



CITY OF BLOOMINGTON

Natural Landscaping: Providing Shelter

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One of the basic needs of wildlife is shelter. Shelter provides living space, refuge from predators and places to raise young. Many of the native shrubs and grasses mentioned in other factsheets from the Environmental Commission’s series on Natural Landscaping provide excellent shelter for wildlife. In addition to native plants, you can provide additional non-living shelter components in your yard.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder...

While the following shelter components may at first seem unattractive to you, they will be highly attractive to local wildlife.

SNAGS: A snag is essentially a dead or dying tree. Snags provide excellent habitat. Wildlife can create cavities in the soft wood of snags for nesting. Large snags are best, but the minimum size for an effective snag is 6 inches in diameter and 15 feet tall. Snags are often filled with insects and larvae and are known to attract 43 bird species and more than 26 mammals in the Midwest. Examples include species of ducks, wrens, owls and woodpeckers. Many people purposefully leave or even create a snag to attract woodpeckers to their yards.

WOODY COVER: Woody cover serves as a place for escape, dens and nesting sites for numerous animals from rabbits to skinks. The cover should be located near a field, woodland or shrubs and trees. Half of the woody cover should be placed in sunlight. You can place evergreen branches on top of the pile for winter insulation, or plant the pile with flowering vines to attract hummingbirds. Placed near a water source, woody cover can be especially important for reptiles and amphibians. If you have a water feature in your yard, consider placing woody cover at the edge, so that part of the wood is submerged.

ROCK PILES: Rock piles serve the same purpose as woody cover. Again the placement of the rock pile should be away from your house and preferably near a field or woodland. A rock pile placed near water can also be termed “riprap.” Large rocks along the water’s edge can provide habitat for many animals. The rocks can provide shade for frogs or a sunny basking site for turtles or salamanders.



The photographs above illustrate the use of natural materials as shelter components in your yard. The first photo shows a black cherry (*Prunus serotina*) snag. The middle photo depicts woody cover topped with evergreen branches. The last photo shows a rock pile incorporated into a native plant landscape. Note that the components look intentional and neat instead of haphazard or inappropriate.

Shelter for Nesting Birds:

While many birds create nests in trees or in fields, numerous other species are reliant on cavities for nesting. Urban sprawl and traditional landscaping has lead to the loss of many cavity sites, including snags. Competition for the remaining cavities is fierce between native birds and invasive species, such as the European starling and the house sparrow. If you cannot provide a snag in your yard, creating a nesting box is a good alternative. A nesting box will act as an artificial, but suitable cavity, and you will be able to enjoy watching the birds use the box.

You may choose to buy or build your nest box. Either way, your nest box should incorporate several basic features:

- ◊ It should be made of natural, untreated wood.
- ◊ Walls should be at least 3/4 inch thick.
- ◊ Hole size, height above ground, placement in yard and other specifications should be chosen to match the requirements of the particular bird species that you wish to attract.
- ◊ The entrance hole should be no larger than needed for the desired species, so that larger birds cannot take over.
- ◊ Entrances should be above the floor of the box to allow room for nest building.
- ◊ Roofs should extend beyond the front of the house and be sloped to keep out rain.
- ◊ Floors should allow drainage.
- ◊ Interiors should be rough to help fledglings leave the nest.
- ◊ Ventilation holes and a panel that opens to allow cleaning should be provided.
- ◊ The nest box should not have an outside perch. This will help to prevent predation or harassment by other birds.



General Placement Guidelines: You should research the habitat requirements of your target species in order to find the best placement for your nest box. In general, always avoid placing nest boxes in areas where pesticides and herbicides have been used. These chemicals poison and kill insects, which are often the primary food source for cavity nesting birds. These chemicals can also directly harm birds. Nest boxes may often be mounted on a tree, but for the best protection from predators, you should use a pole with a predator guard. Many birds will not use a nest box that faces due west because of unfavorable sunlight and temperature.

Best Set Up Time: Install your nest box before breeding season, which can begin from February to March depending on the species. Your nest box may even be used for winter cover. It may take a few years for a bird to find and use your nest box.

Cleaning: The box should be cleaned after the breeding pair and fledglings leave. The abandoned nest material may prevent future breeding pairs from using the box. Also, cleaning the box will reduce ectoparasites, which could make the next set of nestlings sick. You can use warm, soapy water and a stiff brush.

References:

- Henderson, C.L. 1987. *Landscaping for Wildlife*. Minnesota DNR, St. Paul, MN.
- National Wildlife Federation. 2007. Step 4: Cover and Places to Raise Young.
<http://www.nwf.org/backyard/cover>