



Spotted Flycatcher using an open-fronted nestbox. (Photo: Jenny Steel)

It's September and a garden birdwatcher's fancy turns to - nestboxes! It may seem odd to be thinking about nesting when the breeding season for most species is over for the year but there are two reasons why you should.

Firstly, now is the time to be cleaning out your nestboxes so that next year's occupants inherit a nesting space free of fleas, mites and other parasites left over from this year. The Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 specifies that nestboxes can only be legally cleaned out between 1st August and 31st January. The procedure is simple and, in most cases, you do not even need to remove the box from its mounting. First, watch the nestbox for a day or so to ensure that it is not still in use. Then, open it up and check inside. Make sure that there are no small mammals, such as dormice, hibernating in the box: if so, skip cleaning for this year. Wearing gloves, remove all of the old nest material along with any dead young and unhatched eggs. These must be disposed of immediately and cannot legally be retained. Do not use insecticides or flea powders in the box (these can be toxic for birds) - just pour one or two kettles-full of boiling water into the box, which will kill all parasites in the box and its crevices. Then leave the box to dry thoroughly, with the lid wedged open if necessary. Once the box is dry, put a handful of clean hay or wood shavings in the box, which makes it more hospitable for use by birds to roost over the winter or for hibernating small mammals.

The second reason why September is 'nestbox month' is that it is the ideal time to install new boxes, permitting them to be used over the winter as roost sites or by hibernating mammals. Birds need time to accept nestboxes into their environments: boxes installed after February are rarely used in the following nesting season.

If you are planning to install a new nestbox this autumn, there are some general guidelines it is wise to follow.

- Nestboxes should usually face between north and east, unless they are located in a position shaded from the sun and sheltered from heavy rain.
- While some vegetation cover is desirable for a box, most birds require a clear flight line to the box entrance.
- Tilt the box slightly forwards to minimise penetration of rain.
- Do not locate boxes too close to feeders. Having rival members of the same species constantly close to a nesting location can be stressful to the parent birds.

- Do not put boxes of similar design (intended for the same species) close together. If both boxes are in the territory of the same male, only one will be used (unless the design permits use by a different species). The exception is for species that nest communally in the wild, such as House Sparrows, Starlings, Swifts, Swallows and House Martins, which will tolerate nestboxes in clusters.
- Choose a location that is inaccessible to predators, particularly domestic cats.

The nestbox should be chosen to meet the needs of the species you wish to encourage. This is largely a matter of box size, entrance design and mounting height. Starlings and Great Spotted Woodpeckers will require a considerably larger interior volume than will small birds, to accommodate their larger chicks. When you purchase a box, make sure you know the size or species of the intended occupant.

Most nestboxes have either a circular hole for access or are built with a front that only extends part of the way to the roof. Those with holes are sold in a variety of sizes of opening. Blue, Coal and Marsh Tits favour a 25 mm (1 in.) diameter hole, while Great Tits, Tree Sparrows and Pied Flycatchers prefer a slightly larger entrance (28 mm or 1.1 in.). House Sparrows and Nuthatches need a larger "front door" (about 32 mm or 1¼ in.), while Starlings



Now is the best time of the year to put up nestboxes for use in breeding season 2014 and beyond. (Photo: Paul Stancliffe, BTO Library).

require 45 mm (1¾ in.). The best height of the front panel on open-fronted boxes varies with the bird you are trying to attract. For Robins and Pied Wagtails, 100 mm (4 in.) is about right, while Wrens prefer 140 mm (5½ in.) and Spotted Flycatchers 60 mm (2½ in.).

Most hole-entrance nest boxes should be mounted between 1 and 5 m (3-15 ft.) above the ground, although those intended for woodpeckers need to be higher on a tree trunk to meet the birds needs (above 3 m or 9 ft.). Open-fronted boxes should be low down in vegetation for Wrens and Robins (less than 2 m or 6 ft.) but Spotted Flycatchers favour heights of 2-4 m (6-12 ft.) with a clear outlook from the entrance (but with vegetation nearby).

If your nestboxes are not used by your garden birds in a couple of seasons, try moving them to a new location - it is not always possible to get it right first time!

John Arnfield

The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. GBW needs more garden observers in this area. Can you help? If so, contact John on (01694) 724170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu to arrange to receive an information pack and free book.