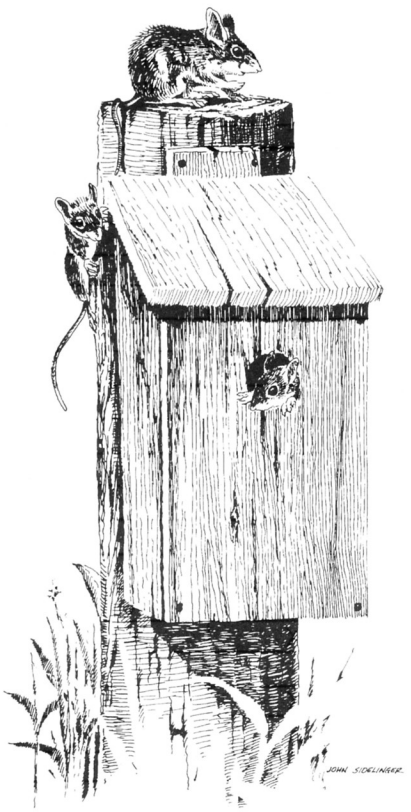
Tips And Cautions

Nest boxes can do more harm than good. Help or harm depends on you. Before you buy, build or place your first next box, please review the following cautions and tips.

1. Many "commercial" bird boxes are built to attract you rather than a bird. Worse, numerous commercially made box designs will attract birds to unsafe housing. If you're purchasing a birdhouse, observe these cautions: Avoid buying a wren, chickadee, Tree Swallow or bluebird house with a perch. Milk carton bird houses, houses of cardboard, and some small metal boxes heat and cool too fast; do not use them. A box that has been stapled together will not last long; a well made box is nailed or screwed together. If a box doesn't have holes or slits for ventilation and drainage, don't buy it. Avoid buying a completely sealed box. There is no way to check the birds, clean out old nests, or remove undesirable occupants.

2. Buyer beware! Small bat boxes, little larger than a bluebird box, are rarely used by bats. We no longer include a small bat box construction plan in this book. Butterfly boxes are popular "for sale" items. But they, too, are rarely used. Some stores are selling boxes made of cedar. Cedar repels insects. We still include a plan (Plan 21) for a butterfly box in this booklet, but consider construction details and placement to be experimental.

3. Select a box for a specific kind of bird or mammal. Different species have different house size and entrance-hole-size requirements. While house sizes can vary somewhat, the exact size of the entrance hole can be critical. For example, a 1 1/2 inch diameter hole will admit a bluebird but exclude the slightly larger starling. Plans 24 and 25 in this book illustrate species-specific hole sizes.



4. Construction: Should bird houses be painted? Should I use a wood preservative? What kind of wood should I use? The answers to these questions and other house construction tips are found on pages 28 and 29.

5. Nesting material: Sawdust is not the best material for lining nest boxes for birds of prey (Screech-Owl, Barred Owl, Saw-whet Owl, Barn Owl, and American Kestrel) or waterfowl (Wood Duck, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser). Sawdust tends to pack down when wet and retains moisture. Wood chips from a chainsaw may be a better lining; or place 1/2 inch layer of pine needles on the box floor. They allow for better drainage and less water retention.

6. Placement: The best built box in the state will not attract a desired occupant if it's placed in the wrong habitat. Or it will have the effect of a "trap," if it's located where it will attract an occupant to an unsafe situation. For some species, boxes are wasted because they are placed too close together. For instance, clustered wood duck boxes invite dump nesting and nesting interference. The same number of boxes placed 100 yards apart, or far enough apart so one is not visible from the other, will produce more ducklings. Ideally, wood duck box densities should be kept low, about 1 per 5 acres of wetland brood rearing habitat. Boxes along the water's edge (raccoons) and near houses and barns (cats) should have predator guards (Plan 23). If you must nail a box to a tree, use aluminum nails (Plan 26). Don't waste a good box or endanger a bird you want to help. Best box placement for every species is discussed in detail in the following section titled: Species Accounts.

7. Maintenance and pests: Mice, squirrels, bees, wasps and other small animals may take up residence in bird houses. If not acceptable, remove the nests. When the nesting season is over (but no later than mid-February), clean out old nesting material and make sure the box is not being used by deer mice. Otherwise, these mice may defend their box from returning songbirds in the spring. They may even kill and eat birds that enter "their" box.