



LANE COUNTY AUDUBON SOCIETY

AN OREGON CHAPTER OF THE NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY

P.O. BOX 5086 • EUGENE, OREGON 97405

Birdhouse Competition

by Dick Lamster

With more than 40 species of cavity-nesting birds in Oregon, building and maintaining birdhouses for local species that will nest in artificial bird boxes is a good idea. I have been building and maintaining birdhouses for more than 20 years. Currently, we have 45 birdhouses on our property, and some years we have had more than 100% occupancy because of double and even triple nestings. Our best year resulted in 181 fledged birds. The five species that used our birdhouses last year were western bluebirds, tree swallows, violet-green swallows, black-capped chickadees, and chestnut-backed chickadees.

After analyzing my own experience, reading articles on this topic, and conversing extensively with birding friends, professional biologists, and other birdhouse “keepers,” I recommend the following:

- 1. If you maintain birdhouses that are being used by European starlings or house sparrows (also called English sparrows), for the sake of our native birds you must destroy the nest and eggs.* These two species are not protected by law since they are classified as non-native by the State of Oregon. You should watch your birdhouses and check frequently (once a week) to see which species are using them. If starlings or house sparrows are nesting in your birdhouse, then open the house and remove the nest and any eggs that are present. If they return a second or third time, it would be best to take the house down. A birdhouse that allows starlings and house sparrows to breed is very harmful to native birds and ecosystems, and it is best to remove it.
- 2. In most cities, only starlings and house sparrows will nest in the birdhouses that people maintain.* So, in sum, maintaining birdhouses in many parts of town is not recommended. An alternative is to enjoy the birds through bird feeders.
- 3. The correct hole size for the typical cavity nesting small birds attracted to birdhouses here in the Willamette Valley is 1 1/2 inch.* This size is suppose to keep out starlings, but some house sparrows can squeeze through a 1 1/2 inch hole. A 1 1/4 inch hole will allow chickadees, nuthatches, wrens, and possibly downy woodpeckers to pass through, but is too small for western bluebirds, swallows, and house sparrows. If you have birdhouses for larger woodpeckers, wood ducks, American kestrels, barn owls, northern flickers, screech owls, and other species that require entrance holes larger than 1 1/2 inch, then you will be providing houses for starlings. Again, you must monitor your big birdhouses. If starlings are nesting there, you should remove the nest and eggs and take the house down if the starlings return, or at least cover the hole so that nothing can enter.

4. *If you have decorative birdhouses in your yard that are the incorrect size for Willamette Valley birds, please cover the entrance hole so they are not used by birds.* Birdhouses that have the incorrect interior dimensions, including depth of the cavity below the entrance hole, will frequently expose the nesting birds to predators such as cats or raccoons, or will result in overcrowding of the young inside the house. Of course, incorrect entrance hole sizes of decorative birdhouses create the same problems discussed above.

5. *Birdhouses should not have perches below the entrance hole.* These perches actually hinder the cavity nesting birds from using the house. Obviously, natural holes in trees that cavity nesting birds normally use do not have perches below each hole. Almost all cavity nesting birds have strong legs and feet for gripping the edge of a hole and some even have specially adapted tail feathers that assist in supporting the bird on the edge of a flat, vertical surface.

6. *Clean out birdhouses every fall after the birds have left.* Remove the old nest and scrape out any bird waste and any insects, such as wasps, that have invaded the house. Then clean the house with a mild bleach solution. Do not spray the inside or outside of the house with insecticides. Leave the door open for a couple of days and then close it and leave the house up all winter. Some birds may roost in the houses at various times during the winter, so you can enjoy them year round.

7. *Place birdhouses on metal posts rather than wooden posts or in trees.* Smooth, round metal posts will prevent predators such as cats, raccoons, and snakes from climbing the post and raiding the birdhouse.

Following these simple guidelines will improve your chances of attracting and assisting native cavity-nesting birds, giving you the pleasure of watching them and enjoying their company.

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