

# Attracting Birds to your Yard

Nearly 300 species of birds are native to the Pacific Northwest. Attracting diverse bird species will depend on the diversity of wildlife features you enhance or create in your yard.

All wildlife needs **water, food, shelter and a place to raise young**. These are best provided in a natural environment, yet as we occupy more of the earth there is less room for wildlife habitat. Yards can be a way to expand or connect habitat for wildlife.

## Water

Ponds and streams are wonderful backyard features. Water features can be as big as a pond or as simple as a birdbath. Small birdbaths should have their water changed every few days and be scrubbed with water and a brush a few times a month to remove algae and bacteria. Keep the water feature full and never use chemicals to control algae or insects or to keep the water from freezing. Chemicals can be harmful to birds and pets.

## Food

*Native plants* with fruit, nuts or seeds are a natural source of food for birds. Birds also eat many insects. Selecting plants with varying fruiting seasons will provide food for birds year round. If you have a vegetable garden, leave a little for the birds during the winter.

**Bird feeders** are a supplementary food source. They are great ways to see the birds frequenting your yard. A Bird feeder with too many birds can promote the spread of disease through contact between birds. Distribute feeders in different areas and vary the food and type of feeder.

**Different birds prefer different food** so choosing the right seed is important. Avoid seed mixes with small seeds like milo and millet; these seeds are not preferred by birds frequenting feeders and seed is scattered on the ground.

*Select a single seed or a limited seed mix for a feeder.* Black-oil sunflower seed may attract chickadees, grosbeaks, finches and many other birds.

*Less is more* when it comes to the amount of food. Too much food might rot or get moldy. Keep food clean. Keep the feeder and area around it clean to prevent spreading disease among the birds. Wash the feeder with a solution of warm water and vinegar once a month or more often during heavy feeding. Rinse and dry thoroughly before refilling.

*Place feeders* where you can enjoy seeing the birds, away from entrances, busy streets, pets, strong winds and driving rain. A roof or dome over the feeder can keep seed dry longer.

## Shelter

Different heights of vegetation using ground covers, flowers, shrubs and trees will create diverse areas for birds to seek shelter. Leave or create "forest floor" with soil covered by mulch or leaf litter, for the ground foraging birds. Remember to have both deciduous and evergreen plants in order to provide cover year round. Brush and rock piles create shelter from wind and predators.

## Places to Raise Young

Most birds will create a place to raise their young in the branches of a shrub or tree, or on the side of a building. The cavity-nesting birds require a hole in a living or dead tree (snag) to raise their young. Protecting natural nesting habitat is the best way to help these birds. The next best thing is to provide a nesting box.



### Birdhouse versus Nesting box

Birdhouses can be a decorative element for a yard, but unfortunately birdhouses can be harmful to birds.

- Paint can be toxic to the young birds and a peg below the entrance can make it easy for predators to reach in and kill the young.
- A birdhouse can also be a home for non-native, invasive aggressive birds like European starlings and House sparrows.
- If you like the decorative birdhouse, *just cover the entry hole so birds won't use it* or display your birdhouses indoors.

**Thank you to the North Cascades Audubon Society for this information.**



Tree swallows prefer the round hole

A **nesting box** is a place where cavity-nesting birds can raise their young. Cavity-nesters in Whatcom County that might use a nesting box include Violet-green and Tree swallows, House wrens, Black-capped and Chestnut-backed chickadees, nuthatches, Downy & Hairy woodpeckers, Northern saw-whet owl, Western screech owl, Barn owl, Wood duck, American kestrel, Northern flicker and Purple martin.

The right size box and entry hole is important when selecting a nesting box for your yard. When you think about it, a chickadee and a Barn owl would not have the same size box or entry hole. Violet-green swallows prefer to fly directly into the nesting box so a diamond shaped hole works well; while a Tree swallow prefers a circular hole. Entry holes can vary from one to six

inches in diameter depending on the bird. House size varies with species, too.

Place nesting boxes out of the reach of predators at least six feet off the ground, with a clear flight path for entry, where it will get early morning sun and shade from hot sun, away from prevailing winds. Tilt the nesting box downward slightly to avoid rain, and place where it is convenient for cleaning, monitoring and observing.

**Competition by non-native birds** for a nesting box and nesting areas can harm native birds. Watch your box closely. If a European starling or House sparrow begins to put nest material in the box, remove it to keep these birds from nesting. Male House sparrows are aggressive and will kill young birds in their territory.



The diamond shape opening is attractive to Violet-green swallows, Black-capped & Chestnut-backed chickadees, Red-breasted & White-breasted nuthatches. They will also use the round hole entry.

**Maintenance of the nesting box** is very important. Once the young have left, clean out all nesting material and throw it in the garbage. These materials can cause disease in the next nest; accumulated nest materials can bring the young nearer the opening where they could fall out or be accessible to predators. Use a brush to remove attached materials. Check and repair any damage, clear air vents and drains, and if the parent birds have left the area, place a wood cover over the hole to keep non-native bird species, hornets or other insects from inhabiting the box. Next spring remove the cover and the nesting box is ready.

## Placement of Nesting Box

Nesting boxes designed for **Violet-green** and **Tree swallows** may also be used by Black-capped & Chestnut-backed chickadees, wrens and nuthatches.

### Tree swallow

Install 6 -15 feet high near wetland, creek or open area near water. Commonly nesting alone the Tree swallows will use cluster nesting boxes near water. The female will take a few days to a couple of weeks to build the nest. Eggs will hatch in 13-14 days. Monitor for non-native invasive House sparrow use.

### Violet-green swallow

Install 6 -15 feet high at the edge of the forest or in residential area with large trees and shrubs. These birds are strongly territorial so place box where birds can not see entrance holes of other nesting swallows. Oval white eggs hatch in 13 -14 days. Monitor for non-native invasive House sparrow use.

### Black-capped & Chestnut-backed chickadees

Install 6-15 feet off the ground at the edge of a forest, an open woodland, mature orchard, or residential area with mature trees. Sunlight is important, at least 50% throughout the day. Eggs hatch in about 12 days.

### Red-breasted & White-breasted nuthatches

Install 5-15 feet off the ground at the edge of a forest, an open woodland, mature orchard. A nesting pair needs several acres around their nest free of other nuthatch nests. Eggs hatch in about 12 days.