

HUNTERS IN THE SKY

Day and night, they patrol our skies. They soar, swoop, dive and dart to keep our rodent population in check. Raptors, or "Birds of Prey," such as the Red-tailed Hawk and the Great-Horned Owl, are some of The Village's most valuable wildlife resources.

Raptors have evolved to become amazingly efficient predators: beaks are almost always large and powerful; feet are strong and heavily taloned; eye-sight, both focus and depth of vision, is superior; hearing is sharp and flight skills are superb.

The Red-tailed Hawk is the most commonly seen raptor, has a wingspan of up to 5 feet and can be identified by the broad band of dark feathers across its white belly, as well as the red feathers on the top side of its tail. On a hot summer day, high in the sky, watch a Red-tail riding heat thermals, or warm columns of air, and catching up-drafts off the rock ridges. As it soars, it may be engaged in a mock combat courtship ritual with its mate, or it just may be hoping to spot dinner with its amazing eyesight. Listen for the Red-tail's hoarse, rasping scream.

Listen, too, especially at dawn and dusk, for the deep, bold hoots of the Great-Horned Owl. A Great-Horned Owl chick leaves the nest in mid-to-late May. You may hear its blood-curdling scream, called a "hunger cry," as it follows its parents in flight. It is hard to miss the five-foot wingspan of the adult owl as it swoops off a Village rooftop at twilight to begin its nightly hunt. Sometimes you will see the Great-Horned Owl roosting during the day near the trunk at the top of an evergreen or cottonwood tree.

BIRD MIGRATION

Many of our summer birds in Castle Pines Village actually spend much of the year in places as far away as South America. In late summer, they gear up to make long journeys back to winter homes. This change of seasonal habitat, called migration, has evolved over thousands of years to enable birds to increase their chances of survival by taking advantage of favorable summer climates and abundant food and daylight.

In August, migrating birds bulk up for the long flight ahead. They may fly nonstop for days at a time and lose up to half their body weight in the process. Most small birds fly alone, in the dark of night, peeping to each other as they are spread loosely across the sky. Migrating altitudes vary from 2,000 to 20,000 feet and the birds orient themselves by using a combination of information they derive from the sun, wind, land formations and the earth's gravity.

Some of the more common summer migrants in Castle Pines Village are the Broad-Tailed Hummingbird (part-time resident of northern Mexico south to Guatemala), the Mountain Bluebird (wintering south to central Mexico), the Violet-Green Swallow (returning to areas as far south as Honduras), and the House Wren (south throughout Mexico). The Swainson's Hawk gathers in groups on the eastern plains before it migrates to the pampas (prairie habitat) of Argentina.

Look and listen for the signs of impending migration. You'll hear fewer bird sounds as young birds have matured and males are less vocal in defending territories. All birds, especially migrants, are busily feeding and you'll see more aggressive behavior at the hummingbird feeder, especially when the Rufus (orange) hummingbird returns south from their mountain nesting sites. By late August and early September, you may see mixed groups of songbirds gathering in the trees. Before you know it, you'll wake one morning to find that some of your familiar neighbors have suddenly vanished, hopefully to return in the spring.

WOODPECKERS

Woodpeckers will excavate nest holes in homes with natural wood siding (often at the site of a knothole) or with Dry-vit (stucco-like) systems. They will peck holes in wooden house parts while looking for insects, roost overnight under protected eaves soiling the house, and will awaken you before dawn during spring and summer, "drumming" on resonant gutters and downspouts. Prevent or eliminate woodpecker damage by hanging a woodpecker house on your property.

NESTING AND ROOSTING BOXES FOR BIRDS IN CPV

In Castle Pines Village, as dying trees are quickly cut down to fight the spread of bark beetles, there are fewer opportunities for birds to find and build homes. Residents, therefore, are encouraged to leave the occasional dead tree on their property. Once a tree is dead, it is no longer attractive to beetles but is very attractive to cavity nesting and roosting birds. Many birds actually eat bark beetles, so all the more reason to encourage them to spend time on your property. Feeding birds is encouraged, especially in winter. Also, there are several species of birds in CPV, listed in this document, that might nest and/or roost in boxes, shelves or nests that residents can provide.

As nesting boxes go, the most safe and effective ones are not always the prettiest. Cavity nesting birds merely want a safe, clean, dry spot in which they can build a nest and lay eggs. It helps to have an entry hole that faces away from prevailing winds (southeast is best) and is small enough to prevent the entry of predators.

The more natural the color and material of the box, the more likely it will be used, especially by certain birds. One should avoid stained and painted boxes, especially on the inside, as they retain heat and can be toxic to birds. One should never use a bird box that has a perch outside the entry hole, as birds have the ability to either fly straight into the box or to hang outside the door to feed babies. Perches encourage larger, predator birds to sit outside the nest and threaten babies and parents. Also, make sure bird boxes have ventilation and drainage holes to help keep babies cool and dry.

If you want to protect your bird box entry hole from being drilled larger by a woodpecker, you can get copper or slate door plates to put over the door, if your box does not already come with one (call ahead to make sure stores have the diameter you need – which would be the diameter of your existing hole. Excellent slate protectors – called “Slate Squirrel Guards” - can be ordered online from [coveside.com/under house accessories](http://coveside.com/under-house-accessories)).

Bird roosting boxes are also a good thing to provide. These boxes usually have multiple perches inside and are large enough to protect several birds at a time from inclement weather.

For more information on where and how to hang boxes and on box specifics, see the sections below, especially those on the specific bird you are trying to attract.

ACQUIRING BIRD BOXES:

Quality nest and roost boxes can be purchased at local wild bird stores or on-line. A good on-line source is bestnest.org, however there are others. Also, bluebird boxes that have been made by volunteers from Denver Audubon can be purchased from resident Arlene Raskin at (303) 660-0033. Finally, plans for making bird boxes yourself can be readily found online.

INSTALLING BIRD BOXES:

Please note: It is against CPV covenants, subject to fines, to do anything that will damage an existing tree within the Village. As attaching a bird box to a tree can potentially harm the tree, the CPV Wildlife Committee recommends you mount your bird box either on the side of your own home, or on a post or pole. The committee also recommends that, should your boxes be within view of neighbors, you consider your neighbors when deciding how and where to install them.

Hanging Boxes From the Side of Your Home:

Hanging nesting boxes from the side of your home is perhaps the easiest and most effective way to provide homes for birds, for several reasons. Smooth vertical walls are virtually predator proof, which makes them all the more attractive to birds. Key bird box predators are squirrels, raccoons, cats and snakes. A perfect spot on the side of your home would be at least 6 feet high, 10 to 15 feet away from trees and decking, and 3 feet in from corners (which squirrels can climb).

Most birds seem to prefer a box that faces east or southeast, away from prevailing winds.

It is simple to hang a bird box below a window. By removing the screen and opening the window, you have easy access to your exterior walls from the inside of your home. The process is described below:

Materials needed – 2, 2 inch hooks with screw posts and 2 picture hangers. (Rectangular metal plates that have free-swinging loops work well and can be attached with screws to the back of the box, called “2-Hole ‘D’ Ring Hangers”.) Open the window and, within safe reach below, screw in 2 hooks, placing them 4 inches apart. It helps to first gently tap the hook with a hammer to get it to penetrate the stucco before you screw it in. Place the picture hangers on the back of the box at the same distance apart. Thus, you can hang the boxes from the hooks, yet still be able to take them in and out for easy cleaning. After the box is hung, place a piece of Styrofoam behind it, if necessary, to help it hang parallel with the wall.

Hanging Boxes From Free Standing Posts or Poles:

As an alternative to placing nest/roost boxes on your home, it is also possible to place them on posts or metal poles, in the ground. The Design Review Committee suggests boxes be mounted on 4" diameter, square, 8' cedar posts, as are the boxes on the CPV Bluebird Trail. These posts are available from home improvement stores or lumber yards and are recommended to be cemented two feet into the ground. Metal poles are also available at all sights mentioned above for boxes. Baffles are available for both posts and poles that will help to keep boxes predator-free.

Again, most birds seem to prefer a box that faces east or southeast, away from prevailing winds.

BIRD BOX MAINTENANCE:

It is also important to clean and repair bird boxes at least once a year. Baby birds can quickly get hypothermia when wet, so roofs need to be checked for leaks. Raccoons can actually open boxes, therefore it is important to replace nail locks that hold doors closed. If the box has recently been used for nesting, with the exception of Pygmy Nuthatches (see Pygmy Nuthatches below for more) bring it in and clean it in September and, most importantly, late March. Whenever opening a bird box or removing it from its spot, ALWAYS FIRST TAP and wait to make sure there is no bird inside. When you are sure there is not a current nest within the box, dump out debris and wipe it clean with a damp cloth. Cavity nesting birds do not want to reuse old nests the following year. If the box is infested with mites, clean with multiple applications of diluted bleach and rinse well.

The information below is not an exact science, especially with nest platforms. The measurements are a best estimate of the ideal size preference of the bird. If you buy a box that is advertised for a particular bird, the inside measurements may slightly vary. You may have a box that is never used by the bird you desire, but another species may find it attractive. Many birds prefer similar box measurements, so who knows what will actually happen.....and this simply adds to the fun!

BOX INFORMATION FOR INDIVIDUAL BIRDS:

The codes below follow the name of the nesting bird and suggest the likelihood of a particular species of using a suggested nest.... V – Very likely, S – Somewhat likely, P – Possible, don't give up hope!
American Robin - S : Robins are not cavity nesters, but will nest under decks and in other man-made sheltered areas where they can find a small, protected, horizontal surface. A robin house does not have an entry hole but is essentially a sheltered shelf, or rather an open box with a roof for shelter from rain and snow. Imagine a standard bird box with the front wall removed. If you can find an area fully sheltered by an eave or a deck (that won't drip) than all you need is a small shelf.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 7.5 x 7.5"

Inside Box Depth: 8"

Cavity Opening: 7"W x 4.5"H

Height to Mount Box: 6 – 15'H

Black-capped Chickadee – V: It was recently discovered that while chickadees will use square nest boxes, they are even more likely to use a nest box with a cylindrical shape. Dimensions are given below for a wooden box. For information on making your own cylindrical box out of 4" diameter PVC pipe, or for ordering a finished product, click on the two links below.

Chickadees have a strong urge to excavate, so you increase the likelihood they will use a wooden box if you put in about 4 inches of tightly packed pine wood shavings (can get at a pet or feed store) in the bottom of the box, many of which they will remove. In the PVC nest box, put the level of shavings up to about 4 inches below the hole, packing them tightly.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 4 x 4"

Inside Box Depth: 8 - 10"

Cavity Opening: 1.125" diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 6 – 8"

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 6 – 20'

<http://web2.uwindsor.ca/courses/biology/dmennill/nestbox.html>

<http://www.gilbertsonnestbox.com/index.htm>

Downy Woodpecker – P: Most woodpeckers roost at night in cavities, usually different cavities than those they nest in and often alternating between a few. Downy Woodpeckers are more apt to use a conventional bird box as an additional roosting spot than they are to actually nest in it– still a good reason to put up an appropriate box. In the bottom of the box, place about 3 inches of tightly packed wood shavings.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 4 x 4”

Inside Box Depth: 10 - 12”

Cavity Opening: 1.25 – 2” diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 8 - 10”

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 6 – 20’

Great-Horned Owl – P: Great-Horned Owls, like most owls, do not build their own nests but rely on the abandoned nests of other birds (usually hawks or eagles) or occasionally squirrels, or will use a sheltered cliff face or very large opening in a dead tree. Large nesting platforms and actual nests can be installed. For more information, contact Gina Gerken by using the contact information at the bottom of the page.

Hairy Woodpecker – S: Woodpeckers are primary cavity nesters and therefore have the ability to drill their own nesting and roosting holes, but because of the decreasing number of trees, woodpeckers will often accept manmade boxes. Hairy Woodpeckers seem a bit more likely to nest in manmade boxes than Downy Woodpecker, and will also readily use them as an occasional alternative roost. In the bottom of the box, place about 3 inches of tightly packed wood shavings.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 6 x 6”

Inside Box Depth: 12 – 15”

Cavity Opening: 1.5 – 2” diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 9 – 12”

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 12 – 25’

House Finch – S: House Finches are very common birds in Castle Pines. They are easy to please regarding nesting spots and are happy to build a home in a wreath you have over your door, a dense plant on your deck, or even in certain kinds of bird feeders. They would, however, consider an actual box, if the dimensions are to their liking.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 6 x 6”

Inside Box Depth: 6”

Cavity Opening: 2” diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 4”

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 8 – 12’

House Wren – V: If you want to attract bluebirds to your home, you might also try to keep your local House Wrens happy. If they have no other nesting options, House Wrens will happily destroy bluebird eggs and kill babies and even adult bluebirds in order to claim a nest cavity. While they actually prefer a smaller cavity, they are willing to adapt to a wide range of nest spots. Wrens prefer a nest box that is mounted within or near dense shrubs and deciduous trees.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 4 x 4”

Inside Box Depth: 6 – 8”

Cavity Opening: 1 – 1.25” diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 4 – 6”

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 6 – 1’

Mountain Bluebird – S: It is especially rewarding to have a bluebird nest near your home. Not only is the amazing color of the bluebird a welcome addition to the neighborhood, bluebirds are the most endangered of our local cavity nesting birds and one of the birds that most needs our help. Mountain Bluebirds are a bit more difficult to attract than Western Bluebirds because they are somewhat shy and prefer to nest at higher altitudes and in more open habitat. They are less likely to use a box that is near a home or spot where there is frequent human activity. An ideal Mountain Bluebird nest site would be a box mounted to a baffled post or pole in a high, somewhat open area, with a few trees that are not too close, but within 100 feet of, and visible from, the box opening.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 5.5 x 5.5”

Inside Box Depth: 8 – 10”

Cavity Opening: 1.563 (1 9/16) diam
Height of Opening Above Floor: 5 – 7”
Height to Install Box Above Ground: 5 – 20’

Mountain Chickadee – V: See information, above, for Black-capped Chickadee.

Northern Flicker – V: These days, there are fewer dead and dying trees, especially of a diameter to house a large bird like the flicker. This causes the flicker to attack wooden surfaces of homes attempting to drill cavities, needless to say causing lots of damage.

As with the Pygmy Nuthatch, at the same time that the damage to the home is repaired, by placing a nest box on the side of a targeted home, as close to the area being attacked as possible, the flicker will often accept the box and refrain from future attacks. If the flicker is slow to accept the box, sometimes it is helpful to thumbtack popsicle sticks or another thin piece of wood over the box entrance. The bird will often quickly drill through the wood and then, because of having an active relationship with the box, be more apt to accept the box as a nest/roost spot. Place about 3 inches of tightly packed wood shavings in the bottom on the box.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 7 x 7”
Inside Box Depth: 18”
Cavity Opening: 2.5 – 3” diam
Height of Opening Above Floor: 15”
Height to Install Box Above Ground: 6 – 25’

Northern Saw-whet Owl – P: This little owl is one of the most difficult birds to see in North America. It is actually quite common in Castle Pines, but because it is so small, secretive, camouflaged and nocturnal, you can consider yourself lucky to ever have an encounter. Saw-whets will, however, sometimes nest in a nest box and you can increase your chances of seeing one just because they decide to be your neighbor! Place about 3 inches of tightly packed wood shavings in the bottom of the box.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 7 x 7”
Inside Box Depth: 16 – 18”
Cavity Opening: 2.5 – 3” diam
Height of Opening Above Floor: 13 – 15”
Height to Install Box Above Ground: 12 – 25’

Pygmy Nuthatch – V: The Pygmy Nuthatch is a tiny (4 ¼”), gray bird with a short tail, large head and long bill. I go into depth with this bird as it has become a problem for many people living in CPV. In nature, Pygmy Nuthatches nest and roost year-round in either abandoned woodpecker holes, or holes they, themselves, have drilled in trees. There is no time of year when a stucco home is safe. In spring, small cavities are pecked out for nesting. In fall, deeper holes are dug to allow multi-family groups to roost through the cold months. To make matters worse, it’s extremely hard to scare these crazy drillers.

Deterrents, such as plastic owls, streamers, squirting water and jumping spiders seldom work, and when they do, it is often only temporary.

There are several constructive things you can do to combat (and actually help at the same time) the Pygmy Nuthatch, and the best solution is to offer a nest/roost box. Although there are no guarantees, this attempt at coexisting peacefully is certainly worth the effort.

Pygmy Nuthatch Nesting:

If late winter or early spring is the time you discover holes being drilled by Pygmy Nuthatches, nesting is most likely the primary purpose of the hole. A range of box sizes might be used by these birds, but the inside dimension of the box that is ideal for nesting is probably 4 x 4” with a hole that is 1 1/8” wide (a standard chickadee box). Pygmy Nuthatches will also sometimes nest in a standard bluebird box, however bluebird-sized boxes can be more attractive for roosting (see below). If putting up only one box, and doing this in the spring, put up a chickadee-sized box. Place approximately two inches of tightly packed wood shavings in the bottom of the box.

Pygmy Nuthatch Roosting:

If late summer or fall is the time holes are in process, roosting is most likely the primary purpose. Often, larger boxes are selected for roosting because sometimes large groups of Pygmy Nuthatches will roost together. If putting up only one box, and doing this in late summer or fall, put up a bluebird-sized box. Boxes with inside perches that are sold as “roost boxes” do not work well for Pygmy Nuthatches.

Because they prefer to layer themselves on the bottom of the box, a nesting box works best. Place approximately two inches of tightly packed wood shavings in the bottom of the box.

Pygmy Nuthatch Box Purchase

There are several places to purchase bird boxes. For online boxes, try bestnest.com. Shipping is usually free for over \$75 purchases. Below are directions on what to purchase at this site:

Nuthatch/Chickadee Box – Under Wild Bird/Bird House/Wren-Chickadee – purchase “Audubon Wren Chickadee Box” – AUD-NAWRCH – 23.99.

Bluebird Box – Under Wild Bird/Bird House/Bluebird – purchase “Coveside Western Bluebird House” – COV-10051 – 29.99, or see information above in “Acquiring Bird Boxes.”

If you want to increase the chances your larger box is used only by a Pygmy Nuthatch and not by a bluebird, swallow or other bird, you can purchase a 1 1/8” wooden predator guard from one of the local stores mentioned above (call first to see if in stock – can be ordered) and use this to downsize the diameter of the larger bluebird hole. If you want to protect your box holes from being drilled larger by a woodpecker, you can also get copper or slate door plates to put on top of the door (again, call ahead to make sure stores have the diameter you need – excellent slate door protectors – called “Slate Squirrel Guards - can be bought online from coveside.com/found in “house accessories.”)

Pygmy Nuthatch Box Placement:

It is recommended you hang nuthatch boxes on the side of your house. For more information, see section above entitled “Hanging Boxes From the Side of Your Home.” Pygmy Nuthatches are more apt to use an alternative hole that is as high off the ground and as close to the sight they have already selected. By hanging the box from your home, you can often come very close to accomplishing this. Hang the box underneath the highest accessible window, closest to the existing hole and a minimum of 10 feet off the ground. Note the conditions of the existing hole (i.e. shade/sun, wind protection, access to nearby trees) and try to recreate this in the spot you place your box.

Since Pygmy Nuthatches often want boxes for two reasons and two seasons, it can be effective to hang them in more than one area. If your home is being targeted in multiple spots, consider hanging at least two boxes. A box that gets full sun, especially on a south facing wall, may not be selected for a nesting sight because of the heat, however this site may be chosen for a winter roost. A north facing wall may be selected for nesting, yet not for roosting, because it may be too cool. An eastern, or south eastern facing wall is probably the best bet to be used because it stands a better chance to be used for both nesting and roosting, however it is usually best to choose the wall with the existing holes, regardless of the direction it faces.

A few days after placing boxes, fill all existing holes in your stucco. It can be effective to stuff them with steel wool and to cover them with fine wire mesh before patching. If there is an active nest or roost hole in your walls, it can take much longer for birds to transition to boxes. DO NOT fill Pygmy Nuthatch holes in your stucco from April through August as they may have nests with babies inside. It is against the law to disturb an existing nest of a native North American bird.

If a Pygmy Nuthatch has been successful in roosting within your stucco in the past, it can sometimes be very hard to get them to accept a box. To help assure success the first time, or if the birds continue to drill in areas where holes have been filled, even with an available box, you may want, after having filled the holes, to hang a temporary rectangular piece of fine wire mesh over the area being attacked. You can remove it once the birds have adapted to the nest box.

In September, when cleaning out a box that has been used by Pygmy Nuthatches, if it looks clean and is lined with feathers (sometimes birds clean boxes out themselves immediately after nesting and start to ready the same box for roosting) leave it untouched and close or re-hang it. Examine the box again in late March. If it appears clean and is still lined with feathers, again, leave it alone and re-hang it. At this point, the birds may continue to roost in the box, or they may convert it to a nesting box. Pygmy Nuthatches will often stuff ventilation and drainage holes with fur or plant material to help insulate the boxes in winter. Don't remove this material during cold months of the year, however do remove it in late April, being careful to make sure you are not disturbing an early clutch of eggs.

Says Phoebe – P: Same information as the American Robin above, except the “Height to Install Box Above Ground” is 8 – 12.’

Tree Swallow – V: Tree Swallows are easy to please and very apt to use a nest box. All swallows tend to prefer an open pathway to the sky from the box entrance.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 5 x 5"

Inside Box Depth: 6 – 8"

Cavity Opening: 1.5 – 2" diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 5 – 6"

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 6 – 20'

Violet-Green Swallow – S: See the above box information for Tree Swallows. Violet-green swallows are less apt to nest on the sides of a home, but seem to prefer more open woodlands.

Western Bluebird – V: Western Bluebirds are happy to nest near humans and adapt well to boxes on the side of the home. For box information, refer to the information above for the Mountain Bluebird. Western Bluebirds will use a slightly smaller box with a hole of 1.5" diameter, however they seem just as happy with the Mountain Bluebird box dimensions. To discourage House Wrens from taking over bluebird boxes, keep boxes as far as possible from dense shrubs, oaks and deciduous trees, but still in line with a few open trees within 100 ft. of the box entrance.

White Breasted Nuthatch – S: White-breasted nuthatches are frequent visitors to bird and suet feeders and fun to have nesting nearby.

Inside Floor Dimensions: 5 x 5" – 7.5 x 7.5"

Inside Box Depth: 8 – 10"

Cavity Opening: 1.25 – 1.5" diam

Height of Opening Above Floor: 6 – 8"

Height to Install Box Above Ground: 5 – 25'

For more information on nesting birds or other wildlife in Castle Pines Village, feel free to contact Gina Gerken at ginagerken@comcast.net or (720) 733-6200.