

Homes for birds: A beginner's guide

Now is the time to start the planning processes for all the springtime outdoor projects we cannot wait to do.

One such project is buying or building the birdhouses you plan to put up around your home and property. Birdhouses provide entertainment for you and your family in addition to a place for birds to build and shelter their nests.

Is a birdhouse project right for you?

Consider the following questions. Would you like to see birds go through the entire reproductive process from mate selection to nest creation and egg laying? Are you interested in discovering what hatchlings look like and watch how they develop? Do you want to observe frantic parents searching for food to feed their young? Would you like to witness the awkward fledgling stage when the young birds have weird feather growth and very clumsy flight attempts?

If none of this sounds appealing or you dislike bird song, guano (poop), or have aggressive pets, this may not be right for you; however, if you answered yes to any of these questions, then you may have found a great, late-winter project that will yield satisfying results throughout the spring and summer.

With so many birds in Wyoming and so many birdhouses to choose from, how is a landowner to choose what is best for their outdoor spaces? Here is a checklist to get started.

1. Start with what you already have.
What kind of environment is your

home surrounded by? Is it urban or rural? Do you already have habitat features such as trees, shrubs, and native plants? Do you have water features, either manmade or natural, such as ponds and streams?

2. Next, think about the type of birds you would like to see and are found in your region. You will also want to think about what sort of behaviors you are interested in observing (please see the graphic, page 9).
3. Once you have selected the right birdhouse or nest box, you will need to either construct it or purchase one. Bluebird and wren nest boxes are the easiest to find in stores. For more specific nest boxes, you will need to build it yourself (please see the resource suggestions, bottom of page 9).
4. After a box has been created or purchased, you will need to place it securely in the ideal location at the correct height and aspect.
5. Next, you will have to wait and see what you attract. You may not always attract birds to use the nest boxes that first year. If that happens, you may want to evaluate whether it is in the best location or height. Meeting all the needs of the birds you seek to attract is also important. In addition to shelter, the birds will also need food and water. Birdbaths and bird feeders are an easy addition, but you may also consider long-term solutions such as planting native plants, trees, and shrubs.

6. Prepare for predators. Snakes, rodents, and other birds will prey on eggs and nestlings while cats, dogs, and even chickens can prey on the young. Wrap barbed wire loosely around the trunk or post that leads up to the nest box or add a large metal cone to the base of the nest boxes to discourage climbers. Keep cats indoors at all times and keep pets away from the birdhouses and nest boxes when birds are fledging. This is when they are learning to fly and will often fall out of the nest and remain on the ground or in low branches until they can find their way back. This period can last up to two weeks. Leaving the birds alone at this time is best because while they look lost and helpless, it is vital they learn how to fly and survive on their own.
7. In the fall, cleanout old nests and repair any damage that may have occurred. By maintaining it annually, you will not only make it more attractive to the birds but also help keep rodents and other pests from making it a winter home.

.....
Jacelyn Downey is the education programs manager for Audubon Rockies and can be reached at jdowney@audubon.org. She is a proud landlord to multiple generations of American Robins, Say's Phoebes, mountain bluebirds, tree swallows, grackles, and house wrens. Sadly, the osprey couple that live in the platform nest generously created by Powder River Energy have yet to raise young, but each spring she has renewed hope this will be their year!



I live in town



My yard doesn't have supporting plants

Hummingbird
Their energetic aerial antics will entertain for hours. Tip: A pollinator garden is a great place to start attracting wildlife to your home. All you need is a pot and a few native plants.

I have a lawn and a few trees or shrubs

House finch
These are sociable birds who like to nest near people and their houses. Tip: Place a covered shelf nest away from doors and high traffic areas near your home.



I have created a garden oasis for wildlife

House wren
These busy birds are always on the move darting in and out of shrubbery. Tip: Get creative! These birds will nest in almost anything so here's your chance to put up a whimsical house.

Mourning dove
The mournful coo of these beautiful birds is a wonderful addition to your garden soundtrack. Tip: Place a mesh wire nest in a forked tree branch.

Robin
It is amazing to watch the sheer number of worms a mother robin must capture to feed her nestlings. Tip: Place platform where it has shelter overhead from the elements.

I live near a body of water

Wood duck
You can't pass up the opportunity to witness a duckling jump from nest to water. Tip: Place nestboxes with opening facing water source with plenty of room for entry.



Osprey
Building a platform can keep them away from your powerlines. Tip: Place nesting platforms as high as possible near a body of water with many fish.

Tree swallow
Voracious insectivores can help keep mosquito populations down. Tip: Place a cluster of nestboxes near wetlands and ponds.



Birdhouse builder ideas

Looking for these nest box plans and more? Go to nestboxbuilder.com or checkout the *Birdhouse Book* by Margaret A. Barker and Elissa Wolfson from your local library or bookstore.

Which birdhouse is best for you?



I live in a rural area

I live in a forested area

Flicker
Providing a suitable nestbox will help steer them away from your siding. Tip: Place nestboxes 10-14 feet high, entrance hole should be at least 3 inches wide.

Chickadee
If cute had a mascot, it would be a chickadee. Tip: Choose a tall narrow nest box with a high entrance hole. Line with wood chips.



Screech-owl
Owls are interesting birds and help control rodent populations. Tip: Face entry hole towards the east or south, and line bottom with wood chips or leaves.

Say's Phoebe
These birds like to nest near people and will often interact with their "pee-ear" call. Tip: Place shelf nest on a barn or other outbuilding.

I live on rangeland

Bluebird
They arrive early in spring and provide hope winter will end soon. Tip: Place one or more nest boxes along a fence post.



Kestrel
Their populations are declining and they can help control rodent populations. Tip: Place boxes at least 8 and up to 30 feet in the air and away from other nest boxes (they are predators).