

Basically Boxes - part 1

Making and installing nest boxes for garden birds

There's no hole like home...

Many garden birds nest or roost in hollow trees and holes in trees. Unfortunately, these days most old and lying trees and branches, which offer the best nesting and roosting sites, are routinely cut down and removed. This leaves fewer places for birds to set up homes and raise families.

Specially constructed nest boxes imitate the holes and cavities in dead standing wood that are usually cleared away. A bird box can be a real help to garden birds - an estimated 2 million fledglings are reared in nest boxes each year. And it's a wonderful feeling to see a blue tit or robin investigating a nest box that you made and put up yourself.

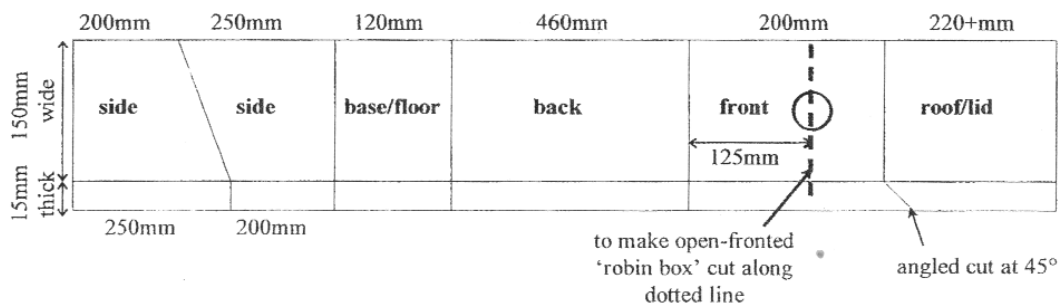
What's more, building bird boxes is straightforward and easy - no special carpentry skills are needed.



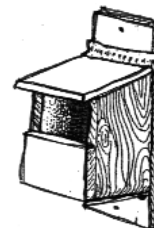
Box building instructions:

You will need:

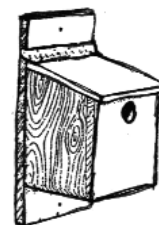
- Rough cut, unplanned, untreated softwood timber, 150 mm wide x 1500 mm long x 15 mm thick
- Scrap rubber, such as an old inner tube from a tyre
- Galvanised 20 mm (1/4") nails
- And the following tools: carpentry saw, hammer, hand brace or drill (with 25 mm, 28 mm, or 38 mm diameter cutting bits), pencil and ruler, scissors for cutting rubber.



There are two sorts of basic nestbox - the open-fronted "robin box" ...



... and the hole-fronted "tit box"



1. Marking out

Mark out the panels of the future nest box with pencil and a ruler to the dimensions shown above, and write the name of each panel onto the marked out wood (believe me, this will save confusion later.) Where possible, try to ensure that the grain will run vertically in the finished box - this will help drainage.

now turn over ...

The diameter of the entrance hole determines which birds will use the nest box

blue tit (25mm)
great tit (28mm)
sparrow (38mm)

not to scale

Not doing - it - yourself : buying a ready-made bird box



Des Res

A bird box should:

- Have a floor space measuring 100 x 100 mm
- Have a liftable lid or side panel, for cleaning
- Have the entrance hole/window no less than 125mm from the floor
- Be made from wood at least 15 mm thick

A bird box should not:

- Have a perching stick by the entrance hole - predators will find this most useful for attacking nestlings.
- Have wood stain or preservative anywhere around the entrance hole or inside the box.
- Have an en suite bird table below with the nest box in the roof - these cause all manner of territorial squabbles.

2. Cutting

- Saw the panels apart. Please note you will need to make a slanted cut between the front panel and roof at a 45° angle
- Front panel: decide which box type you want to make:

Hole-fronted tit box - use a hand brace or drill to make a round entrance hole;

25mm diameter - for blue tits

28mm diameter - for great tits

38mm diameter - for sparrows

Open fronted robin box - simply saw off 75mm from the top of the front panel to make a 'window' entrance

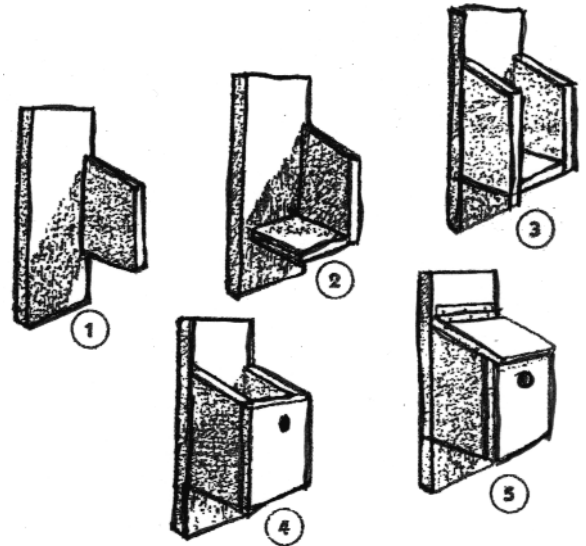
3. Nailing

- start by nailing one of the sides onto the back plate through the back (as in the diagram); then nail on the floor (this can be quite tricky - go carefully to avoid splitting the wood); then nail on the other panel
- Nail all the other panels into place except for the roof panel.
- If your carpentry is of a high standard with evenly proportioned panels and snugly fitting joints, you will need to drill some small holes (1-2mm diameter into the floor panel to allow for drainage)

4. And finally ...

Fix on the roof panel with a rubber flap 'hinge' made from scrap rubber. This should cover the joint between the roof and back plate completely so as to be waterproof. Nail the rubber into the back plate first, then pull it tightly over the joint and nail it onto the roof. The roof should be able to lift away like a lid.

The entrance hole should be no less than 125mm from the floor level



Wood treatments and preservatives

These will prolong the life of your box, but are hazardous to wildlife, and fatal to bats, which may use the box. Even without treatments a nest box should last 5-10 years.

Putting up your nestbox

Bird boxes should be positioned 2-5 metres above the ground, out of direct sunlight, opening away from the prevailing wind (i.e. facing N-NE), and tilted downwards slightly against rain.

Boxes may be fixed to trees with nails or tied on with bands (but be careful to allow for tree growth). Boxes can also be fixed to walls.

Avoid placing boxes within 30 metres of other bird boxes of the same type, bird tables or feeders.

Open fronted boxes benefit from being situated amongst cover such as climbers or shrubs.

Try to make sure that there is a clear flight path to the box and plenty of perching opportunities nearby, but not too close.

Sparrows readily use boxes in eaves, but this may deter other birds from nesting in the roof. Never place boxes near to house martin nests.

Housework

Maintaining your nest box

- Clean out your nest box once a year, 2-3 weeks after any nestlings have fledged (Oct-Nov).
- Remove any old nests or bedding and wash out the box with warm soapy water. Do not use pesticides or flea powder.

- Check to see that the box is still securely attached to its tree. As the tree grows, its girth will widen, which may force out the fixing nails. The nails may also start to rust. If you tied your nest box to the tree, the bands will need to be loosened slightly each year.
- Do not disturb your nest box during the breeding season.

... and giving wildlife a little extra help

- In spring, put out things birds can use to build nests, eg, feathers, wool, string, moss, pet hair (but not cotton wool)
- In autumn, after cleaning, put some clean hay (not straw) or wood shavings in your box for roosting birds and other wildlife
- Make sure your bird lodgers have plenty to eat in your garden (see 'Feeding Birds' factsheet)