



Snakes and other predators can easily enter this nest box since it is attached to a fence and overgrown with shrubs.



A juicy breakfast is delivered by dad!
Note the soon-to-fledge youngster in the background.

Brunswick Wildlife Preventing Backyard Disasters While Attracting and Protecting Birds

We love our yardbirds! From finches to hummingbirds, Americans spend millions on feeders, seed, nest boxes, and the like to attract and observe our little feathered friends. Our good intentions must be preserved by being responsible backyard birdwatchers...ones that do no harm.

This is the latest in a series of articles on preventing or mitigating backyard disasters. Please step into my backyard!

Eastern Bluebirds

Providing nest boxes for Eastern Bluebirds is very rewarding and the maintenance is fairly easy. At our latitude, we usually enjoy watching two or three broods a year.

Whether purchased or built, nest box construction is very important! Boxes should be made of non-pressure-treated wood which is three quarters of an inch thick or thicker to provide adequate insulation. Neither the inside nor outside should be painted. A preservative such as linseed oil on the outside is ok.

The floor should be four inches by four inches. The distance from the floor to the bottom of the hole should be five to seven inches and the height for any wall should be at least ten inches to allow adequate ventilation above the nest. The use of a cardboard "starter cup" provided with many purchased boxes is not necessary; however, if used, ensure it does not reduce the inside space.



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The area for the outside flyway into the box should be open. The entrance hole should be one and one half inches in diameter and have a metal or wood-block plate to prevent woodpeckers from enlarging it for their use or opportunistic nesters like flying squirrels and other bird species. Ventilation holes on both sides are required for air flow.

A well-designed box will have a down sloping roof to shed rain, a roof that overhangs the hole providing a shade and rain shield. The bottom of the box should have holes in the floor corners to allow drainage of any rain that gets in.

Boxes should be attached to a pipe or small post, with a baffle below the box to deter snakes and other predators from climbing in. The bottom of the box should be at least four feet off the ground for predator protection but convenient for you to maintain given your height.

Also, boxes should have top or side openings allowing easy access for monitoring and keeping them clean. Remove the old nesting material and wasp nests and other insect infestations and then wash the inside of the box with a hose between broods.

What activity should you expect? Female bluebirds build nests over several days. They gather nest material such as pine straw off the ground and may be seen carrying it into the nest box. The nest inside will be a loosely-constructed, cup-shaped nest of straw or grass.

Egg-laying starts as soon as the nest is finished. One egg a day is laid in the morning and incubation begins after the last or next-to-last egg is laid.

The female alone incubates the clutch and then broods the young. Hatching normally occurs in fourteen days. The length of brooding, which depends on the temperature, relative humidity, and solar radiation, typically lasts for the first five to seven days after hatching. The average age at fledging is nineteen days.

Both adults start feeding the nestlings within an hour of hatching and continue until approximately three weeks after fledging

For complete nest box criteria, the latest box construction plans, and to see new predator guard designs go to the North American Bluebird Society's website:
<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/>.

Seed Feeder Disasters

The quality of bird seed matters. To get the freshest seed, I always buy from a store that has high turnover of their seed inventory. Depending on your location, a wild bird store may have fresher seed than a superstore or vice versa.

For my dime, quality black oil sunflower seed is the best so it is my mainstay. I add the more expensive stuff such as thistle seed and fruit and nuts mixtures occasionally, especially if I attract a special bird. A winter example is a Pine Siskin that may hang around only for thistle seed.



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This past winter, I had a special guest...a female Baltimore Oriole on my suet feeder. I did not have time to rig a grape jelly feeder...the food that holds winter orioles for most folks. I had an orange on my counter so I cut it in half and spiked the halves in my birch tree. For the next sixty plus days, before migrating north, she ate an orange a day. Next winter, I plan to add grape jelly to my mix.

Got mold? Wet seed will grow mold and mold may be harmful to birds. Keep your seed dry in a waterproof container with a lid. If your feeders are drenched by “frog strangler” or hurricane, clean and dry the feeders and replace the wet seed.

I keep my suet, caged feeders, and hummingbird feeders out most of the year; however, by early winter it is time to add more seed to the buffet using tube feeders. Unfortunately, once my tube feeders are out, hordes of blackbirds and grackles appear...bully birds that scatter seed everywhere!

Minimize the amount of seed that accumulates on the ground by raking or vacuuming to keep birds from getting into moldy seed. This practice also has another benefit since will minimize blackbirds and doves on the ground so they will not fall prey to Cooper’s and Sharp-shinned Hawks.

Perhaps your worse feeder disasters are mammalian invasions. Baffles and other devices like feeder cages may be used to keep raccoons, squirrels, and others from your feeders. As shown in the photo, caged feeders have wire enclosures with holes large enough to ensure songbirds have a place at the trough but not large enough for mammals and larger birds.

Platform feeders are not recommended because they attract bully birds and result in more seed on the ground. Suet feeders may also present problems. Often a grackle will attack one of my suet cakes and shred it to the delight of the blackbirds below.

Speaking of bully birds, last winter I actually had an American Crow coming to a suet feeder. I just shook my head and gave up. For several weeks, I enjoyed its antics and took photos. Who knew?

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds

Over the summer and into fall, you will usually notice an ebb and flow of hummingbird activity. Males show up by early April, joined by females a couple of weeks later. The kids start fledging in late May. Usually there is a second brood later in the summer.

Hummingbirds mostly eat insects and that is what they feed their young...the protein fuels rapid growth...so adults will make fewer trips to your feeder while feeding their young.

Closer to migration, hummingbirds will make more visits to your feeders since they need the carbs to fatten up (often doubling their weight) for their long nonstop flight across the Caribbean or Gulf of Mexico. In fall, hummingbird activity will vary as northern migrants find your feeders.



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Then we say goodbye to hummingbirds until the next spring. Not so fast! If you leave your feeder up into late fall, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird may stay or you may get a visit from a western species (such as Rufous) and they may spend the winter with you!

Do not worry about the leaving your feeder up as it turns colder and consequently endangering your summer hummingbirds by postponing their migration. Their migration is triggered by hormonal changes based on the photoperiod (length of day) and not the food supply or temperature.

The fact that a few hummingbirds are here during winter means there are enough insects and tree sap around to support them. Hummingbirds protect themselves from dying of hypothermia by going into torpor, a state of temporary hibernation, featuring a deep sleep with greatly decreased body temperature and metabolic rate, which allows them to conserve energy.

Your feeder may provide a high-energy supplement to winter's natural food so maintain it through the winter as long as you have a hummer and take the feeder inside at night when the temperature is expected to be below thirty degrees to keep the water from freezing.

No matter the time of year, there are a few basic rules for feeding hummingbirds. Prepare sugar water by dissolving one part sugar in four parts hot water and let cool before filling your feeder. The water does not have to be red so I recommend staying away from store-bought "nectar" and other products that contain red dye and supplements. In winter, the ratio of sugar to water should not be increased to lower the freezing point because it may make the birds sick.

Replace the sugar water every two or three days to prevent fermentation. Mold prevention is equally important. Between fillings wash your feeders with warm soapy water, using a small bottle brush (available at wild bird stores) to scrub the holes. Due to slower fermentation rates during cold weather, feeders may not need cleaning and refilling as often.

I use two sets of three feeders to ensure there is fresh sugar water, especially by mid-summer when the number of hummers has multiplied and the heat ferments the water quickly. I found great, cheap hummingbird feeders at a local superstore, finding later they were dishwasher safe in the upper rack.

Got to go feed the camera so I'll see you in September with more tips on preventing backyard disasters...and meantime have a great summer caring for and watching your backyard birds!

John Ennis



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Pole and baffle arrangements work well to keep predators like snakes away from nest boxes. This arrangement also works for protecting feeders from squirrels and raccoons.



Jailbird? My caged seed feeder keeps bully birds and squirrels out, much to the delight of this Chipping Sparrow.



Use of a sugar/water mix of one part sugar to four parts water is best. The base of the feeder is red and the water should not be.



Success! This guy is the same nestling being fed by its father in the photo above. It and four siblings were my first batch for 2011. They fledged the next day.



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