

Oh, Give Me a Home
By *Pat Schlarbaum*

Its special observing wildlife at close range, and seeing songbirds providing for their young is especially uplifting. Iowa's diverse nesting songbird populations require many habitats to successfully nest and raise their broods. Some, like the woodland-nesting whip-poor-wills and ovenbirds, prefer to nest in the leaves on the forest floor. Veerys and cuckoos need low, shrubby areas in mature woodlands, while American redstarts, wood thrushes and vireos would be located somewhat higher, four to 50 feet up, in the fork of a tree branch. High in the woodland canopy, American crows and great horned owls prefer a commanding view of their surroundings to raise young.



Many of our grassland nesters, like vesper and grasshopper sparrows, join bobolinks in remnant prairie areas to nest. Bluejays and barn swallows have acclimated to woodlots and farm buildings, but what about those birds that prefer to nest in cavities? Belted kingfishers and some swallows, such as bank and rough-winged, excavate their nest cavities in dirt, along cutbanks of rivers and streams. Cliff swallows group their jug-like mud houses in large colonies in protected spots under bridges, while tree swallows select a wooden cavity. The odd hole in a tree or a well-constructed nestbox provided by people can become the nesting place for a group of birds called *cavity nesters*.

Cavity-nesting birds consist of two types – primary and secondary. Primary cavity nesters, like woodpeckers (red-headed, downy, hairy or red-bellied) and northern flickers do the heavy construction for most cavity nesters drilling holes or hollowing out nesting and roosting spaces. Secondary cavity nesters, such as eastern bluebirds, black-capped chickadees and tree swallows, use holes made by primary cavity nesters, in addition to holes formed by natural processes of decay, insects, fire or breakage which are used by American kestrels, screech-owls, wood ducks and barred owls. Typically, it is the secondary cavity-nesting birds that use nestboxes.

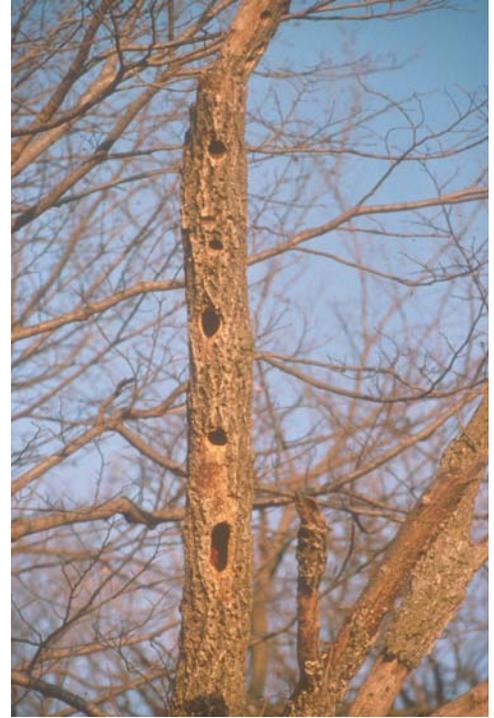
Many Iowans are realizing the pleasures of assisting cavity nesters by constructing, placing, monitoring and maintaining artificial nestboxes. A nestbox trail consists of a number of boxes interspersed along suitable habitat for specific birds. For example, some bluebird enthusiasts regularly check between five to more than 100 nestboxes along their “trails,” and are rewarded by seeing a favorite species respond to their stewardship.

Many natural snag (standing dead or dying trees) contain a variety of nesting cavities. Generally, the bigger the snag the greater the value to birds. Large snags provide greater area for excavation and feeding and a larger number of holes for several primary cavity-nesting species. Where snag trees are limited, artificial nestbox structures can assist wildlife. Nest boxes should be constructed with the individual species in mind, particularly hole sizes, since the entrance determines what kind of birds can enter the box.

European starlings are pernicious cavity nesters that are nonnative and considered a scourge to other cavity nesting birds. If you wish to attract a smaller bird, be sure the hole is only as large as necessary, or the more aggressive starling may usurp the box.

Other construction tips to consider:

- Don't put perches on nest boxes; only English sparrows and European starlings prefer perches.
- A dry box is a better box. If at all possible, the roof should enclose the box completely.
- The bottom should be recessed ¼-inch to prevent rain from seeping across the flow and up into the nest.
- Access to the box should be by a hinged front or side piece, when possible.
- Wood is the best all-around material for nest boxes. Softwood such as pine is appropriate for smaller nestboxes but cedar or cypress may be used for larger boxes.



- Boxes may be preserved using linseed oil, but only on the outside. It's been observed by "Mr. Woodduck," Frederic Leopold that "There's nothing better than melted bees' wax for a preservative."
- Boxes should be placed upon their own pole wherever possible with a predator guard.

If properly constructed and maintained, nest boxes should last 12 to 15 years and provide many nesting opportunities to songbirds, kestrels, owls and bats. Used nests should be cleaned from nesting structures for sanitary reasons as soon as possible after young fledge.

The Iowa Wildlife Diversity Program, in cooperation with the DNR's parks bureau, has designed a nest structure trail for cavity- and platform-nesting birds in Ledges State Park, near Boone. This educational project includes 12 demonstration nesting structures for birds and mammals indigenous to the central Iowa region. Proper placement of the boxes in suitable habitat and interpretation of each species' biological needs are provided at each structure. Platform-nesting birds, like mourning doves and American robins, nest in the forks of branches or on platform shelves. The nesting trail includes structures for American robin, eastern bluebird, northern flicker, American kestrel, black-capped chickadee, mourning dove, barred owl, great-crested flycatcher, tree swallow, woodduck, screech owl, housewren and bats.

Hopefully, your walk in the park will include an appreciation of the many types and ages of trees. Biological communities need diversity—a multitude of offerings. In addition to many fruit-bearing trees (dogwoods, service berry, cedar and crabapple), shrubs such as the hazelnut, gooseberry and raspberry offer food, nesting and escape cover.

Many backyard or "back forty" woodlots can be improved by following some of these same principles when landscaping for wildlife. Plantings that provide a continuum of food from summer to late winter, a variety of nesting strata and heights, and escape cover from predators and the elements will improve wildlife habitat. Where possible, maintain brush piles and existing snags to provide homes for wildlife. Dead, nondiseased trees, can offer much more than a warming fire on a winter's night. Our exuberance to "clean up" woodlots should consider a more far-

reaching approach to the health of the area. Nutrient recycling food provision and nesting opportunities can be provided by allowing natural degeneration to occur.

Where desirable, cavities in living trees can be created by selecting a limb at least three inches in diameter and pruning it off about six inches from the trunk. Over the years this will form a natural cavity. Elm, ash, sycamore, mulberry and basswood are especially prone to forming natural cavities. Timber stand improvement plans may require culling undesirable trees, opening the canopy and allows forest regeneration. Snag trees can be created by girdling and thus killing a few of these undesirable (wolf) trees more than 12 inches in diameter. Girdle by removing a three-to-four-inch wide belt of outer bark and inner bark (cambium) around the tree.



Many pines live for only a hundred years in our climate and have not survived the stressful years since 1993. A mature yard-tree that has died can be given a “new life” by trimming away excess branches and providing an attractive sculptured tree. Where falling trees or branches are not a concern, these large snags provide numerous forage and nesting sites for cavity nesters. And, sloughing bark is idea for harboring insect-eating bats.

A good source of information concerning nestboxes and nesting structures for wildlife is *Woodworking for Wildlife* published by the Minnesota DNR for \$9.95 plus \$3 shipping and postage. Write the Minnesota DNR, 500 Lafayette Rd, Box 7, St. Paul, MN 55155. Phone (800) 657-3757. ISU Extension publication Pm-1351b, *Managing Iowa Habitats: Wildlife Needs that Dead Tree* is beneficial reading. Also, *Iowa’s Bluebird Directory* is available from Jaclyn Hill, 2946 Ubben, Ellsworth IA 50075 for \$4 and includes much useful bluebird information.

Obviously, woodlands providing suitable nesting habitat for all forest-nesting birds is



preferred, but in areas of limited natural snags and cavities, nest boxes can provide a necessary habitat component to assist local wildlife. In addition, while monitoring their boxes, outdoor enthusiasts are offered the opportunity to see wildlife at close range, and share the excitement of another of nature's wonders – cavity nesting songbirds.

