

Love Nests for Native Birds

How to provide cozy homes for cavity-nesting songbirds

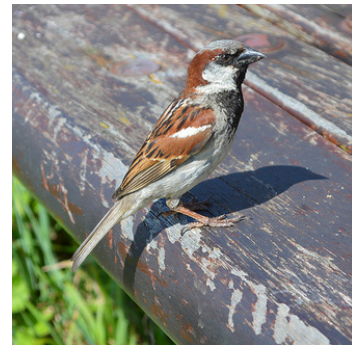
If you build it, they will come!

If you live in the city or suburbs in North America, you can help native birds by customizing the entrance holes on your birdhouses. Decorative birdhouses are often made without the needs of native birds in mind, and cannot successfully be used by them. Native songbirds like violet-green swallows, tree swallows, chickadees, nuthatches, and some wren species are cavity-nesters, requiring tree cavities, or in their absence, birdhouses (nestboxes) to nest in. As breeding season begins, these birds struggle to find suitable nesting sites for raising their young, crucial to the survival of their species.

The competition

“Without question the most deplorable event in the history of American ornithology was the introduction of the English Sparrow.”—W. Dawson, *The Birds of Ohio*, 1903

Native songbirds face fierce competition for a dwindling supply of nesting cavities from two notorious invaders: English house sparrows and European starlings. Both species were introduced to North America in the 1800s. House sparrows are the little brown birds that take handouts at sidewalk cafes and descend upon your feeders in droves. You may think they're cute, but house sparrows, along with starlings, have spread throughout the continent, out-competing and displacing native cavity-nesting birds. Unless you live in a natural area or have taken measures to deter house sparrows, they are likely nesting in your yard or under your eaves. They are now one of the most abundant songbirds on the continent, and the most widely dispersed in the world. Their effect on native songbirds and species diversity has been devastating.



Invasive English House Sparrow
Photo: Matt Brown

How you can help

Many of the birdhouses that people have in their yards are dangerous for native songbirds because the entrance holes are big enough to allow house sparrows and starlings to get in, aggressively ousting native birds and even killing them on the nest. Here are two ways to customize the entrance holes to keep invaders out:

🔪 **The simplest solution: the small round hole (1 1/8")**

For small native songbirds, simply make sure that the round entrance hole is exactly 1 1/8 inches in diameter. This is big enough for chickadees, some nuthatches, Bewick's wrens, and other small native cavity nesters, and will exclude the bulkier invasive house sparrows and starlings. This solution does not work for native swallows, however (see below). If the existing entrance on your nestbox is bigger than 1 1/8 inches, you can retrofit it with a block of hardwood with the right size hole. The extra depth provided by a block over the entrance hole is beneficial, as it makes it harder for predators to reach inside. You can also buy 1 1/8 inch metal rings at some bird stores. Keep an eye on the entrance hole if it is made of wood. House sparrows and squirrels can enlarge the entrance and they will oust—and possibly kill—any native birds that have set up house there.



🔪 **For keepers: the oval entrance hole for swallows**

If you would like to provide much-needed nesting habitat for native violet-green swallows and tree swallows, you'll need to work a little harder, but the results will be worth the effort. In response to the invasion of English house sparrows, innovators have come up with the oval entrance hole. Swallows can just manage to squeeze through, but house sparrows can't. The oval must be exactly 7/8 inch high and at



least 1.5 inches wide for violet-green swallows. If you have tree swallows, make the oval slightly larger, at 15/16 inch high but no more, or again, house sparrows will get in. For swallows, place the nestbox in an open area without trees or shrubs in front of the entrance. Smaller native birds will appreciate boxes with oval entrances too, so if you want to reserve them for swallows, block the entrance until you notice swallows returning from migration, or offer more nestboxes.



Violet-Green Swallow
Photo: Todd Carnahan

For hole covers, use hardwood, plastic wood, or metal if possible. House sparrows will chip at the hole in an attempt to enlarge it. It happens quickly, so please be vigilant. You can use black paint or a permanent marker to blacken the edges of the hole. If the black disappears, you'll know that an invader has enlarged the entrance. Bonus: the dark edges make the hole more noticeable to potential native nesters, too.

Checklist for suitable nestboxes

- Entrance hole is size-specific for the kind of bird you'd like to attract (must be unsuitable for house sparrows and starlings)
- No perch (native birds do not need them, and they make landing more difficult for them; plus, perches allow invaders to harass/reach inside)
- Adequate floor area for the species you're attracting (approximately 5"x 5.5" for swallows; 4"x 4" for smaller songbirds)
- Waterproof, with good ventilation and drainage, and an opening front or side panel for cleaning in the fall
- Sturdy, made of untreated, durable cedar or pine, with an entrance hole cover made of hardwood, plastic wood, or metal
- Extended roof to deter predators (or place nestbox directly under an overhanging roof of a building)
- Location inaccessible to predators, e.g., on the side of your house; generally not on a tree or fence

It is better to provide no nestbox at all than to provide one that breeds house sparrows

Retrofitting an existing birdhouse with an oval entrance hole-cover

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=joOET1fQjxM (video instructions on making oval entrance hole-covers)
Malcolm Rodin may also do house visits and provide nestboxes: 250.812.6461; swallows@shaw.ca)
- Oval entrance hole-covers are available at Wild Birds Unlimited on Shelbourne Street in Victoria, but they are softwood. Use them as a template to make hardwood hole-covers. They have round metal ones suitable for chickadees and nuthatches.
- www.fraservalleybirding.com/Articles/Nest%20Boxes.htm (Fraser Valley Birding article on oval entrance holes)

Building nestboxes for native birds

- www.naturescapebc.ca/naturescape/Provincial_Guide_2003.pdf (see pages 19-22 for building plans)
- www.nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses (Cornell University provides excellent resources, including tips on nestbox placement; building plans; bird identification; managing invasive species; dealing with predators)
- www.nestboxbuilder.com (nestbox designs and tips; controlling house sparrows)

More about invasive English house sparrows and European starlings

- www.sialis.org/hospphotos.htm (house sparrow identification)
- www.sialis.org/hosp.htm#theproblem (damage to bluebird nests caused by house sparrows; warning: graphic images)
- www.nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/managing-house-sparrows-and-european-starlings (Cornell University)

Bring Back the Bluebirds project

www.goert.ca/bluebird and www.cowichanbluebird.ca. The *Bring Back the Bluebirds* project, re-introducing extirpated western bluebirds to the Salish Sea region, began in 2012. The Cowichan Valley Naturalists' Society (CVNS) has taken over the project lead. To report a bluebird sighting, contact cowichanbluebird@gmail.com or call 250-710-5618. Find CVNS on Facebook at www.facebook.com/CowValleyNaturalists. Please contact CVNS before providing bluebird boxes; they must be placed in natural areas where there are no house sparrows or cats and need to be monitored regularly.