

# Pre-built Cabins for Birds

*By Lynn Stafford with Liz and Bill Buchroeder, and Terre Ashmore*

*Photo credits at end of story*

Many birds create wonderful nest structures, such as snug little hummingbird nest cups, woven socks that orioles construct, blackbird nests hanging over water in reeds and cattails and large eagle and hawk platform nests high in trees, cliffs and power poles.

However, several local bird species prefer to find already constructed snug “cabins” that are free for the taking (if one gets there first). We have several species of woodpeckers in our mountains. All of them drill cavities into wood for their nests. Mostly, these holes are in dead wood. Often, these burrows are abandoned after nesting and remain empty for years. There are 15 or more local species of birds that utilize these “pre-fab digs.” Most of these hole-nesters will come to properly built nest boxes, as well, especially if a reliable water source is nearby.



***Fig. 1: Male American kestrel (RC)***

Competition is stiff for these high-quality nesting cavities. Most of the hole nesters are year-round residents that can claim territories before the nesting season. Bluebirds, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and several owls are common permanent resident hole-nesters in our area.

There is even one hawk, the American kestrel (Fig. 1), that will nest in a suitable box. This kestrel (Fig. 2), with her head framed in the entrance hole, found a home at nearby Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge.



***Fig. 2: American kestrel in a nesting box (JS)***



***Fig. 3: Male western bluebird (CN)***

Western bluebirds (Fig. 3) are known for using nesting boxes (Fig. 4). These birds forage in open fields. They look for small woodpecker holes in trees near open areas. This can be duplicated on many of our Pine Mountain Club lots with correctly built boxes. Since we are encouraged (and often required) to remove dead limbs and trees from our properties, replacement with human-made apartments is very beneficial. Bluebirds have plenty of natural nesting cavities in our wild areas, if dead wood

is left intact. However, if our homes have otherwise adequate bluebird habitat, nest boxes often

can be used to replace dead limbs and snags.



Other common birds that use nest boxes include mountain chickadee (Fig. 5), oak titmouse (Fig. 6) and white-breasted nuthatch (Fig 7). This nuthatch (Fig. 8) is inspecting a box for possible use. It has found the accommodations acceptable, and is bringing in nesting materials (Fig. 9). The chickadee forages in pines and firs, perusing the foliage for insects and other small invertebrates. The titmouse prefers oaks and pinyon pine. The nuthatch works the tree trunks and branches, looking for creatures under the bark flakes.

***Fig. 4: Female western bluebird at a nest box in Pine Mountain Club (MM)***

Some birds have become completely adapted to living with people. House sparrows are not usually found in Pine Mountain Club. We are still too “rustic” for them. However, Frazier Park and Lebec have populations that make use of human buildings for nesting. This pair (Fig. 10) has adopted a light fixture on a Frazier Park store. Another common local bird with “house” in its name is house finch (Fig. 11). These tame songsters have decided that humans are not all bad. They are not strictly hole nesters, but they like ledges, nooks and crannies. And they are regular customers at bird feeders and bird baths.



***Fig. 5: Mountain chickadee (PS)***

One can research online to find the correct dimensions for each species when building nest boxes. Each species has requirements, particularly in location, entrance size and height above ground. Human structures adjacent or within natural forests and woodlands require hardening against wildfires. Usually, that includes removal of snags (standing dead trees) and dead limbs. Nest boxes, if properly built and placed, can alleviate the resultant lack of nesting opportunity. Hopefully, the natural forests, woods and brushlands away from human structures can be left intact with snags and logs, which are vital to many living organisms.



***Fig. 6: Oak titmouse (MAR)***

***Fig. 7 (left): White-breasted nuthatch (DF)***



***Fig. 8: (middle) White-breasted nuthatch inspecting nest box (MM)***



***Fig. 9 (left): White-breasted nuthatch carrying nesting material (MM)***

***Fig. 10 (below): House sparrow pair (female on left, male on right) at nest in light fixture (BB)***



***Fig 11 (below): House finch pair (male on left, female on right) (BB)***



**Photographers**

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