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Nesting boxes attract birds to protect your orchards

These strategically placed shelters will not only give birds a home, but the birds in turn will eat up the insects that devour fruit trees.



DREAMSTIME

Bluebirds can help you control mosquitoes and other insects in your yard and garden.

By: **Mark Cullen** Green spaces, Published on Sat Mar 05 2016

Looking out my office window right now I would never have guessed some species of birds are in steep decline. I have 12 feeders and every one of them is well populated on this winter's morning. The amount of quality seed in the feeders is depleting quickly but it is a good thing 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 in April.

Why would you want to attract insectivorous birds to your yard? According to Susan Poizner, author of *Growing Urban Orchards*, orchardpeople.com), there are lots of reasons, including:

1. They eat huge numbers of flying insects.

2. Many organic orchardists mount nesting boxes to help protect their fruiting trees from damaging insects.
3. Insectivorous birds are an important part of the web of biodiversity in the natural world.
4. Many are declining in population: they need all of the help they can get.

The more bluebirds and tree swallows I can persuade to come to my property, the better for keeping the mosquito population down, as well as many of the flying insects that enjoy munching on my fruit trees. Tree swallows and bluebirds have an appetite for flying insects that borders on legendary.

In my 10-acre garden last summer, I had the pleasure of hosting Poizner.

We have a lot in common, including our mutual interest in birding and orchard fruits. As we strolled through my small apple orchard, she told me the story of the fascinating Joe Krall.

It seems Krall developed a fascination with insectivorous birds several years ago. In 1992, he created a “nest box trail” which grew to more than 500 birdhouses near Guelph Lake in Wellington County. His goal was to attract nesting bluebirds 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 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?

- More than 32,000 birds were born in his 500 boxes.
- These included more than 2,000 Eastern bluebirds 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 you do not disturb or touch young hatchlings but it is OK to have a peek, he explains.

While Krall 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.

However, Poizner has retrieved some of his now-famous nesting boxes and offers them for sale for \$48 plus HST, which covers the cost of recovery and transportation to Toronto. You can obtain a nesting box of your own by emailing her at info@orchardpeople.com.

Each birdhouse is complete with a galvanized metal pole and hardware for mounting. All you have to do is dig a hole, place the pole, and

screw the house onto the pole. Remember, they were built to last a lifetime and I have no doubt each one will last through the lifetime of many bird families.

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.

Bird activity and nesting boxes

- The female usually lays between three and six eggs at one time.
- Grasses, feathers, plant stems, pine needles are among the nest-building materials.
- Birds arrive in Southern Ontario in mid- to late-April, mate and build their nests. Eggs are laid in May/June or early July. Occasionally, a second brood is hatched.
- It is important to clean out your nesting boxes after the first brood has fledged (pushed out of the nest) and then after the second brood (which can be a totally different species).
- The best location for nesting boxes for insectivorous birds is an open meadow or grassy area, out of prevailing winds and five to six feet above ground.

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