

## **THE NEED FOR BIRD NEST-BOXES.**

Our declining bird population needs all the help it can get and so many of us provide food and water in our gardens. Another way is to provide places to nest. Trees, shrubs, ivy and creepers are essential for many garden species, but not all gardens have suitable ones, in particular very few have old trees with holes in for hole-nesting species like the tit family. Nest-boxes are the answer: whether you make a box yourself or buy one ready-made, please remember the following important points:

- 1) The box should be of thick solid wood or wood-crete – not thin plywood or composite (which can warp) or metal (too hot in summer for nesting, too cold in winter for roosting - and produces condensation).
- 2) Recommended sizes for the entrance hole, which should be high up, are tits 2.8 cm, sparrows 3.5cm, starling 4.5cm. Metal plates round the hole prevent larger birds or predators enlarging it. For robins leave the whole top of the front open.
- 3) It must not have a perch by the hole – birds don't need one, but it could certainly provide a foothold for an avian or mammalian predator.
- 4) It can be water-proofed with a non-toxic preservative on the outside, but not inside (to avoid fumes and contamination).
- 5) Make sure the top and side joins cannot let in water – if necessary, use a non-toxic filler or waterproof tape (or rubber from a bicycle inner tube).
- 6) Drill several drainage holes in the bottom in case water does get in.
- 7) The lid must slope forward and overlap the sides, front and back, to keep out the rain and sun, and deter predators.
- 8) The lid must be firm but removable, so that the box can be emptied and cleaned out before the next season.
- 9) The inside of the box front, under the hole, is best roughed or steeped to help young birds clamber out when ready.
- 10) Don't have a nest-box over a bird-table – would you want to rear a family in a public restaurant?!
- 11) Angle the box away from direct hot sun and persistent rain, and tilted very slightly downwards.
- 12) Do fix the box securely with nails, screws, strong twine or wire, but avoid any sharp nails or screws protruding into the inside of the box. Don't put steel nails or screws into trees – they rust and rot, harm the tree and can be dangerous later to saws.
- 13) If cats are a problem, site the box appropriately – a blank wall is best – surrounded by sprigs of prickles, chicken wire or similar.
- 14) If occupied don't keep looking inside – the adult birds might desert or the fledglings leave too soon.
- 15) After the nesting season is well over, using gloves, clean out the box with boiling water, or Citrox cleaner, and place a small twig across the bottom inside to encourage its use for a roosting bird in winter. If used for roosting, clean again before spring.(We have fun watching a blue-tit pop into a box for roosting each evening at dusk!)

Do put up a nest-box – it helps the birds, and it also helps you by providing entertainment and garden pest control – one brood of blue tits can consume 12,000 grubs and caterpillars! Involve children if possible.

**Note:** Valentine's Day is traditionally the time when birds start their pair-bonding and courtship for the new breeding season! A box makes an interesting and unusual present.

*Graham Bell*