



# Washington County Wildlife Society

## ~Fact Sheet~

### Nestboxes Need Predator Guards

By Dave Redden, New Years Creek Co-op Director, Master Naturalist

So, you have your bluebird nestboxes up and are enjoying seeing the beautiful bluebirds build their nests. You are even checking the nests every few days to track their progress to tell when they lay eggs and when the chicks hatch. Right on schedule the chicks appear (about two weeks after the first egg is laid) and things are looking great. You have another 13 days that you can observe their growth before it is nearly time for them to fledge. One day you check the nest and find nothing there even though it is not time for them to fledge. Your nest has been lost to a predator.

This scenario happens all too often with nestboxes not protected by predator guards. In fact, some advocates of the guards suggest that if you are not using predator guards, you are just feeding the predators instead of helping the bluebirds or other wildlife you are trying to encourage. The counter to this is that nature does not provide predator guards, so providing a nestbox of any sort is at least as good as what nature does. However, since we are already interfering with the natural process to help a species that is having trouble, we might as well give it all the help that we can.

Common predators for bluebirds and other cavity nesters are raccoons, feral cats, bobcats, opossums, chicken snakes and rat snakes. In addition, ants are a deadly nuisance for young chicks. All can be discouraged from raiding your nestbox with a little effort.

#### The Mounting Pole

The most common practice to reduce predator impact is to mount the nestbox on a smooth metal pole, usually galvanized water pipe, electrical metal tubing (also called EMT or conduit), or chain-link fence posts. This is a good start but is not sufficient. Typical recommendations are to mount the nestbox at a height that is around eye level, 4 - 5 ft. Unfortunately this height is an easy leap for a cat, so if cats are a problem in your area, you will need to raise the nestbox higher. An easy way to do this is to use a telescoping pole system, such as can be constructed with 1" EMT in the ground a couple of feet, with about 3 ft of pipe above ground. Then mount the nestbox on a piece of 3/4" EMT about 5 ft long, and let it fit down inside the 1" pipe. Adjust the height that the nestbox sits by drilling a 5/16" (or slightly larger) hole in the 3/4" pipe and insert a nail or 5/16" lynch pin through the hole to keep it at the elevation you want the box. I have found that 6 - 7 ft is sufficient when used with a predator guard baffle. To



lower the box to check the nest condition, simply pull the nail or pin and let the smaller upper pole slide down inside the larger pole mounted in the ground.

Perhaps the least effective pole to use for a nestbox is a wooden pole such as a fence post or tree. These are easily climbed by all predators. However, the metal poles can also be climbed by predators, even snakes. So, a smooth metal mounting pole is not sufficient in itself.

Location of the pole is also important. If a predator can climb a tree, pole, guy wire or building nearby and drop onto your nestbox, the pole and other protection you may have are irrelevant.

### Predator Baffle

The most common type of baffle used is made from lightweight stovepipe or air duct material. You can get this in 6" or 8" sizes at almost any major hardware store. It comes in approximately 2-ft lengths. All you need to do is to make a way to attach the pipe around your telescoping pole just below the nest box. There are numerous ways to do this, but a popular way is to use pipe strapping (available in the plumbing section of hardware stores usually) to make an attachment bracket. An example is shown at the Texas Bluebird Society web site at <http://www.texasbluebirdsociety.org> (click on Building Plans tab). Of course there are numerous ways to achieve this objective, so be creative.



You also need to have something inside the stovepipe at the top to keep snakes and small animals from crawling inside the pipe and getting to the nestbox. This can be 1/2" mesh hardware cloth, also available at hardware stores, or other material that

allows light through. It is important for the light to shine through so that the predator thinks that the way to the nestbox is up the pole inside the stovepipe, but he runs up against the barrier at the top and has to turn around. Coons and bobcats will not be as easily deterred by the stovepipe since they can just tear it apart if they want to. As a result, I have experimented with a different type of baffle that works well for the larger predators.

The baffle I use for keeping coons and cats away (also works on smaller animals such as snakes, squirrels, and possums) is a metal plate approximately 3 ft in diameter with a hole in the middle just large enough to fit over the mounting pole. The plate is supported by a pin through the pole just below the nestbox. (This system also works well for keeping squirrels and coons out of bird feeders.) The difficulty with this system is finding a suitable source for the metal sheet to make it and getting a 3-ft circle cut. If you do not have metalworking tools and skills, you can probably get one of the local sheet metal shops or



For more information contact Washington County Wildlife Society, 1305 East Blue Bell  
Brenham, TX 77833-2426, (979) 277-6212, Fax (979) 277-6223, [www.wcwildlife.org](http://www.wcwildlife.org)

machine shops that do custom fabrication to cut you a plate. I use 18-gauge steel or lighter. If you use very light sheet, you will need to add some bracing on the top of the plate. Do not put anything on the bottom of the plate that allows toeholds or makes it feasible for a predator to work his way around to the top.

Small cylinders around the entrance to the nest box may discourage squirrels and 'possums, but will likely have little effect on a determined cat or coon. They will have no effect on snakes.

I am sure there are many other successful approaches to assisting nesting birds. Send us your stories and ideas and we will try to put some up on our web site or publish them in future newsletters.