

WILD *Bird* NEWS[®]

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LEARN FROM THE YOUNG

by Scott Severs



Children are naturally drawn to birds. From their earliest days as infants through their lively elementary-school days, kids and birds nicely complement one another.

When given an opportunity, human infants begin to notice birds at a very early age. Observant parents often catch the eyes of their infants tracking the overhead passing of birds. Geese and ducks make particularly good subjects for babies' first experiences with the avian world, for these large birds are easily observed at parks and other suburban locations. (One family relayed a story of observing their baby following the motion of a flying bird: When the parents looked up to see what their baby was watching, it turned out to be a Golden Eagle!)

One early educational tool—baby sign language—uses birds to help develop language in infants. This language relies on simple motions to convey a meaning: Flapping one's arms communicates the word "bird," and "duck" is signed by mimicking with one's hand the quacking head of a water bird. Young infants quickly learn hand signals and can perform them more quickly than they can form their first words. And once the miracle of language comes to a child, the first spoken word may be "bird."

Kids are naturally attuned to singing birds,

a skill that many adult bird watchers learn they must rediscover. The intrusive—

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and often cacophonous—sounds of everyday life cause many of us to tune out the sounds of birds. New adult birders often have a difficult time picking out specific bird songs from the background environment—it's a skill almost

as complex as learning a new language. Furthermore, kids quickly learn that a patient approach and motionless observation is essential when pursuing birds in their backyards. They soon discover that any sudden motions frighten the birds away.

Grade-school kids may take their early fascinations with birds to new levels. This interest is often expressed in delightful drawings of birds free of the pressures of formal description. Youngsters teach us that it

really isn't hard to draw a bird. They generally have a natural, free-handed way of putting the image of a bird down on paper. Some children quickly grasp the fun of birding, often without any coercion from an adult, even while dragging oversized adult binoculars around their

necks. Other kids look to share their interest with their peers by hosting bird-watching birthday parties!

The lively, colorful, and vocal qualities of birds and the innate curiosity of a young human mind provide countless opportunities for discovery. Giving a child a bird feeder, field guides, or binoculars often leads to a pastime that lasts a lifetime. As adults, we can benefit, too—we can rediscover through children's senses the natural, and perhaps instinctive, interests we followed in our earliest days.

Scott Severs is the manager of the Wild Bird Center in Boulder, Colorado.



Nest Box Monitoring 101



by Tina Phillips

For centuries, humans have been fascinated with the breeding behavior of birds. Native Americans appreciated birds' aesthetic

value and would provide gourds for cavity-nesting birds, such as Purple Martins, to nest within. Since then, many species of cavity-nesting birds have benefited from nest boxes and other arrangements provided by humans. In fact, the population of Eastern Bluebirds, which was once in decline, has rebounded and is thriving as a result of nest-box trails across the country.

Simply providing a nest box (or "bird house"), however, is only the first step. To truly benefit our feathered friends, monitoring activity inside a nest box is equally important.

People are usually surprised to learn that you can peek into nest boxes on a regular basis without harming the birds. It is a myth that birds will abandon a nest if they smell the scent of humans near the nest. Songbirds generally have a poorly developed sense of smell, and careful nest-box monitoring rarely leads to nest abandonment or harm to the birds. The information provided by monitors, however, can

add volumes to our knowledge of the nest-box inhabitants.

The first step in becoming a responsible nest-box monitor is to educate yourself about the kinds of cavity-nesting birds that are typically found in your region during the spring and summer. Your local Wild Bird Center can provide you with that information.

Once you know the kinds of birds in your area that might use nest boxes, it is important to place the nest box in the appropriate habitat. Putting up a nest

box will not guarantee that it will be occupied, since most birds have specific habitat requirements. For example, wooded habitats are likely to attract chickadees, nuthatches, and titmice. Habitats containing sparse vegetation and scattered trees, such as meadows, large backyards, and agricultural areas, are likely to attract bluebirds and swallows. Discern the type of habitat you can provide, and you should be able to narrow your list of possible birds to a few species.

Next, you'll need to buy or to build a nest box. Quality nest boxes have specific features, such as thick walls; extended, sloped rooflines; rough or grooved interior walls; drainage holes; ventilation holes; easy access for monitoring and

cleaning; no outside perches; and are sturdily made of untreated lumber. Installing predator guards helps deter potential critters—raccoons, chipmunks, and snakes—that might depredate nests.

Additionally, entrance-hole sizes should be specific to the desired species in order to deter undesirable non-native birds, such as European Starlings, from nesting. Boxes should be in

place before nesting actually begins, and this will vary geographically. Finally, after accounting for all these variables, you'll be ready to begin monitoring your nest box.

The key to responsible box monitoring is to be as unobtrusive as possible. There are critical times in

the nesting cycle when monitors should avoid checking boxes: in the morning during egg laying, during the first few days of incubation, in bad weather, and when the young are close to leaving their nest. Always work quietly and efficiently

to minimize stress on the birds. Some monitors sing a song as they approach a nest box, in the event that an adult is in the box. If the adult leaves the box upon your arrival, slowly open the box, check the contents, close the box, and leave quickly. If you open a box, and the female is inside and does not move, do not force her out. Close the box, leave the area, and check the box another day. If necessary, observe the box from a distance and approach only when the female leaves the nest to feed.

The final step to becoming a good nest-box monitor is taking good notes. You may want to collect data on species, the number of eggs, and the number of nestlings in the box.

Putting up and monitoring a nest box or two is a rewarding and informative pastime that not only helps birds but also enriches your life. If you haven't yet become a "bird landlord," why not give it a try?

Tina Phillips is the project leader for The Birdhouse Network, a citizen-science project of Cornell Lab of Ornithology. For more information visit www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse.



Tufted Titmouse incubating
by C. Hill



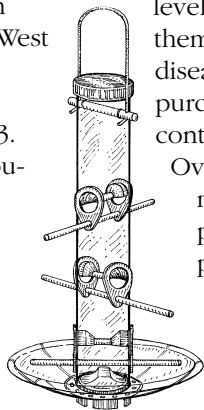
Chestnut-backed Chickadee nestling

Creating a safe experience for birds visiting your feeder

*A word from Wild Bird Centers of America's
Director of Research, Dr. David Horn*

In 1999, thousands of American Crows died with the arrival of West Nile Virus (WNV) in New York City. The virus quickly spread, reaching the West Coast in 2003. As the virus spread, tens of thousands of birds died, including hawks, jays, and chickadees. Fortunately for people who feed birds, WNV is not known to be transmitted from bird-to-feeder-to-bird contact; the predominant mode of transmission is from mosquito to bird. There are, however, several diseases that birds can acquire at feeding stations if they are not properly cared for, and it is important for people who feed birds to create a backyard environment that is safe for our feathered friends. The following article describes the steps that you can take to reduce the risk of avian disease at your feeders and lists actions you can take if disease strikes your feeding station.

According to the National Wildlife Health Center (www.nwhc.usgs.gov), there are several simple steps that you can take to reduce the risk of disease to birds using your feeders: First, provide birds with a large amount of space for feeding. While images of dozens of birds crowded on to a single feeder are beautiful, such events increase the likelihood of contact between sick and healthy birds and may increase a bird's stress



level while feeding, making them more susceptible to disease. One solution is to purchase feeders that minimize contact between birds.

Overcrowding at feeders may also be alleviated by providing birds with other places to feed.

A second step is to keep the birds' feeding area clean of both seed hulls and bird droppings by sweeping or vacuuming the area below the feeder. One way to minimize the cleaning needed is to use no-waste seeds or seed mixes that contain hulled seeds and to offer only the preferred seeds for the bird species in your area.

Third, purchase feeders that do not have sharp points or edges, which may cause bleeding or scratches on birds that can facilitate the transmission of disease.

Regularly cleaning your feeders is the fourth step you can take. Feeders should be washed approximately once a month with a solution of 10% bleach (one-part bleach to nine-parts water) by completely immersing feeders for at least three minutes and then allowing them to dry. Purchasing feeders that are made of materials that are easier to clean, such as metal and plastic, may also make feeder cleaning easier. Finally, store food appropriately and ensure that fresh seed is in your feeder. Use a rodent-proof container to store food and avoid having wet, moldy, musty-smelling seed in your feeder. Providing feeders that protect seed from the elements and using birds' preferred seeds should reduce the chance of seed getting wet or moldy.



(In addition to the above steps, people who provide water to birds should scrub birdbaths and change the water in their baths several times per week to prevent mosquito reproduction and the possible spread of West Nile Virus.)

Bird feeding is a wonderful pastime, and it provides those who feed birds with a greater connection to the natural world we live in. Providing a safe-and-clean feeding environment will allow you to enjoy our feathered friends while lowering the disease risk to feeder birds.

For an excellent technical summary of the common avian diseases, read the *Field Manual of Wildlife Diseases*, published by the National Wildlife Health Center (http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/pub_metadata/field_manual/field_manual.html). To learn more ways to improve your bird-feeding experiences, download a copy of the "Six Steps to Turn Your Yard into a Sanctuary for Birds" brochure on the Wild Bird Centers of America web site (http://www.wildbird.com/cms/www_files/6ways.pdf).

Dr. David J. Horn is an assistant professor of biology at Aurora University and Director of Research for Wild Bird Centers of America, Inc. He has been publishing scientific articles on wild bird feeding for over 10 years and is the principal investigator for the Wild Bird Feeding Industry's international seed-and-feeder preference study that begins in fall, 2005.



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Courtship Rituals



Roses, chocolates, a diamond ring—the courtship rituals of modern man are complex and varied. Birds have their courtship rituals, too, and some of them occur right outside our windows. Many birds use food in their courtship rituals. Common Terns and some gull species fly over their nesting colonies carrying fish as an offering (and perhaps proof of their ability to provide for the young). The most likely feeder birds to offer

food as part of their courting rituals are cardinals and some sparrows. But there are other, more active displays that we can witness in the backyard that signal the start of breeding season.

Male Red-winged Blackbirds fly in a way that displays their brilliant red epaulettes to help attract a mate. Mourning Doves bow then lift their heads and coo to signal their interest.

Other birds deploy seemingly aggressive behaviors in their courtship rituals. Many birds raise their bills in the air. Tufted Titmice assume a flat posture, open their beaks, and spread their wings. Gray Catbirds fluff out their feathers and spread their tails, dropping them at the same time. Geese will rear up and spread their wings when threatened or when they want to attract the attention of a potential mate.

The key, as with many things in life, is intent. If the male is directing these attentions toward a female, and it's the right time of year, it's a good bet that his motivation is an urge to merge.