

# Green Scene: Give Nature a Helping Hand

by Elaine Golds

(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, February 29, 2008, page 19)

[photograph]

[caption: Flying squirrels have large eyes, typical of nocturnal species, as well as a flap between their legs for gliding.

Victoria Otton photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Give nature a helping hand: Build a box]

It took only a few days of sunshine to convince me that spring is on its way. The melting snow has revealed green shoots impatiently pushing up the soil. Alerted by the promise of a new season, the birds have shifted in their habits. The larger flocks of mixed species that form each winter to forage more efficiently are now breaking up and the annual pairing off is commencing. As the weather warms, there is less of a need to feed and a growing urge to seek out partners and good nesting sites.

Several of the bird species that reside here year-round, including all the woodpeckers, nest in tree cavities. Although it's still a few weeks before the nesting season begins in earnest, the inspection process has already begun. Smaller species that nest in tree cavities include black-capped and chestnut-backed chickadees as well as red-breasted nuthatches. While woodpeckers are equipped with bills that can easily chisel homes out of decaying wood, other woodland inhabitants are unable to carve their own residences and must rely on cavities excavated by woodpeckers or formed through natural tree decay. These so-called secondary cavity nesters will also use nest boxes constructed by people. Some of the migratory birds soon to arrive also use nest boxes; these include the violet-green and aptly-named tree swallows.

It's quite a challenge for birds to find suitable nest sites. Similarly, nest boxes must meet a number of requirements. They must keep out the rainfall but still allow for adequate air circulation on hot days. The entry hole must be small enough to deter larger predators such as jays and grey squirrels and be placed sufficiently high on the box so that racoons cannot reach the eggs inside. The wood should be natural, untreated and unpainted just like the trees for which they are substituting. Perches are not needed; in fact, they only assist predators. Detailed instructions for building good nest boxes can be found in books or on various websites (e.g., see [www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/resources/](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/resources/)).

The Burke Mountain Naturalists have installed dozens of nest boxes in regional parks. Each spring, volunteers check these boxes for previous use and add fresh wood shavings. It's a type of spring-cleaning much more interesting than the typical indoor form of this activity. Sometimes, repairs to the entry are required if holes have been enlarged by voracious squirrels. Occasionally, we discover dead bodies of abandoned babies and assume some fatal accident befell the parents. Once such boxes are cleaned, they are ready for what we hope will be more successful use in the coming season. This year, we were quite dismayed to discover pellet holes in some nest boxes that had been used for target practice.

Other discoveries strike a much happier note. Last weekend, our crew was checking nest boxes in Minnehada Regional Park and discovered a family of flying squirrels had taken up residency in one of our larger nest boxes intended for the use of screech owls. Flying squirrels are a native species – unlike

the greys – and are very rarely seen because they are nocturnal. While they don't actually fly, they have a flap of skin that extends from their front to their back legs which allows them to glide from tree to tree. These squirrels play vital roles in the forest ecosystem, unlike the non-native grey squirrels that are little more than a nuisance to several native species. We were delighted a family of flying squirrels found one of our nest boxes to be to their satisfaction.

Nest boxes for chickadees or swallows can also be installed in backyards if suitable habitat is available. Chickadees prefer to nest close to trees with branches not far from their box where they can perch to carefully watch for predators before entering the box. In contrast, fast-flying swallows require a long clear flight path to their box. In yards where neighbourhood cats are prone to wander, nest boxes can be more safely installed on the side of house rather than on trees that cats can easily climb. A nest box in a backyard can provide children with wonderful opportunities to observe wildlife. If you think your backyard would be enhanced by the addition of a nest box this year, now is the time to do it while the birds are seeking out and selecting sites.