

HOW TO MONITOR A NEST BOX IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

BOX LOCATION

One pair of nesting bluebirds requires about two acres of grassland to find the thousands of insects to feed an active nest. Select a site for your nest box so it will be in the shade. Place it where sprinklers will not hit the box. If possible, aim the hole to the north or east to keep out wind and sun. Aim the hole toward a tree, bush, fence or other structure for the baby birds to land on after their first flight from the box. Avoid pointing toward a street or body of water. The box can be mounted 5 feet or higher. Trail monitors regularly hang them 12-15 feet high (to prevent tampering) in trees with a special swivel basket (lifter) and extending pool pole. They can be taken down and checked (monitored) in a matter of minutes.

Hang the nest box as soon as you can and leave it up all year. Bluebirds use the boxes for shelter on cold winter nights. Fall and winter is the time to do any maintenance so all is ready for early spring. The box should be clean, the hole free of rough places that cause feather wear and cracks filled so a toe is not caught. Drafty, leaky seams can be repaired with clear silicone caulk. Hooks must be well bent so they cannot fall off the limb on a windy day.

SAFE HANDLING OF NEST BOX

Every time you prepare to take down a hanging box think 1,2,3: 1. Memorize the spot on the limb where the box is hanging, 2. Watch for about a minute to see if any bees are going in and out of the box and 3. Keep your eye on the box as you bring it down through the twigs and branches so it doesn't tip.

After the nest is built open the box after 11am and before 5pm to avoid disturbing egg laying in the morning and incubation at night. If the female is on her nest leave her alone and wait until the next box check. After the clutch of eggs has been laid you can monitor the box earlier in the day until about 5 p.m.

Safety is our number one goal for yourself, for the public and for the birds.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

1. **Strings** of all types may tangle the feet of the adults and chicks. It is best to remove the strings visible on the top of the nest before eggs have been laid. You can use small scissors to clip entangled string and tweezers to remove it.

2. **Managing ants and bees is important.**

Ants will eat chicks after they hatch and must be kept out of the nest box. **Argentine ants** can be prevented from getting in the box by tying a small rag half way up the hook and wetting it with motor oil so the ants can not pass without getting oily. Add a little oil each week when you check the box to keep it effective, but use as little as possible. Keep twigs and leaves from touching the box by which ants could enter. In addition you can repeatedly douse the ants and their hole with soapy dish water. If ants still persist, please explore this link:

<http://www.sialis.org/ants.htm>

Fire ants must be eliminated with the appropriate bait which the ants will take into the nest. Confer with a local expert such as Vector Control 714-971-2421. They prefer to handle these ants because people often worsen the problem by using the wrong bait.

Bees will kill chicks and cause adults to abandon the box. You can spray the ceiling inside the box with Home Defense or Hot Shot insect sprays before the nesting season and in August when you clean out the box. It lasts for months. Do not spray when birds are using the box. Alternatively, you can glue fluffy quilt batting to the inner ceiling, then extend 1 inch down the sides and back of the box to discourage bees from building comb. Contact a SCBC member for advice to get rid of bees in boxes ASAP.

3. **Why monitor weekly?** Counting and recording eggs and chicks weekly helps you know the age of the chicks. And observe how the wing develops each day so you can recognize age that way. **Here is how to calculate the age of chicks.** Suppose after 11 a.m. on May 1st you see one egg in the nest. Next week you check on May 8th and find five warm eggs. Assume the last egg was laid on May 5th and that the female started to incubate them then. Incubation usually takes about 14 days. That means it is likely the eggs will hatch May 18th. Make a note of your guess of hatch date. Count hatch day as Day 1. Fourteen days later on May 30 the chicks will be 14 days old and this should be the last time you look into the box until after the birds fledge because the chicks will be more active and may be frightened into bolting out of the box. This is called a **prefledge and must be avoided** because they cannot fly until about Day 19. Most chicks fledge between day 19 to day 24 with days 22-23 most common. For your guidance, using this pattern of development, project ahead when you expect fledging. If the female began incubating before all eggs were laid, some chicks will hatch and fledge before others. Observe the box and adult behavior before opening. The dirty nest should be removed right away (wear gloves) so the female can start a clean, new nest for the second brood. If she has already built a new nest cup over the old flattened nest, leave the nest.

4. **Dead birds.** If easy to do so without disturbing the nestlings or parents, dead birds may be removed and carefully disposed of by wearing gloves.

5. **Tiny insects** occasionally crawl on chicks or in the box. They are most likely feather mites. Avoid getting the mites on yourself. They cause itching.

6. **Safety of the hook.** It must be well bent. A 90 degree bend on the end of the hook like a fish hook will help prevent the wind from blowing it down.

IF BIRDS NEED MEDICAL CARE

Please call Licensed Bird Rehabilitator, Vicki Anderson, 714-964-0666 for consultation or 2/25/19

permission to deliver birds, and for instructions about care of birds in transportation. Conditions that may warrant such a call are, mite infestation, nestlings without parents, water-soaked nest with unfeathered nestlings, nestlings that appear to be ill and not thriving. Please be aware that Vicki is a volunteer and her resources are greatly limited during the nesting season.

OTHER BIRDS IN BOXES

We welcome these other cavity-nesting birds in our boxes: Tree Swallows, Violet Green Swallows, Mountain Chickadees, Chestnut Backed Chickadees, Oak Titmice, Ash-Throated Flycatchers, Bewick's Wrens, White-breasted Nuthatches and Pygmy Nuthatches. We discourage placing nest boxes in brushy locations that are favored by House Wrens. This species is highly aggressive toward bluebirds. They already exist in strong numbers and have adapted to nesting in locations other than in natural cavities and nest boxes.

Woodpeckers are welcome in our boxes and we happily replace any boxes in which they enlarge the hole. Every woodpecker is revered as the necessary creator of cavities used by bluebirds and other cavity nesting birds. As a general rule, unless a species is in decline, it is more beneficial for woodpeckers to continue their habit of selecting and excavating their own nest sites. This is consistent with their biology and provides great benefits to the habitats they occupy. For these reasons, providing boxes specifically for woodpeckers warrants careful consideration of many factors.

Non-native **HOUSE SPARROWS ARE NEVER ALLOWED TO USE BOXES.** Their loosely built, domed nests and speckled eggs can legally be removed. Bluebird organizations are very concerned about imported House Sparrows which are dangerous to native birds. Read about House Sparrows at: sialis.org including sialis.org/neglect.htm