

Golf Is For The Birds

Ten techniques to enhance the success of birdhouses at your course.

BRIAN BECKNER AND TODD LOWE • PHOTOS BY BRIAN BECKNER

Think about it: What other setting has more diversity of open space, water, and cover to foster wildlife than what can be found on most golf courses? Golf courses are often safe havens that might not otherwise exist, especially in urban areas. The open green spaces common to many golf courses provide especially good habitats for birds, and with a little effort your golf course can considerably enhance its environmental quality.

While many bird species nest among tree branches, some species require cavities for nesting. Birdhouses provide homes for an array of birds that would otherwise require natural cavities like hollowed trees or abandoned woodpecker holes. With natural structures in decline in most developed areas, golf courses can enhance their positive impact on the surrounding area by installing birdhouses for cavity nesters. We encourage you to establish, or continue your efforts with, a birdhouse program at your golf course. This article lists a number of tips that can help improve the success of your birdhouses.

1. KNOW YOUR SPECIES

Not all birds are cavity nesters. Do some research and learn about cavity nesters in your region, especially those considered to be threatened or endangered. Most songbirds, which many encourage and consider desirable on any property, prefer making their nests among the branches of trees or dense shrubs. To learn more about birdhouses and the birds that use them, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [NestWatch](#) website or Audubon International's [Fact Sheets](#) page.

2. RIGHT BIRD, RIGHT SIZE

Size matters, especially when considering habitat for cavity-nesting birds. Birdhouses vary in both entrance hole diameter and cavity depth. Bluebirds,



Birds and their nest boxes come in different sizes, so know your targeted species and their preferences.

Carolina wrens, and nuthatches require small nest boxes, whereas screech owls and wood ducks require larger nest boxes. Entrance holes on nest boxes can range from 1.25 to 4 inches, depending on which bird species you are trying to attract. A correctly sized entrance can also dis-

courage unwanted species, especially invasive European starlings and house sparrows.

3. LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Birdhouse-mounting location matters. Some birds require an open habitat or



Years of nesting material made this box unusable. Also, the entry hole is now too large for the targeted species. This box is most likely inhabited by undesirable birds.

nearby water for nesting, therefore their nest boxes are more suited to mounting on posts. However, other species prefer dense vegetation and their nest boxes can be mounted directly onto trees. The mounting height for birdhouses also varies among species.

4. TEMPERATURE

Be mindful of the sun and its impact on temperature. For many bird species in the southern region of the United States, higher temperatures are not conducive to proper nesting. Therefore, to decrease exposure to direct sunlight, birdhouse openings should not face south or southwest. The best location to keep a birdhouse cool is often one that receives afternoon shade. Unfortunately, mounting birdhouses in locations that receive after-

noon shade is not always a viable option. In addition, regional and seasonal temperatures vary, ultimately playing a part in selecting birdhouse locations. Also, dark colors retain heat and increase internal temperatures, so use light or neutral colors when constructing birdhouses.

5. PROXIMITY TO OTHER BIRDHOUSES

Too many birds of the same species in close proximity can reduce nesting success due to increased competition. Additionally, some birds might establish nests in multiple boxes but only maintain one. Wood ducks, for example, can be brood parasites — laying their eggs in the nests of other birds. When nest boxes are too close together, eggs from brood parasites can overcrowd eggs laid in other nest boxes to the

point that most of the eggs will not hatch. Each bird species has its own territorial preferences, so identify the preferences of each desired species for success.

6. GUARD AGAINST PREDATORS

Predator guards are used for many reasons. Some are placed at birdhouse entrances to create a deeper entryway that is difficult for predators to infiltrate with a beak, talon, or claw. Often, predator guards work best when made out of a hardened material that can resist wear caused by woodpeckers or other animals that may attempt to inspect and enlarge the birdhouse entrance. Perches are not recommended because predators can use them for support when ravaging birdhouses. Sometimes baffles are



Don't be afraid to open your birdhouse occasionally to monitor your success. It is only a short-term inconvenience to its inhabitants.

needed to keep snakes from preying on eggs or hatchlings inside birdhouses.

7. MONITOR YOUR SUCCESS

Track the use of your birdhouses. Know the targeted species and guard against undesirable species. Invasive exotics — like house sparrows and European starlings — outcompete other birds for nesting areas, so do not encourage their populations by allowing them to use your birdhouses. Don't be afraid to open the boxes occasionally to check bird activity. If undesirable birds take up residence in birdhouses, be a good landlord and evict these squatters. You should keep track of your birdhouses and note how many eggs are laid and how many eventually leave the nest as fledglings. Your results can also be used to increase the understanding of birds and their populations by submitting results to Cornell's [NestWatch](#).

8. CLEAN OUT YOUR BIRDHOUSES

Once the box has been used for nesting and the young have fledged, clean it out. Birdhouses can get quite dirty inside. Cleaning will encourage another brood, either in the same season or the next. It also keeps mites and other insects from establishing colonies in the birdhouse.

9. INCLUDE OTHERS

Birding, or "bird watching," has become a popular pastime for many. In 2010, birding was considered the second-fastest growing hobby, with 48 million people in the United States taking part. In 2013, approximately 85 million Americans enjoyed observing, photographing, or feeding wild birds. According to a recent survey on Recreation and the Environment by the USDA's Forest Service, birding ranks 15th on a list of the most popular outdoor activities — just below bicycling and beach bumming (see [Birding makes big tracks in 2013 and bags young fans](#)). As such, you may be surprised at how many golfers are interested in assisting with a birdhouse program at your course. Set up times throughout

the year to establish, monitor, and clean the birdhouses. Invite golfers and even experts to accompany you during a bird count while traveling the golf course.

10. COMMUNICATE YOUR EXPERIENCE

Birdhouse programs are fun on an individual level but are much more rewarding when the experience is shared with others at your course and in your community. Provide photos and tours to educate your community on your success and let them know that golf courses are more than just places to play golf. Bird cams set up in boxes with a direct feed to monitors in the clubhouse have been used to connect visitors to the environmental side of golf courses. Also, communicate your achievements via press releases and/or newsletters.

Golf courses provide excellent habitats for wildlife, and a birdhouse program is an easy and affordable way to strengthen your course's environmental efforts. Enlist others to help with developing, monitoring, and cleaning your birdhouses, as it will reduce the workload on the golf course staff and provide excellent outreach and education opportunities for your golfers and the surrounding community.

BRIAN BECKNER, owner of [Native Bird Boxes](#), was a golf course superintendent for over 12 years before becoming a full-time bird enthusiast. He now builds, installs, and monitors birdhouses for golf courses in Florida.

TODD LOWE is a senior agronomist in the Florida Region.



Involve others at your facility or community with your birdhouse program to increase awareness and reduce the workload on your golf course staff.



Golf courses provide excellent habitats for a variety of nesting birds like this pair of eastern bluebirds.

SUBSCRIBE TO THE USGA GREEN SECTION RECORD

TEXT "GREENSECTION" TO "22828" OR [CLICK HERE](#)

Offering the latest information on golf course management, turfgrass culture, environmental issues, research and economic sustainability.