

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Nesting Boxes Add New Dimensions to Backyard Birding

In the spring of 1982, we observed a Carolina Chickadee gathering moss and dry grasses in our backyard. Watching to see where she went, we were somewhat surprised to see her go down inside an iron pipe in the garden. Feeling that she deserved a better nesting place, we scrounged around and came up with a small box that had contained a gift bottle of wine. The front panel was removable. We cut a hole $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches across in this panel, put it back on the box, and placed the whole thing on top of another iron pipe several feet away from, and in line with, the one the chickadee had chosen. We hardly had time to move away after securing the box before a pair of chickadees discovered it. They spent quite a while going in and out and chattering to each other. The following morning, we were delighted to see that they had "bought" the house and nest building was under way. This was on 11 March.

It was soon apparent that the female was incubating. Spring is a busy time for gardening and birding, and we did not watch the box constantly. We did note on our daily records that the chickadees were always present there. On 21 April, we noted one adult taking a green worm into the box and wondered if the babies had hatched. On 29 April, we could hear the babies in the box when being fed. On 6 May, at noontime, we dashed outside to look for a Scarlet Tanager, which we heard singing. We did not locate the tanager, but did realize that there was quite a commotion near the bird box. When we looked in that direction, we discovered one fledgling already out and perched in a nearby tree. Another one was peeking out the hole and shortly took flight. It was a few minutes later that we saw the adult bird fly to the hole with an insect and entice another fledgling out. We could hear a fourth baby inside, but pressing duties called us back to the house. A check later in the afternoon found the box empty and the adults and young long gone. In subsequent days, we did see the whole family foraging in the trees occasionally.

We waited a few days before taking down the box and opening it. The nest we discovered was very neat and clean. Made of moss and fine grasses, it had a nice "woody" odor. We removed the nest, scrubbed the box, let it air out a few days, and then returned it to the same pipe/post. Incidentally, the box interior measures $12\frac{3}{4}$ inches long; is $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide and deep; the hole is $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches from the bottom. We give this information because, as you will soon see, it seems to be just the right dimensions for small hole-nesting birds.

On 13 May we noted two male House Wrens looking over the box. Both were singing and, apparently, trying to claim it. Late the same day, we were aware that one male wren had won and the other had moved on. The following day, the male that had taken possession of the territory began taking twigs into the box. He did a lot of singing and very shortly a female had arrived. We were not certain when the nest building began in earnest. At any rate, these birds did nest there. It seemed an eternity before we could hear the nestlings in the box and then forever until they fledged. We were not so fortunate as to be present when the young came out, but knew they were in the box early in the morning of 28 June and gone that afternoon. They remained in the area for several days foraging in the low bushes and hedge near the nest box.

Meanwhile, a few days before the young wrens left the nest, a male was heard singing down the street a ways. He kept moving closer each day, and the singing kept up. The male who had the young in the nest was too busy feeding them to challenge the newcomer. Within a few days, the nesting wrens had moved on, and the new male claimed our backyard for his own. On 7 July, we noted a wren taking the sticks and twigs out of the box—we had been too busy to get around to cleaning it out. Once again a new nest was built and, we presumed, eggs laid. The wait until we heard the young in the box was not quite as long as with the first pair of wrens. Even so, it seemed as though it was a long stay.

On 12 August, we saw a young bird peeking out of the hole. We checked the box several times during the day, and often the baby had its head sticking out, surveying the world outside. It occurred to us that fledging time must be near. The next day at about 10 o'clock in the morning, we saw the baby wren again peering out at his surroundings. Suddenly he gave a push with his toes, lifted his tiny wings and flew quite well. Out of the box and 20 or more feet he flew into a nearby hedge. Other faces appeared and peeked out. Then a little brown head with baby face and wide gape popped out of the hole. He surveyed the situation, apparently measuring the distance to the nearest perch. He made much noise (as the first one had done also) which was answered by the parent birds. He almost flew out, then became "chicken" and turned and went back inside the box. Soon, however, he tried again. After a period of several minutes, he overcame his fear and took off flying. This flier was a bit less sure than the first fledgling, but he made it to a bush within a few feet of the box. We could then see two more babies in the box. They took turns looking out, but neither could bring itself to the point of leaving. The parent birds came and looked into the box several times and chattered at the young. One would come out, look things over, and then return. Then the other would give it a try, give up, and go back into the box. This lasted some 30 minutes or so. We were reminded of children sticking their toes into cold water and jumping back before finally being able to take the plunge into the swimming pool. Finally, the coaxing of parents and siblings already out persuaded the reluctant ones to join them. It took almost an hour to get the four fledglings out. The whole family moved off a few yards into denser hedgerows and kept up a chatter the rest of the day. As I write this, it is the 17th of August. The family of wrens is still around and can be seen and/or heard frequently during the day. As dusk falls, the parent birds coax the young up into the pine trees to roost. We felt most fortunate to be able to watch the fledging of two out of three families that used our box. Isn't it amazing how these tiny birds can fly the first time out?

Two days after the wrens departed the box, we took it down and examined the contents. The nest was full of small sticks and twigs, which we decided to count. Would you believe that there were 438 separate twigs? The inner nest was lined with pine straw

(needles to you mountain dwellers) and a few small feathers. Tucked here and there among the twigs was a bit of spider web and what looked like bits of cocoons of moths. The bottom of the nest was damp and musty (had the second pair of birds left some of the first nest in?), and we found a colony of small brown ants (with eggs) had established a home there. We also counted a half dozen sow bugs on the floor of the box. We might mention here that the box had two holes in the bottom through which we had run a heavy coated wire to hold the box in place. The ants and sow bugs must have entered by way of these holes.

We have no exact dates as to when eggs were laid, incubation began, or hatching took place. We did note that the time lapsed between the building of the nests and fledging was 46 days for the first pair and 38 for the second. We wonder if the warmer weather (downright hot, if you will) made any difference in the time it took to bring the nesting to an end. Or did the second brood leave earlier because of the presence of the ants? The second brood did seem a tad smaller, and their gapes were more pronounced.

This was the first time in many years that we have had the pleasure of observing the nesting of small birds here, and it made our summer backyard birding very interesting. Why don't you try it next year—and let us know what happens?—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607.

NATURE WALKS

Bird watchers living near Eno River, Umstead, and Crowders Mountain State Parks are accustomed to the nature hikes scheduled throughout the year. Now similar activities are open to the public at several parks in eastern North Carolina. On Saturday, 9 April there will be a bird hike at Goose Creek State Park (phone 923-2191), and on Saturday, 7 May there will be one at Merchants Millpond State Park (phone 357-1191). All hikes begin at 0800 at the respective park offices and last until early afternoon. For further information, write Michael L. Dunn, East District Naturalist, Cliffs of the Neuse State Park, Route 2, Box 50, Seven Springs, N.C. 28578.