

Green Scene: Naturalists & Nest Boxes

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[photograph]

[caption: An agile black-capped chickadee demonstrates why no perch is require for a nest box.
Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Thinking outside (& inside) the nesting box]

Perhaps, you have noticed small wooden boxes on trees in local parks and wondered what purpose they serve? These nest boxes are the work of local groups such as Boy Scouts or Burke Mountain Naturalists. Over the years, volunteers have installed boxes for swallows, chickadees, owls and other species in Shoreline Park, Mundy Park, Como Lake, along the Coquitlam River and in Regional Parks including Colony Farm, Minnehada and Widgeon Reserve. Now, in preparation for the nesting season, naturalists are cleaning boxes and adding wood shavings so the boxes will be ready for use this spring.

Nest boxes are used by species called “secondary cavity nesters”, i.e., birds that nest in tree cavities formed by natural decay or excavated by other species such as woodpeckers. Woodpeckers, with beaks designed for drilling, are primary cavity nesters as they create their own nest sites in dead or dying trees. As a consequence, they are much less likely to accept a human-made box. Other species have evolved to use alternate nesting strategies. For example, robins and jays never nest in cavities but, instead, construct “cup” nests in trees. Secondary cavity nesters require sites with holes just big enough for them but too small for a predator. The entry hole must be high enough above the nest inside so that a raccoon or house cat cannot reach inside to capture a young bird. These nest boxes require no perches; in fact, a perch only makes it easier for predators to raid the nest.

Birds use nest boxes only for raising their young so the boxes are vacant for much of the year. It’s always possible, on a frosty night, some birds may seek shelter in these boxes but fluffed-up feathers and a full stomach should suffice to ensure winter survival. Chickadees are now checking suitable sites and will start nesting in March. Swallows, which migrate from Central America, typically start nesting in April. However, our climate is changing. We were surprised last year to discover some swallows had already chosen boxes by March.

Real estate agents tell us that location is critical when choosing a home. The same is true for birds. Nest boxes should be hung to catch some morning sun. Swallows are swift birds that fly directly into their boxes so they require a clear flight path. They prefer a water view because their favorite prey, insects on the wing, are often found there. In contrast, chickadees are forest birds that perch close to their nest box and, before they enter, carefully look in all directions to ensure no predator is watching. Thus, they require a nest box with nearby branches. Both swallows and chickadees will nest in boxes only a few feet off the ground. Sadly, we have learned nest boxes usually must be hung much higher to prevent people from vandalizing them in public parks. We no longer have nest boxes at Como Lake because of such vandalism.

Sometimes there are problems with other species. In parks where people disperse birdseed on the ground, rats are abundant and take over nest boxes. Gray squirrels also enlarge the holes and use these boxes. Because we don't want to create habitat for these non-native species, we always remove the boxes usurped by them. The numbers of boxes in Shoreline Park are dwindling now because of such problems.

Initially, boxes appear quiet while parents incubate eggs but will erupt into a hive of activity once parents start to feed their hungry babies. One of the best places to view nest boxes in active use is around the wetlands on the east side of Colony Farm Regional Park. It can be delightful to watch the constant parade of busy swallow parents later in the season. Certainly, as the weather warms, spring has many pleasures in store for us.