

# Nesting boxes and hollows



*We can mimic natural hollows by installing nesting boxes to help provide homes for birds, bats and possums. By supplementing naturally occurring hollows with wildlife boxes, providing native food plants and retaining vegetation corridors you are sustainably supporting these extraordinary suburban neighbours.*

## The hollows shortage

The clearing of Adelaide's original bushland has resulted in the loss of natural nesting hollows in old trees. More recently, the removal of dead trees and limbs for firewood has further contributed to the decline in suitable hollows, both up in the trees and down on the ground. This has impacted upon the many bird, mammal and lizard species that rely on hollows for nesting and shelter – and Australian wildlife has the highest rate of hollow dependency in the world!

The shortage of natural nesting hollows, with no likelihood of new ones being created due to the long time frame (80+ years!) required for even small hollows to form, means it is very important that we conserve existing hollows be they in living or dead trees.

## Threats

A number of pressures threaten the availability of nesting hollows. The primary threat is habitat loss through urban development. A trend toward manicured gardens and cleared spaces has led to a decrease in the availability of mature eucalypts capable of supporting multiple natural hollows.

## Mimicking natural hollows

Nothing is better than a natural hollow, but it takes upwards of 300 years for a one to form to the size a Brushtail Possum or a cockatoo might be able to use. For a nesting box to recreate habitat for possums, birds and bats, we must understand what natural hollows do. In the summer, hollows have their own air-conditioning provided as living trees transpire (i.e. lose water through evaporation). In winter it is also warmer within a natural hollow compared to outside. As there are many different sized hollows in trees, there is no one-size fits all nesting box. Each species' size and habitat requirements will help determine what you construct to attract your desired native animals.

**Possum boxes:** Both local species of possum may use nest boxes. The smaller Common Ringtail Possum tends to make a drey or leaf nest in the branches of trees, but will utilise hollows during the wetter periods of winter and spring. The larger Brushtail Possum is an obligate hollow user, meaning they seek out a hollow or suitable location to shelter by day, every morning before dawn.



Nest boxes are an important aspect to wildlife conservation in any areas where natural nesting hollows are not available.

Nesting boxes are readily utilised by this species and provide appropriate shelter, thereby minimising the risk of one taking up residence in your roof.

**Bird boxes:** The size of your bird box and its entry hole will depend on the species you want to attract.

Vertical hollow nesting birds include rosellas, red-rumps and many parrots; whereas some pardalotes, ducks and kookaburras prefer hollows on the horizontal.

**Bat roosting box:** There are nine bat species within the Adelaide metro area which can use the boxes during the day and during the winter months when they hibernate.

Bats boxes are designed with a landing pad at the bottom of the box so they can crawl up inside.

## Installing nesting boxes

When installing a nest box remember to locate it high enough to avoid threats from dogs, cats, rats and foxes (4-8 m), but still at a height where the box can be maintained.

The box entrance needs to face away from the hot westerly sun, and also positioned to avoid the wettest winds (in Adelaide orientating it from a north-easterly to southerly direction is preferable).

Positioning an artificial hollow under a leafy canopy will also provide natural shade.



## Maintaining nesting boxes

It is important to remember that nesting boxes for all native species require some management. This means making regular observations of the nest boxes to see which species are using them; removing the eggs and nestlings of introduced bird species (e.g. Common Starlings or House Sparrows); as well as destroying and removing feral honeybees which may take up residence. You must have convenient and safe access to the nest box with a ladder or call in a professional.

## Complementary planting

Ensure that large remnant trees on your property are a lasting feature in your backyard, as they provide important hollows for our wildlife. Planting locally native, dense prickly shrubs as under-storey around trees with hollows can deter predators. Locally native flowers, native grasses and provenance plants that have fruits and berries are also important food sources not just for the animals using your nest boxes, but many other local species as well.

## Where can I get nest box construction information?

A couple of books exist which provide dimensions, drawings and details of nest box construction for Australian native wildlife. See *Nest boxes for wildlife – a practical guide* (2004) by Alan & Stacey Franks or *The Nest-Box Book* (2008) by the Gould League.

Nest boxes can also be purchased locally from fauNature at [www.fauNature.com](http://www.fauNature.com), State Flora Belair, Cleland Wildlife Park or Fauna Rescue at [www.fauNaturescue.org.au](http://www.fauNaturescue.org.au).

Birds in Backyards [www.birdsinbackyards.net](http://www.birdsinbackyards.net) has developed a series of nest box plans for a range of Australian birds. They also contain information on the bird, where it lives, what materials you need, and how to build, install and maintain your nest box.

Alternatively, search the web for other books and designs.

## Why a backyard for wildlife?

In Australia, gardening has been recognised as one of our favourite pastimes. What we do in our home gardens has the potential to benefit or harm the natural environment.

By developing and maintaining a garden that follows the five basic Backyards 4 Wildlife principles you will contribute to a better local environment, help conserve our local flora and fauna, create important habitat, reduce your maintenance costs, and reduce the threat of invasive environmental weeds.

## Top 5 tips

1. Use plants native to your suburb.
2. Plant species that are a range of heights.
3. Use mix of local native plants that flower throughout the year.
4. Manage your pets responsibly.
5. Minimise chemical use.



A wildlife nesting box in a tree, occupied by Gould's Wattle Bats (*Chalinolobus gouldii*). Photo by Terry Reardon.

## More information

Bird Life Australia Nest boxes – technical information

[www.birdlife.org.au](http://www.birdlife.org.au)

Visit the urban biodiversity page of our website to access more Backyards 4 Wildlife information, the Engaging with Nature Nest Boxes and Hollow Habitat Assessment Teacher Information Pack and contact details for specialist native plant nurseries.

[www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/adelaideMtltoftyranges](http://www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/adelaideMtltoftyranges)

Or contact your nearest Natural Resources Centre

### Black Hill

115 Maryvale Road, Athelstone, SA 5076  
P (08) 8336 0901

### Eastwood

205 Greenhill Road, Eastwood, SA 5063  
P (08) 8273 9100

### Gawler

8 Adelaide Road, Gawler South, SA 5118  
P (08) 8523 7700

### Willunga

5 Aldinga Road, Willunga, SA 5172  
P (08) 8550 3400

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