

COEXISTING WITH PYGMY NUTHATCHES

The **Pygmy Nuthatch** is a tiny (4 ¼”) gray bird with a short tail, large head and long bill. They roost (sleep) year-round in abandoned woodpecker holes and holes they’ve drilled themselves in trees (and sometimes your stucco home!) In spring, smaller cavities are usually preferred as individual families nest and roost. In fall, larger cavities are often chosen because multi-family groups may roost through the cold months, huddling together in tight layers to keep warm. The information I offer on nest/roost box placement only comes from my own experience. There are no guarantees and it’s not an exact science, but certainly worth the effort in hopes of keeping your homes hole-free.

Box Measurements and Purchase

Nesting:

A range of box sizes can be offered that might be used. A standard “nuthatch/chickadee box” is listed as having a 4 X 4” floor dimension. I have found, however, that the pygmy seems to prefer a box for nesting that is a little larger. My box floor dimensions (which I purchased from bestnest.com – see below for details) is 5.75” wide and 7” deep. It’s hole is 1 1/8” wide. I have also seen pygmies nest in a standard bluebird box, but not as frequently, however bluebird boxes can be attractive for roosting (see below).

Bestnest.com:

Nuthatch/Chickadee Box

- Go to Wild Bird section on left.
- Click on Bird Houses
- Look at top of page and click on “Wren/Chickadee”
- Go 10 Rows down. Will see “Audubon Wren Chickadee Box – 24.99

Bluebird Box

- Got to Wild Bird section on left.
- Click on Bird House
- Look at top of page and click on “Bluebird”
- Go 25 Rows down. Will see “Coveside Western Bluebird House” – 29.99

You can also get beautiful bluebird boxes from Denver Audubon for \$25. These boxes are especially great because they come with an entrance hole diameter that is 1 9/16” (1.563) which is better for accommodating both Western and Mountain bluebirds (as does the Coveside box above). If you’re not ordering from bestnest.com and trying to get free shipping (over \$75 purchase), please get your bluebird boxes from Audubon. In fact, watching lovely bluebirds come and go from your yard helps deal with the stress of pygmy attacks!! Proceeds go directly to benefit this wonderful organization. I can help you get them, just let me know.

You can also get these same boxes at local wild bird centers (try to get similar measurements to those I mentioned above for the smaller box), or Tagawa Nursery in Parker. If you really want to make sure that your larger box is used by a pygmy only, Tagawa sells wooden predator guards that you can mount over the existing hole (call first and see if they have the correct size – can special order). Get one that is 1 1/8” and put it on top of the larger hole. If you want to protect either of your box sizes from being holed out (drilled a lot larger) by a woodpecker, you can also get (again, call and see if they have it in) copper door plates to put on top of the door, with or without the predator guards.

Roosting:

Often (but not always), larger boxes are selected for roosting, because sometimes large groups of birds will roost together. In nature, sometimes over 100 pygmies cuddle up together in the same roost hole. At my home, the roost group only seems to be about 6 to 8 birds. Sometimes, they roost in the box that was used for nesting. Some winters, they seem to prefer a box that is of bluebird dimensions. Whether or not they choose it because it’s a little larger, or because it’s a little more sheltered, I’m not sure.

Boxes are sold that are termed “Roost Boxes.” They come with perches in them and holes near the bottom. Don’t buy these – buy nest boxes for the pygmies to roost in. Trust me – it’s a long, funny story, but I know they don’t like them.

Box Placement:

I prefer using boxes that hang off the side of my house,for several reasons:

One; its against CPV covenants to attach anything to a tree in the Village.

Two; it’s easy to hang boxes just below a window. I use 2 hooks screwed into my stucco, approx. 5 in” apart and picture hanging loops that are screwed into the back of the box at the same spacing. Thus, I can take the boxes in for easy observation and cleaning. Place a piece of Styrofoam behind the boxes after they’re hung if they aren’t level due to the use of larger hooks.

Three; on the side of your home, if you place the boxes at least 10 to 15 feet away from trees and corners of your home, they are inaccessible to squirrels. This will keep squirrels from gnawing the boxes and tormenting the babies.

Finally, if you’ve had pygmies drilling into your home, you can place the boxes as close as possible to the sites they’ve been drilling – hopefully making it more likely that they choose boxes rather than your home.

Remember – if a neighbor complains about the boxes as being unsightly (I’ve never heard of this happening) you will be required to remove them – so if you have a choice, put the boxes in an inconspicuous spot.

Hang the boxes underneath the highest windows possible. My boxes are all at least 20 feet off the ground, however it’s not to say pygmies wouldn’t use them a bit lower. I would shoot for having them at least 12 to 15 feet up.

Other Placement Points – I've offered the pygmies boxes on both the south and east sides of my home, however they've only selected eastern boxes to nest in. They usually also roost on the east side as well, however one winter, they roosted on the south. My guess is that it's because my south side gets full sun and is too hot for summer temps. When the birds were drilling, they only selected my S & E sides. If you've got holes being drilled on your home, I would put the boxes on that same side, regardless of the direction. If it happens to be on the south wall, try to place the box so that it gets partial shade.

Since pygmies want boxes for two reasons and for two seasons, I might recommend placing a box in more than one area. If it were my home, and I had multiple areas being targeted, as I know some of you have, I would order three boxes from bestnest.com.2 wren/chickadee boxes and one bluebird box (they usually offer free shipping when spending over \$75). If I only wanted to hang 2, I would start with the 2 wren/chickadee boxes and see what happens – hanging them on different facing walls. If you aren't successful with at least one of these boxes, I would either add the bluebird box in another area, or replace one of the smaller boxes with it the next season.

Place the boxes on your home at a minimum of a few days in advance of filing existing holes in your stucco. If there is an active nest or roost hole in your walls, it will take a lot longer for the birds to transition over to your boxes. **DO NOT** fill deep pygmy holes in your stucco from April through August as they may have nests with babies inside.

Know that you may have other birds use the boxes you've put out for the pygmies in the spring to nest – another reason to put up more than one box.

It's important to check the boxes to see if they need cleaning at least once a year. If the box has been used for nesting, check it out. **ALWAYS FIRST TAP** on the box and wait to make sure there is no bird inside before you pull a box inside your house. If the box is infested with mites – tiny, white bugs (which happened only once to me – clean with multiple applications of diluted bleach and rinse well) or if filled with feces or dead birds, then empty and clean in mid-August. If it looks clean and is lined with feathers (sometimes the birds clean the boxes out themselves immediately after nesting and start to ready the same box for roosting)– then leave it untouched and just rehang it. The box should be re-examined in late April. Again, if it looks tidy and is lined with feathers, leave it alone. If it's feces filled and has no feathers, then clean. They'll often fill the ventilation and drainage holes with fur or plant material to help insulate the boxes in winter. Don't remove this material during cold months of the year.

General Bird Box Info:

With any bird nesting box, if you're serious about having birds use them, don't look for a decorative box. Birds tend to prefer natural, untreated wood. When boxes are painted, heat is retained and baby birds can die. Stains and paints are sometimes toxic. Make sure the boxes have plenty of ventilation holes at the top and drainage holes on the bottom. Never use a bird house that has a perch at the door because it encourages larger birds to harass and kill both babies and parents. Hope this info. helps! Watch out, you may become a pygmy nuthatch fan! If you have any further questions – call or email me – Gina Gerken – ginagerken@comcast.net or (720) 733-6200.