

# Helping Cavity-nesters in Florida<sup>1</sup>

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Cavities or holes in trees are required nesting sites for 25 bird species in Florida. Some cavity-nesters have very specific preferences for their homes. For example, the **red-cockaded woodpecker** excavates its nesting cavity only in older living pine trees that are infected with red heart rot, and in areas with little or no hardwood understory. On the other hand, Carolina wrens are quite adaptable and even have been known to set up house-keeping in pockets of accessible clothing articles, mailboxes, and old hornet nests.



Figure 1.

Some cavity-nesters such as woodpeckers, Carolina chickadees, and brown-headed nuthatches prefer to excavate their own nest cavities in dead or decaying wood. Others select

old woodpecker holes or cavities formed by lightning, disease, decay, or insects.

Turkey vultures are the largest cavity-nesters with wing-spans of about 6 feet (2 meters). Their nest site often is at or near ground level in hollow trees or logs. When these structures are not available, they will nest in caves or in dense shrubbery.

The smallest hole-nester in Florida is the **brown-headed nuthatch** which is only 3 1/2 inches (9 centimeters) long. These birds often nest in small cracks and crevices that do not have noticeable rounded openings like woodpecker holes.



Figure 2.

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Of the 25 species of cavity-nesters in Florida, two are legally classified as species in jeopardy of extinction. The [southeastern American kestrel](#) is a state-listed threatened species and the red-cockaded woodpecker is a federally-listed endangered species. The ivory-billed woodpecker also is doubly listed as endangered but probably is already extirpated from the state. The Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals has recommended listing the hairy woodpecker and the white-breasted nuthatch.



Figure 3.

## NEST SITES

Nest sites for cavity-nesters usually are in shorter supply than food and water. Dead trees (snags) often are removed from forests, parks, and yards. Whenever possible, snags should be left for birds; however, if you are concerned that a dead tree may fall, it can be shortened and supported with cables.

Properly built [bird houses](#) or nest boxes can mimic natural cavities and help to increase the availability of this limiting habitat component. Some cavity-nesters in Florida, such as black and turkey vultures, chimney swifts, and [pileated](#) and red-cockaded woodpeckers will not readily use bird houses. However, there can be exceptions to this general rule. Preferred habitats, house dimensions, entrance specifications, and other special requirements are fairly specific for each species. Refer to [Table 1: Bird House Specifications](#).

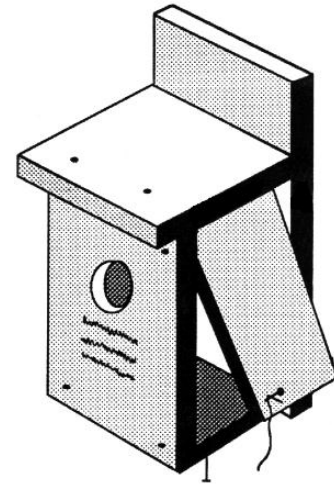


Figure 4.



Figure 5.

Bird houses can be set out at any time of the year. However, making them available just before the major nesting season (March-June) will enhance their use.

The following general considerations apply to all bird houses.

**Cleaning** - Include a hinged door or other means for easily checking and cleaning out the house. Birds will do their own cleaning as they do in natural cavities, but your help will increase use.

Drainage - The bottom should contain 3 or 4 1/4-inch holes to allow drainage of rain water that may enter.

Attachment - Houses built for wrens can be suspended under an eave or a tree limb. All other houses should be firmly attached to a post, tree, or building.

Perches - Natural cavities do not have perches, so do not attach perches on any built houses. Perches will only encourage use by exotic English sparrows and European starlings. A nail or knife can be used to scratch the outside surface below the entrance if smooth boards are used.

Cavity-nesters perch on vertical roughened surfaces such as bark.

Roof - The front edge of the roof should overhang about 1-2 inches (2.5-5 centimeters) to help protect the entrance from wind-driven rain.

Ventilation - Ventilation holes or slits should be located at the top of both sides just beneath the roof.

Nails - Use galvanized nails.

Floor - The floor should be situated between and about 1/4 inch above the bottom edges of the front, back, and sides. This will help prevent the rain from seeping into the bottom of the nest.

Wood - 1" x 4", 1" x 6", or 1" x 12", untreated boards are the best materials to use.

Paint - Newly painted or oiled houses are less attractive to birds until they have weathered. However, it is desirable to paint the top surfaces of purple martin houses white to reflect the sun's heat.

Style - The shape and style of the house are not as important as the dimensions.

Size - House dimensions should be close to those given in this pamphlet, but they do not have to be exact.

- Providing houses for cavity nesting birds is not only recommended to help reverse declining trends for some populations, but it is also a **rewarding activity** for many Floridians. What have you done for wildlife lately?



Figure 6.



Table 1. Bird House Specifications.

Width (in)	Height (in)	Entrance		Height of house (ft)
		Size (in)	Height above floor (in)	
Barn-owl				
22	18	10 square	centered at the top	in open building near roof
Preferred habitat: open canopy wood-lands or edges of thick woodlots				
Special tips: 2" of woodchips on bottom				
Barred owl				
12	24	7	12	20-30
Preferred habitat: old growth, wetland forests				
Special tips: 3" of woodchips on bottom, a perch should be close but not block entrance				
Brown-headed nuthatch				
4	10	1 1/4	7	10-25
Preferred habitat: pine woodlands				
Special tips: outer material should be pine bark				
White-breasted nuthatch				
4	10	1 1/4	7	6-25
Preferred habitat: deciduous woodlands				
Special tips: outer material should be bark				
Carolina wren				
4	8	1 1/2	1-6	6-10
Preferred habitat: woodlands with thick underbrush				
Special tips: bird house can be hung from limb or human house eave				
Carolina chickadee				
4	8	1 1/8	6	4-10
Preferred habitat: all woodlands				
Special tips: place house in area with about 1/2 sunlight				
Common flicker				
7	24	2 1/2	18	8-20
Preferred habitat: all woodlands				
Special tips: outer material should be bark				
Downy woodpecker				
4	10	1 1/4	7	8-25
Preferred habitat: all woodlands				
Special tips: fill house tightly with sawdust, outer material should be bark				
Eastern bluebird				
5	9	1 1/2	5	4-8
Preferred habitat: open fields, yards, golf courses				
Special tips: place house in open area facing and about 10 feet away from a bush or along a wire fence on which young can perch				
Eastern screech-owl				
8	16	3	10	15-30
Preferred habitat: woodland edges				
Special tips: 3" of woodchips on bottom				
Great-crested flycatcher				
6	10	2	6	8-20
Preferred habitat: all woodlands				
Special tips: place house in shade				

Hairy woodpecker				
6	15	1 1/2	10	12-25
Preferred habitat: all woodlands				
Special tips: fill house tightly with sawdust, outer material should be bark				
Pileated woodpecker				
11	24	4	18	20-30
Preferred habitat: old growth woodlands				
Special tips: 2" thick boards, fill house tightly with sawdust, outer material should be bark				
Prothonotary warbler				
4	8	1 1/4	6	2-12
Preferred habitat: swamps and along rivers				
Special tips: place house "next to" or "over" water				
Purple martin				
6	6	2 1/2	1	10-20
Preferred habitat: open fields, yards, and golf courses				
Special tips: must have several compartments, place house on pole at least 25' from trees and other tall structures				
Red-bellied woodpecker				
7	15	2	10	20-40
Preferred habitat: old growth woodlands				
Special tips: fill house tightly with sawdust, outer material should be bark				
Red-headed woodpecker				
6	15	2	10	20-40
Preferred habitat: open canopy woodlands and edges				
Special tips: fill house tightly with sawdust, outer material should be bark				
Southeastern kestrel				
9	16	3	11	13-16
Preferred habitat: open areas and edges of woodlands				
Special tips: 2" of woodchips on bottom				
Tufted titmouse				
4	10	1 1/4	7	4-15
Preferred habitat: old growth woodlands				
Special tips: place house in shade				
Wood duck				
10	24	4x3 horizontal oval	20	4-6 over water; 15-25 over land
Preferred habitat: bottomland hardwoods and wetlands				
Special tips: 4" of woodchips on bottom, 18"x3" strip of 1/4" hardware cloth on inside below entrance				
Hooded merganser				
10	24	4x3 horizontal oval	20	4-6 over water; 20-30 over land
Preferred habitat: bottomland hardwoods and wetlands				
Special tips: 4" of woodchips on bottom, 18"x3" strip of 1/4" hardware cloth on inside below entrance				