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THE GREEN FILE - Plan for the best birding year ever

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Looking out my office window right now I would never have guessed that some species of birds are in steep decline.



Bluebird boxes

I have 12 feeders and every one of them is well populated on this cold winter morning. My supply of quality seed is depleting quickly but it is a good thing that I stocked up with a bulk purchase of the stuff early in the season.

This time of year, the greatest activity in our gardens occurs around the bird feeder. More accurately, it is the **ONLY** action out there! It is the perfect time of year to make a plan to attract insectivores when they 'fly past' come April. The more tree swallows and blue birds that I can attract to my property the better for the mosquito population and many of the flying insects that enjoy munching on my fruit trees.

These birds have an appetite for flying insects that borders on legendary.

This past summer, I had the pleasure of hosting Susan Poizner to my 10-acre garden. We have a lot in common, including our mutual interest in orchard fruits and birding. As we strolled through my small orchard of apples she told me the story of Joe Krall, a fascinating person.

It seems that Joe developed a fascination with insectivore birds several years ago. In 1992 he created a 'nest box trail' which grew to over 500 birdhouses near Guelph Lake in Wellington County, Ontario. His goal was to attract nesting blue birds and tree swallows (members of the 'swift' family). He had no problem building the bird boxes: with his technical skills as a tool and dye maker he created boxes that would easily stand for a lifetime, complete with metal roofs and a side hatch for easy cleaning.

The hard part was cataloguing all of the activity in the nesting boxes over 23 years. Whenever he could, he would hike the trail with his notebook in hand and record what he found. The results?

over 32,000 birds were born in his 500 boxes

these included over 2,000 Eastern Blue Birds and close to 30,000 Tree Swallows

many of the houses attracted House Wrens and Black Capped Chickadees (hey, they need habitat too!)

He would often open the side of a nesting box to inspect the contents, even during the nesting period of April through July. It is important that you do not disturb or touch young hatchlings but it is ok to have a peek, he explains.

Why would you want to attract insectivore birds to your yard? According to Susan Poizner (author of 'The Backyard Orchardist' www.orchardpeople.com), there are lots of reasons:

- they eat huge numbers of flying insects
- many organic orchardists mount nesting boxes to help protect their fruiting trees from damaging insects.
- insectivore birds are an important part of the web of biodiversity in the natural world
- many are declining in population: they need all of the help that they can get.

Observing bird-activity around nesting boxes is fascinating. Here are some facts:

- the female usually lays between 3 and 6 eggs at one time.
- they use grasses, feathers, plant stems, pine needles and other natural materials build their nests
- they arrive in mid to late April every spring, mate and build their nests in the first few weeks and lay their eggs in May/June or early July. Occasionally they will hatch a second brood.

It is important to clean out your nesting boxes twice a year: after the first brood has 'fledged' (pushed out of the nest) and after the second brood, which can involve a different bird species.

The best location for insectivore nesting boxes is five to six feet above ground, out of prevailing winds and in an open meadow or grassed area. We see a lot of these birds on golf courses with nesting boxes for this reason.

While Joe is very passionate about his bird-box project he is moving away from the Guelph area and trees have grown up in the meadows where the boxes once stood in the open. He has pulled most of them up and is moving a few of them to his new home.

As you gawk at the population of feeding birds on your bird feeders this winter, plan to attract some migratory birds to your yard this spring.

Mark Cullen appears on Canada AM every Wednesday morning at 8:40. He is the Lawn and Garden expert for Home Hardware. Sign up for his free monthly newsletter at www.markcullen.com

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