

Green Scene: It Will Soon be Nesting Time Again

by Elaine Golds

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A rite of spring - volunteers clean and repair bird nest boxes installed in regional parks by the Burke Mountain Naturalists. *Jolene Bonhomme photo.*

With the lengthening days and swelling buds on shrubs and trees, it appears that spring is just around the corner. When the sun occasionally breaks through the clouds and the air warms, I notice the number of birds at my feeder drops dramatically. I suspect the reason for this is because this momentary hint of spring provokes these birds into preparing for the upcoming nesting season and sends them off into the woods to search for suitable nesting sites and sing for mates.

February is also the month when volunteers from the Burke Mountain Naturalists tackle their spring cleaning of hundreds of nest boxes installed in various parks in the Tri-Cities area. These nest boxes, mainly intended for chickadees and swallows require annual maintenance to ensure they continue to provide suitable nesting habitat. All members of the woodpecker family nest in the cavities of trees just as also do chickadees, nuthatches, wrens, tree swallows, violet-green swallows, purple martins, starlings, house sparrows and some species of ducks (goldeneyes, wood ducks, bufflehead, common and hooded mergansers). Unlike woodpeckers, most of these birds are not equipped to create their own cavities and must rely on natural decay - or the work of woodpeckers - to create the spaces they need to raise their young. In areas where decaying trees are not abundant, people can help by providing appropriately-designed nest boxes. Information about building nest boxes is available on the Burke Mountain Naturalists website, www.bmn.bc.ca.

To avoid attracting introduced species such as starlings and house sparrows, nest boxes must be designed with a hole just the right size for a particular species to enter and a deep cavity to provide protection against the reach of predators such as raccoons. A small perch pole at the nest entrance only enhances access for predators and should not be provided. Nest boxes must also be positioned in the right location. Swallows, for example, require a clear flight path to their nest hole while chickadees prefer a few branches close by on which to sit and check for predators before entering their nest. Encouraging swallows to nest nearby is very beneficial as these birds catch mosquitoes and other flying insects. Similarly, chickadees also feed on insects they find on plants

such as aphids so they are also beneficial to have in a garden. In backyards, nest boxes should be installed in areas where they can't be easily reached by roaming neighborhood cats. In our yard, we have found placing a nest box on the side of our house, which can't be climbed by raccoons or cats, provides a safer site in an urban setting than a tree. Preventing predation by cats is important as studies have indicated outdoor cats kill approximately 100 million birds in Canada each year.

Cleaning out nest boxes in early spring allows volunteers to determine if the box was used and, if so, by what species. Used nest material is discarded and replaced with a 1 inch lining of dry wood shavings. Sometimes, we discover some surprises. Several nest boxes at Minnehada Regional Park were used this year by deer mice which had brought in a large amount of grass and chewed woody debris to build a cozy nest inside the box.

A mouse peers out of one of the swallow nest boxes. It was left undisturbed. Jolene Bonhomme photo.



Sometimes, we are delighted to find flying squirrels have taken over a nest box. We leave these mammals undisturbed. Chickadees typically collect moss and, often augment it with animal hair to build their nest. Swallows bring in a thin layer of clay and then construct a nest lined with duck feathers inside the box.



A nest box used by a tree swallow, such as this one, typically has many more duck feathers lining it than one used by a violet-green swallow. Susan Zuckerman photo.

The purpose of the duck feathers brought into the nest by swallows has been a matter of speculation. Bernd Heinrich, a bird biologist and prolific author, believes these feathers are too large to provide much insulation. Instead, he suggests these feathers provide camouflage for the eggs. When the incubating female leaves the nest to feed, the eggs are particularly vulnerable to predation. The manner in which the duck feathers cover the nest tends to make the nest look empty. Heinrich also notes that the feathers chosen are always of a white or light colour which mimics the colour of the eggs. Apart from deterring predation, such camouflage could also prevent another female swallow from sneaking into the nest to lay an egg of her own – something that can happen especially when nesting sites are limited.

Chickadees which reside here year-round can easily make early starts on selecting and defending nest sites. The tree and violet-green swallows, which winter in Central America, have long flights to undertake before they arrive in early March. Nonetheless, there is a great advantage to be among the early arrivals and be able to select the best nest site. In the bird world, the real estate market is heating up and the race is on to find a perfect home.