox specifications of specific species on <https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/> - or refer to the information below. It is recommended you hang woodpecker boxes on the side of your house. Woodpeckers are more apt to use a nest box that is as high off the ground and as close to the sight they have already selected. By hanging the box from your home, you can often come very close to accomplishing this. Hang the box underneath the highest accessible window, closest to the existing hole and a minimum of 10 feet off the ground. Note the conditions of the existing hole (i.e. shade/sun, wind protection, access to nearby trees) and try to recreate this in the spot you place your box.

A few days after placing boxes, fill all existing holes in your stucco. It can be effective to stuff them with steel wool and to cover them with fine wire mesh before patching. If there is an active nest or roost hole in your walls, it can take much longer for birds to transition to boxes. **DO NOT** fill woodpecker holes from April through August as they may have nests with babies inside. It is against the law to disturb an existing nest of a native North American bird.

If a woodpecker has been successful in roosting within your siding in the past, it can sometimes be very hard to get them to accept a box. If the birds continue to drill in areas where holes have been filled, even with an available box, you may want to hang a temporary rectangular piece of fine wire mesh – possibly even in the form of a window screen - over the entire area being attacked. You can remove it once the birds have adapted to the nest box.

In September, clean out your woodpecker boxes. See “Bird Box Maintenance” below.

Downy Woodpecker : Most woodpeckers roost at night in cavities, usually different cavities than those they nest in and often alternating between a few. Downy Woodpeckers are more apt to use a conventional bird box as an additional roosting spot than they are to actually nest in it– still a good reason to put up an appropriate box. In the bottom of the box, place about 3 inches of tightly packed wood shavings.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 4 x 4”

Inside Box Depth: 10 - 12”

Cavity Opening: 1.25 – 2 ” diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 8 - 10”

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 6 – 20’

Hairy Woodpecker : Woodpeckers are primary cavity nesters and therefore have the ability to drill their own nesting and roosting holes, but because of the decreasing number of trees, woodpeckers will often accept manmade boxes. Hairy Woodpeckers seem a bit more likely to nest in manmade boxes than Downy Woodpeckers, and will also readily use them as an occasional alternative roost. In the bottom of the box, place about 3 inches of tightly packed wood shavings.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 6 x 6”

Inside Box Depth: 12 – 15”

Cavity Opening: 1.5 – 2” diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 9 – 12”

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 12 – 25’

Northern Flicker : These days, there are fewer dead and dying trees, especially of a diameter to house a large bird like the flicker. This causes the flicker to attack wooden surfaces of homes attempting to drill cavities, needless to say causing damage. As with the Pygmy Nuthatch, at the same time that damage to the home is repaired, by placing a nest box on the side of a targeted home, as close to the area being attacked as possible, the flicker will often accept the box and refrain from future attacks. If the flicker is slow to accept the box, sometimes it is helpful to thumbtack popsicle sticks or another thin piece of wood over the box entrance. The bird will often quickly drill through the wood and then, because of having an active relationship with the box, be more apt to accept the box as a nest/roost spot. Place about 3 inches of tightly packed wood shavings in the bottom of the box.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 7 x 7”

Inside Box Depth: 18”

Cavity Opening: 2.5 – 3” diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 15”

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 6 – 25’

Bird Nest Boxes General Information

As nesting boxes go, the most safe and effective ones are not always the prettiest. Cavity nesting birds merely want a safe, clean, dry spot in which they can build a nest and lay eggs. It helps to have an entry hole that faces away from prevailing winds (southeast is best) and is small enough to prevent the entry of predators.

The more natural the color and material of the box, the more likely it will be used, especially by certain birds. One should avoid stained and painted boxes, especially on the inside, as they retain heat and can be toxic to birds. One should never use a bird box that has a perch outside the entry hole, as birds have the ability to either fly straight into the box or to hang outside the door to feed babies. Perches encourage larger, predator birds to sit outside the nest and threaten babies and parents. Also, make sure bird boxes have ventilation and drainage holes to help keep babies cool and dry.

Also, it is important to note that all native North American birds are protected by the Migratory Bird Act. It is against the law to damage or remove eggs from their nests. It is also against the law to injure or attempt to capture birds without proper authorization. Breaking these laws can result in fine or jail time.

Installing Bird Boxes: Please note: It is against CPV covenants, subject to fines, to do anything that will damage an existing tree within the Village. As attaching a bird box to a tree can potentially harm the tree, the CPV Wildlife Committee recommends you mount your bird box either on the side of your own home, or on a post or pole. The Committee also recommends that, should your boxes be within view of neighbors, you consider your neighbors when deciding how and where to install them.

Hanging Boxes From the Side of Your Home: Hanging nesting boxes from the side of your home is perhaps the easiest and most effective way to provide homes for birds, for several reasons. Smooth vertical walls are virtually predator proof, which makes them all the more attractive to birds. Key bird box predators are squirrels, raccoons, cats and snakes. A perfect spot on the side of your home would be at least 6 feet high, 10 to 15 feet away from trees and decking, and 3 feet in from corners (which squirrels can climb).

Most birds seem to prefer a box that faces east or southeast, away from prevailing winds. It is simple to hang a bird box below a window. By removing the screen and opening the window, you have easy access to your exterior walls from the inside of your home. The process is described below:

Materials needed – 2, 2 inch hooks with screw posts and 2 picture hangers. (Rectangular metal

plates that have free-swinging loops work well and can be attached with screws to the back of the box, called “2-Hole ‘D’ Ring Hangers”. (They are available at hardware stores). Open the window and, within safe reach below, screw in 2 hooks horizontally, 4 inches apart. It helps to first gently tap the hook with a hammer to get it to penetrate the stucco before you screw it in. Place the picture hangers on the back of the box at the same distance apart. Thus, you can hang the boxes from the hooks, yet still be able to take them in and out for easy cleaning. After the box is hung, place a piece of styrofoam behind it, if necessary, to help it hang parallel with the wall.

Hanging Boxes From Free Standing Posts or Poles: As an alternative to placing nest/ roost boxes on your home, it is also possible to place them on posts or metal poles, in the ground. The Design Review Committee suggests boxes be mounted on 4” square, 8’ cedar posts, as are the boxes on the CPV Bluebird Trail. These posts are available from home improvement stores or lumber yards and are recommended to be cemented two feet into the ground. Metal poles are also available at all sights mentioned above for boxes. Baffles are available for both posts and poles that will help to keep boxes predator-free. While Pygmy Nuthatches, Downy Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers will nest as low as 6 ft. off the ground, you are more likely to get them to nest on a post or pole that is as high as possible within their preferences. Hairy Woodpeckers seldom nest below 12 ft. off the ground. And again, most birds seem to prefer a box that faces east or southeast, away from prevailing winds.

Bird Box Maintenance: It is also important to clean and repair bird boxes at least once a year. Baby birds can quickly get hypothermia when wet, so roofs need to be checked for leaks. Raccoons can actually open boxes, therefore it is important to replace nail locks that hold doors closed. If the box has recently been used for nesting, with the exception of Pygmy Nuthatches (see Pygmy Nuthatch Box Maintenance) bring it in and clean it in September and, most importantly, late March. Whenever opening a bird box or removing it from its spot, ALWAYS FIRST TAP and wait to make sure there is no bird inside. When you are sure there is not a current nest within the box, dump out debris and wipe it clean with a damp cloth. Cavity nesting birds do not want to reuse old nests the following year. If the box is infested with mites, clean with multiple applications of diluted bleach and rinse well.

For questions, feel free to contact the Village at Castle Pines Wildlife Committee at wildlife@thevillagecastlepines.com