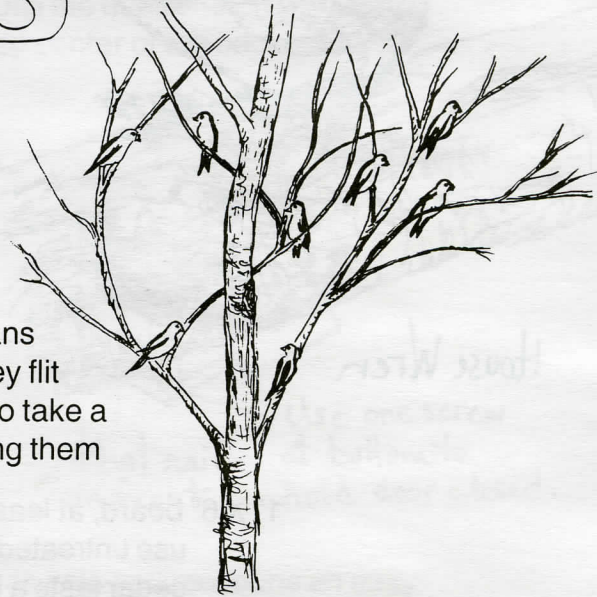


NATURE DETECTIVES

Winter 2002

Making Friends with Chickadees, Nuthatches, and Wrens

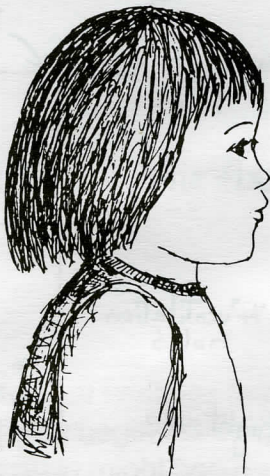
For chickadees and nuthatches, keeping warm in winter means eating ten to twenty times more food than in the summer. They flit here and there searching for seeds and bugs, and it is hard to take a good look at them. Sometimes though, their curiosity will bring them right to you for better inspection.



Calling Curious Birds: An Experiment with "Spishing" and "Squeaking"

Would you like to entice busy birds to come to you? Would you like to have a conversation with a bird? You can often draw small birds closer to you by imitating their songs and sounds. Try this experiment in bird calling.

On an early morning or late afternoon walk in the winter woods, move softly and slowly. (Sudden movements and loud talking scare birds away.) Find a spot to sit or stand quietly. Make sure there are bushes or trees nearby for birds to land on.



"Spishing"

"Spishing"

There are two bird-like noises to try. The first noise is known as "spishing." Simply make a whispery "spssh, spssh" sound with your lips. Repeat the sound in a regular pattern.

"Squeaking"

The second noise is called "squeaking." Lengthy kisses made on the back of your hand after you have licked your lips make the high squeaky sound. Be patient and keep repeating your "squeaks" and "spishes." Chickadees, nuthatches, and other small birds are often fascinated by these sounds and may stop by to inspect you and possibly talk back to you.

"Spishing" and "squeaking" may be done any time of year. Our summer resident wrens are as curious as chickadees. Give them a call next summer.

Pull Out and Save



House Wren

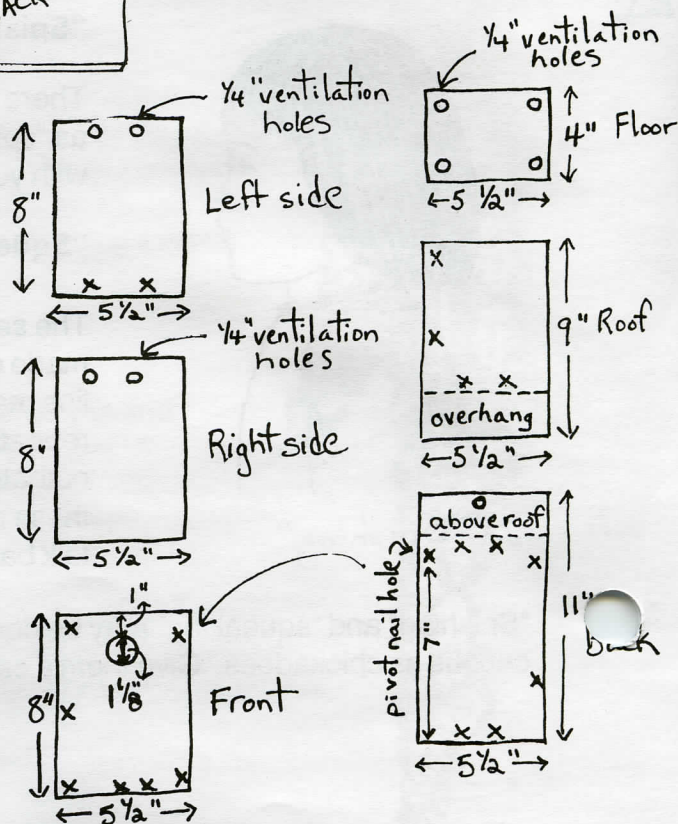
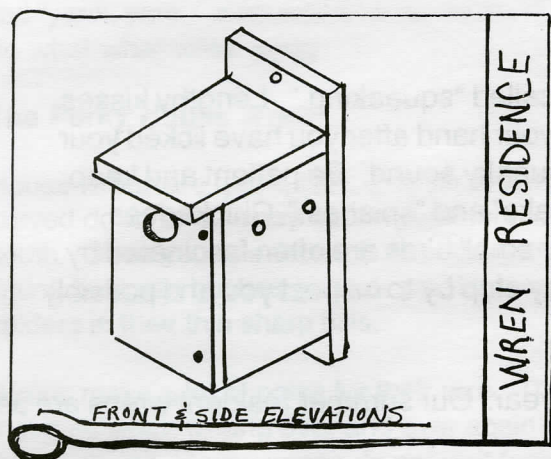
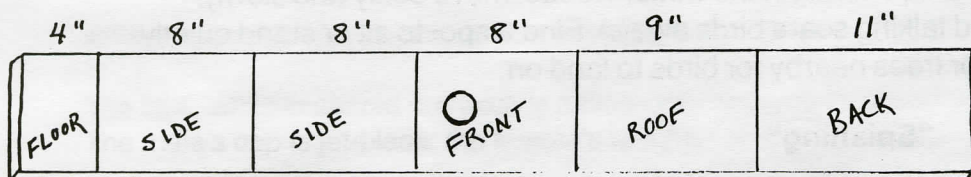
Build a Box for Baby Birds

Years past, an old tree might have stood where you live. Chickadees, nuthatches, or wrens could have chipped out nest holes in the old tree. Most people don't have old or dead trees in their yards now, but you can still give baby birds the cozy, safe shelter they need next summer by building a nest box to hang this winter. Here are plans for a house designed especially for wrens or chickadees, but a nuthatch has been known to move in, too.

Before you start, find an adult to saw wood, drill holes, and help you put together the nest box.

Materials you need:

- 1" X 6" board, at least 4 feet long (a 1" X 6" board is actually $\frac{3}{4}$ " X $5\frac{1}{2}$ ")
- use untreated, unpainted wood; rough grade lumber works well;
- cedar lasts a long time, but common pine is fine
- pencil or pen
- saw and drill
- hammer and 1 1/2" galvanized nails or screwdriver and 1 1/2" wood screws
- sandpaper
- clamps (help hold parts together during construction) and wood glue (optional)



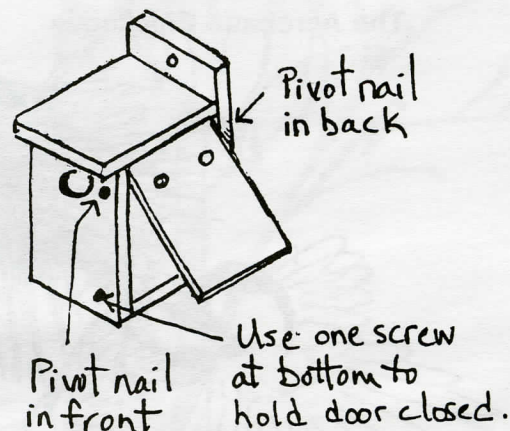
Putting Together Your Nest Box

Draw the lines for the nest box parts on your board. (Remember, wise carpenters measure twice to cut once!) Cut out the pieces, starting with the floor. Drill the quarter-inch ventilation holes in the sides and floor. Drill a small hanging hole in the top center of the backboard.

Make the entrance hole diameter exactly 1 1/8".

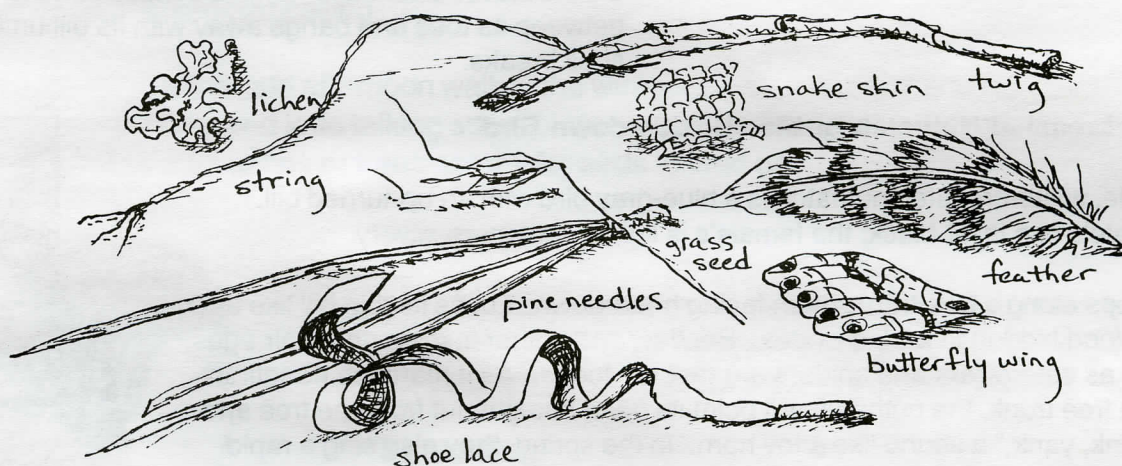
(If the hole is any bigger, you are almost certain to have house sparrows take over the nest box.) On the inside of the front, make horizontal scratches in the wood under the entrance hole. This gives the baby birds a toehold for climbing out of the box. Smooth the entrance hole with sand paper so no splinters poke the birds going in and out.

Put the box together as illustrated. Using clamps and gluing first makes it easier. Pre-drill screw holes, using a bit smaller than the screw size, to keep the wood from splitting.



Do not add a perch to the front. Perches give predators such as cats and raccoons an easy grip, and perches give sparrows a place to sit while they bother the birds inside the box.

NEST MATERIALS



Hanging Your Nest Box

Hang your nest box five or six feet off the ground by March. Chickadees are here year round, and they begin scouting nest sites early. Male wrens arrive in March to start nest building. The male might begin several twig nests in hopes a female wren will choose one when she arrives later. If you make a pile of thin, three-inch sticks on the ground near your nest box, you might spot Mr. Wren taking one through the entrance hole.

If no one chooses your nest box this season, try changing the direction it is facing next year. If you clean out the old nest at the end of every summer, your nest box could shelter a family of birds every summer for many years.

Heads Down or Tails Up – Identifying Three Busy Birds

Have you ever seen a bird zig-zagging down a tree trunk headfirst? The “upside down” bird was probably a nuthatch. Or have you ever seen a bird catch a bug mid-air, do a somersault, and land back on its feet? That nimble bird was most likely a chickadee. You can often identify a bird at a distance by noticing how the bird is moving. Sometimes you can identify a bird without even seeing it when you hear its distinctive voice.

The Acrobatic Chickadee



Black-capped Chickadee

Chickadees are such good bug finders that other birds like nuthatches and woodpeckers follow them to find food.

Black-capped chickadees have black caps and black bibs with white faces and chests. The mountain chickadee looks similar, only a little “dustier.” Listen for their melodious song “CHICKA-dee-dee-dee!” just like their name. Sometimes they whistle “fee-bee” or “fee-bee-bee.”

The chickadee has a tiny beak made for digging into cracks for bug eggs no bigger than pinheads. They also eat insects, seeds, and berries. Chickadees like to eat sunflower seeds, but their stubby, pointy bills, good for bug hunting, are bad for crushing seeds. So the clever chickadee holds a sunflower seed between its toes and bangs away with its bill until the shell breaks.

White-breasted Nuthatch or the “Upside-down Bird”

The little, white-breasted nuthatch is a blue-gray bird with an up-turned bill. The male’s cap is jet-black; the female’s is lighter and more silvery.

As it hops along a tree trunk, often facing head-down, it uses its thin bill like a tool to nab food hidden in bark crevices. Beetles, ants, other insects and their eggs, as well as caterpillars and spiders are favorite foods. As it marches headfirst down a tree trunk, the nuthatch will point its head straight out from the tree and call “yank, yank,” a sound like a toy horn. In the spring, they also sing a rapid “to what-what-what” song.

The Perky House Wren

House wrens are quick, little, grayish-brown birds with upturned tails and curved down bills. They spend summers in Colorado but winter farther south. Often you see them close to the ground, hopping, fluttering, and flitting between bushes and low plants, busy picking up insects and spiders in their thin sharp bills.

Wrens make a lot of noise for their size. Their song is a lively chortling sound that they seem to sing over and over again alternated with an insistent scolding “churr-churr.” House wrens do not visit feeders, but of all the backyard-nesting birds, they are the easiest to attract to a nest box.



WHITE-BREASTED
NUTHATCH