

# Got Mites? 'Renesting' May Be Needed

By **Ronnie Eaton**  
**San Mateo County**

Sooner or later I knew that it might happen -- mites in a nest box! Over the past few years I had read about this and other problems that one might find during a nest-box check in order to learn ahead of time "what to do when" a problem is encountered. There is, fortunately, a lot of good information out there about any number of concerns, even black bears! Well, that hasn't been a problem for us yet, but I do have one trail where my monitoring partner Marsha and I have to step over mountain lion scat!

During a recent check of a Tree Swallow nest box, we were horrified to see THOUSANDS of minute-sized mites swarming all over the top of the nest box and my hands! They were reacting to the motion of the nest box as we took it down to check the nestlings. Far worse than what we saw on the outside of the nest box was what we feared the nestlings were suffering inside the nest box.

The nestlings were about 10 days old and, fortunately, looked fine. However, one nestling was standing up on the rim of the nest in the back of the nest box fussing loudly. We weren't sure if it was from our having opened the nest box or from the mites, but regardless, it was obvious something had to be done

to minimize the number of mites in the nest box if these nestlings were to successfully fledge. We had no tools with us or enough specific information to be able to deal with the mites that day, so we had to close up the nest box and leave things as they were.

In my subsequent research I learned that mites are quite common on TRES (check out [treeswallows.com](http://treeswallows.com)) and less likely on Western Bluebirds. I'm not sure if this is because TRES are inherently more susceptible to mites, or if they carry them to the nest box via the feathers they collect for the nest. I was surprised to read that mites often are not as bad as one thinks and that birds have evolved a number of ways to tolerate them. However, large numbers of mites can weaken nestlings as they take their blood meals. Additionally, nestlings that survive the mites to fledge may be weakened by blood loss and won't survive to adulthood.

I had read that "renesting" is one way box monitors can deal with infestations of nests from mites and other parasites, such as botfly. Renesting means replacing an infested nest with a clean one: either an old nest that you know is free of

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This newsletter uses the Comic Sans font for greater accessibility for everyone

# How to Manage a Mite Infestation

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parasites and that you have saved, or a new nest that you fashion from the same materials as the nest being replaced. I decided to check with one of our local experts, Lee Pauser with Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society. Lee is always tremendously helpful and a true font of information. He has experienced problems with mites and has done reneesting but he also recommended just treating the existing nest and young with food-grade diatomaceous earth (DE). I decided that since the mite infestation was so severe that I would both reneest and treat with DE.

While you can easily buy food-grade DE online, I didn't want to wait, so I found food-grade DE at a local health-food store.

Okay, now for the clean-out! I had to put aside my trepidation as to how the nestlings would react to all of this and focus on the process. I removed the infested nest box, placed it on the ground and positioned the tub close by. I opened the nest box and gently pulled out the liner and nest with the young swallows, placing my other hand gently over the nestlings as I transferred the liner and nest to the tub. I then removed them from the nest and laid a towel over the top of the tub to keep them quiet.

I took the infested nest box and nest/liner some distance away and placed them into a plastic bag and wiped my hands with alcohol. Then I gathered dried grass strands about 5-8 inches long and fashioned a new nest by wrapping the grass around my hands, laying it in the clean liner and com-

## Supplies for Mite 'Renesting'

- New, clean nest box
- New plastic liner for the nest (made from a berry container or suet container, with lots of holes in it for drainage)
- Large, deep plastic tub
- Grasses for new nest
- Towels, alcohol and plastic bags
- Painter's tape
- Diatomaceous earth and hand duster

pressing it as I went until I had a good, deep rim. I gathered more grass for the cup and again compressed it into place. Finally, I placed several clean chicken feathers into the nest around the cup that I got by sacrificing one of my cat's feather toys (!) and placed the new nest/liner into the nest box.

I used the duster to apply some diatomaceous earth to the bottom and sides of the nest to deal with mites that would come off the

nestlings. To keep the nestlings quiet once they were placed into the clean nest box, I placed blue painter's tape very lightly over the nest box opening to keep the nest box dark and prevent them getting out of the opening. This type of tape is not very sticky and would not harm the young if they did try to get out. (You could instead stuff a rag or sock into the opening.)

Now to the nestlings! One by one, I gently picked up a nestling from the tub and cupped it in my hand, lightly dusted it on the back, tummy, tail and under the wings with diatomaceous earth, then opened the clean nest box and laid it gently into the nest, closing the nest box after each transfer. They were all amazingly cooperative, except for one, who took great exception to the entire process and fluttered around the tub screaming bloody murder!! Sheesh! I believe that it was the same nestling that was protesting when we opened the nest box and found the mites originally!

Finally all nestlings were positioned in the clean nest box and allowed to sit quietly

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# Mite management

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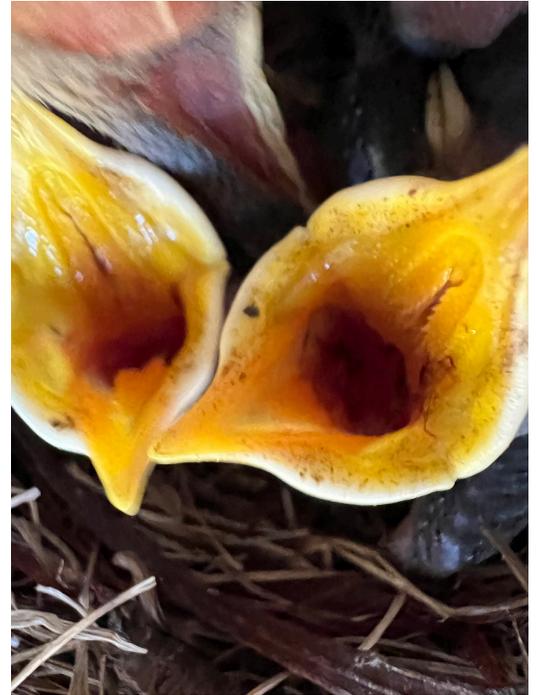
for 5 minutes before I gently removed the tape from over the entrance hole and lifted the nest box back into position in the tree.

I gathered up all the materials and retreated to observe the nest box and wait for the parents to return. After a few minutes, the parents began to circle near the nest box and eventually landed on the opening. After a couple of visits, a parent entered the nest box. I waited until both parents were returning with food, which only took about 10 more minutes, before leaving.

Phew! So, know that you, too, can survive finding a nest box infested with mites!! We are fortunate to have wonderful, experienced nest box monitors such as Lee Pauser and others who are very happy to share their knowledge and help out anyone who needs it.

I am now putting together a "mite kit" that I'll have with us in case we come across other nest boxes infested with mites. It took this experience to show me that while reading is helpful to learn about potential problems, there is nothing quite like the real thing to get you up to snuff on how to deal with them in the field! ■

# Big Mouths



Did you know that WEBL parents 'test' nestlings to see if a food item will fit in their mouth? If the prey is too big, the parent gives it to a larger sibling. Photo by Cindy Lockhart, San Mateo County

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