THE BACKYARD
WILDBIRD & NATURE STORE
ENJOYING NATURE IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD™

Birding in the Backyard

MARCH 2026

ATTRACT CHICKADEES TO NEST

BY KELSEY

Chickadees are one of our most common cavity nesting songbirds. They're small, cute, and enjoy visiting backyard feeders full of suet, peanut halves, and sunflower seeds all year long. Our Vancouver Island native chickadee is the Chestnut-backed Chickadee, whose short sustained flight keeps them limited to the island.

During courtship, the male chickadee chooses the nesting site before getting his partners' approval. Once she's decided, he starts bringing her little bits of vegetation to build the nest with.

The female chickadees do the actual nest building, which can take around a week to complete. The nest begins with a bed of soft moss that the female builds up to her desired height from the entrance hole of the cavity or nest box, before adding the fluffy, furry top to lay their eggs in.

She prefers a box of 4" by 4", or 5" by 5" at the most. Too large, and the amount of work it would take to build the nest isn't worth it for her. If you're lucky enough to have a pair nest in your yard, keep an eye out for when the young fledge!

Chickadees have around 5 to 9 eggs per brood, which are incubated by the female chickadee.

Once incubation is done, the nestlings hatch and stay in the nest for roughly 3 weeks before fledging. Fledgling birds will be fully feathered and similar in size to their parents, making them difficult to tell apart from adults visually.

You may notice young chickadees begging to be fed, with fluttering wings and an open bill, though they're perfectly capable of feeding themselves.

Fledglings may run around on the ground before they take off flying; if you spot one that looks like it's trying to fly but it's not going well, leave it be unless there's an immediate danger nearby or you can see an obvious injury. They're likely just learning, and the parents are nearby,

If there's danger, simply move the chickadee to a safer location or, if you can, remove the danger. Injured birds should be moved to a box without food or water, and wildlife rehabilitators should be contacted for your next steps.

Chickadees can use either natural cavities or nest boxes for nesting. When choosing a nest box, a chickadee can use an entrance hole as small as 1" in diameter. Keeping the entrance hole small helps keep larger birds and predators from taking over the nest or harming the chickadees.

Choose a nest box that has the entrance hole around 5" to 6" above the floor of the box. The female chickadee will build her nest to the height she desires, and the deeper box helps keep the nest inaccessible for predators.

Bewick's Wren vs House Wren

Bewick's Wren (left) and House Wren (right)

Bewick's Wren
—J. Morrison

Bewick's Wrens are mid-sized wrens with long tails detailed with black barring down the length and tipped in white. The tail is often tilted up as the bird sits and moves around. Bewick's Wrens have a long, slightly curved bill and a very distinctive white eyebrow to help a positive ID. Their back is brown, and their undersides are a gray-white in colour.

House Wrens are small, generally brown birds with short tails. Their tail and wings have dark barring, and their throat is pale. House Wrens have a fairly long curved bill and short wings. They also have a very faint white eyebrow.

Keep an eye out in your backyard for both of these wren species!

House Wren
—R. Hocken

The Birdie Housing Boom

by Colin

Through the winter months, birds arrive in flocks to backyard feeders. As spring approaches, the birds begin to set up territories, arriving in smaller flocks and finally in pairs. Chestnut-backed Chickadees are a prime example of this behaviour. The reason? Nesting season in here!

Common backyard cavity nesting birds include the Bewick's Wren, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Violet-green and Tree Swallows, woodpeckers, and some less desirable visitors—the European Starling and House Sparrow.

Most of these cavity nesters utilize existing cavities for their nests but some, such as woodpeckers, will excavate it on their own. All these cavity nesting birds will also use a nest box, especially in areas with less available natural habitat. Nest box specifications vary depending on the species, but there are a few general things to consider.

First of all, ventilation is a must. Make sure that there is plenty of airflow through your nest box, which helps keep it cooler inside for the young birds. It's also important to consider how warm the box can get; keeping it out of the sun, especially the warm afternoon sun, can also help stop birds from overheating in the box.

How easy is the box to clean? You want easy access to the inside when necessary, so you can remove old nests, dirt, debris, or anything else that may impact your birds using it again.

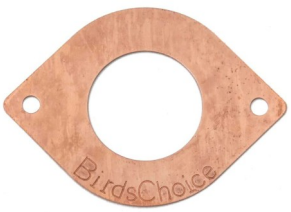
Taller boxes, around 6 inches or so for smaller birds, allow the nesting birds to be farther away from the entrance hole and are less accessible to predators. For the same reasons, we recommend avoiding perches and keeping the entrance hole only as large as necessary for your desired birds.

The final consideration? Location! It's best to mount your nest box so that wind and rain doesn't blow directly into the box, and the box is as far from backyard feeders as you can get it, or at least turned away from them. They don't need to be mounted very high, around 6 to 10 feet up is usually just fine.

If you're lucky, your box will be used right away, or it may take a bit of time. It's all about patience, unfortunately!

If there isn't any action at your nest box, try moving it to a new location, even if it's just around the other side of your shed or tree.

Copper Portal Nest Hole Protector



The copper piece can be fit over an existing hole to resize it smaller, or to keep squirrels and the like from chewing the hole bigger in order to get inside.

Available in 1 1/8" for chickadees, wrens, and nuthatches, or 1 1/2" for swallows.

$7.99 ea.

Do You Have Fruit Trees but No Fruit?

BY KELSEY

Mason bees are a non-aggressive, solitary bee that doesn't have a queen, build a hive, or make honey. They are, however, *great* backyard pollinators. They're roughly 75% more effective per bud then honeybees, and stay in a much smaller radius, making them ideal for backyards.

They spend the fall and winter in a dormant state, coming out in the spring once temperatures reach a steady 12-14°C. If you have fruit trees in your yard, chances are you already have mason bees.

They mostly pollinate fruit trees like apples, plums, and other early flowering fruits and plants. Their season runs from April to May, usually lasting between 4 and 6 weeks before last years adults die off, leaving their eggs behind to hatch into next years' population.

The eggs hatch within 4 days, eat the nectar-pollen left by the parent bee, and spin themselves a cocoon to wait out their growth in. The bee grows into their adult form inside the cocoon, usually finishing by early September and then remaining in a dormant sleep state until the next spring, where they start the cycle over again.

You'll know you have bees for next year if you see any of your tubes mudded up; they're called mason bees due to the mud walls they build between each egg, and at the end of the tube once they've filled it.

Mason bees are experts at finding themselves holes to nest in, and prefer to lay their eggs in holes around 5/16" in diameter and between 3" to 6" long. Because the female bee is able to choose the sex of her young, she always lays the females at the back of the tube and the males up front. Longer tubes mean more female bees per tube, and shorter tubes will contain less.

While you can simply grab a block of wood and drill out the proper hole size, we recommend making sure you are able to clean out whatever you are using at the end of the season without risking harm to your bees.

Cleaning the bee condo keeps pests such as pollen mites from making a home and killing off all your bees. You can do this by purchasing premade reusable blocks, or drilling out slightly larger holes and filling with single use tubes.

The tubes are generally made out of cardboard or parchment paper, and are designed to be discarded after use. Condos that use the tubes can be great as once a tube is filled, it can be removed and replaced without disturbing the rest of the condo.

Full tubes should be removed from the condo and stored somewhere cool over winter. You can choose to unroll the tubes and clean the cocoons inside, or fill the condo with new tubes and place the old ones as close as possible for the bees to hatch out of. If your tubes are hard to unroll, soak them in cool water until they come apart easily and never cut them open with a blade, to avoid harming the dormant bees.

Reusable blocks are designed to come apart, allowing easy access for cleaning. The blocks we carry are pine, with a plexiglass top piece to allow you to watch the bees at work. The blocks should be cleaned out every year to keep pests from moving in and taking over.

Bee cocoons should be gently removed from the block, and the block cleaned with a stiff brush and spray bottle of bleach-water. Once cleaned, tape your block back together tightly to ensure it dries without warping, and your pieces fit together correctly. Warped wood can create gaps that may allow pests access.

Mason bee cocoons are waterproof but delicate. Fill a small container with a 5% bleach to 95% water mixture and drop the cocoons in. Gently roll them around in the water for a few minutes and pull them out to air dry. This will kill off any parasites or pests that may affect your bees.

Put the mason bee condo at least 4 feet off the ground in a location that gets plenty of sunlight. Ideally under cover to keep any nasty weather off. Mason bees usually stay within 200-300 feet of the location they hatch from, so keep it within that distance of what you are wanting them to pollinate. Do not bury the condo in the trees they should be pollinating but mount it a good 6-10 feet away or so.

Mason bees aren't picky with their condos. As long as the hole is the right size and the location is good, they'll use just about anything from a fancy condo to a handful of tubes in an old coffee can.

Mason Bee Condos

Mason bee condos with single use tubes and reusable blocks are available. Our blocks have a plexiglass top so you can enjoy watching the bees move through their life cycle!

We also carry replacement 4" and 6" cardboard tubes.

Did You Know?

Woodpecker nest boxes come with woodchips or similar, to allow the bird to mimic their natural excavating behaviour when making a nest?

Snacks & Foraging Behaviours

Great Blue Herons have a highly variable diet. Some common snacks include fish, frogs, salamanders, snakes, turtles, insects, rodents, and even other birds.

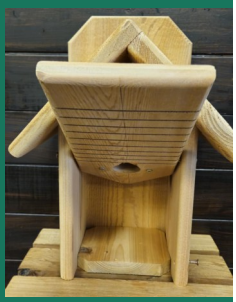
They forage primarily by standing still or wading very slowly through shallow water. When fish or other prey is near enough, the heron strikes with a rapid bill thrust.

Herons will hunt day or night, in marshy areas, swamps, tide flats, shores, and even in grasslands if there's food available. Or in your backyard pond!

Nest Boxes

While not all our backyard birds use nest boxes, we carry locally crafted nest boxes for a variety of cavity nesting birds, including chickadees, wrens, nuthatches, swallows, woodpeckers, and Wood Ducks.

Bat Boxes are also available, though we recommend making sure you have an existing bat colony to use the box as it isn't an attractant for them the way a nest box is for birds.



Heron Lies the Rub

BY DAVE

Do *you* have a heron feeding station? Are they having difficulty using it? Here's some tips to help them out!

The water may be too deep. Herons love water that's shallow enough to wade in, which also keeps their food supply closer to the surface. Keep the depth between 15 to 40 centimeters deep for prime wading depth.

Herons will lunge deeper for food, and 'swim' their way back out, but shallow is better for them. Feeding stations that are deep all around and lack a gradual shift in depth hinders their feeding and allows food to stay out of reach.

Are there things the food can get under? Floating plants such as water hyacinth and water lettuce, or water lily leaves can block the view of any delicious morsels. Mares Tail, Elodea, Vallisneria, and Parrots Feathers grow in dense clumps that food can tuck itself into.

Clay weeping tiles, plant pots tipped on their sides, piles of stone, and driftwood can all get in the way of your heron feeding ambitions.

Check if there's anything blocking their way. Herons prefer to land in an open area, then walk up to their feeders. Remove any series of stakes, spaced approximately 30cm from the edge of the pond—sorry, heron feeding station— that have lines of string running between them at heights of 50cm, 45cm, and every 10cm lower after that.

These strings a re a big problem, as herons won't be able to approach close enough to the feeder to reach in for food or wade.

You'll have to look carefully for the strings if it's black, as black string disappears against the backdrop very easily. Seine green rebar stakes are also a problem, for similar reasons.

Though herons do prefer to walk up to their feeders, on occasion they may land directly in the water so make sure there is no netting or twine over the wading area.

If you have motion-activated sprinklers, no need to worry! Herons will quickly become accustomed to the spray; after all, they are water birds.

You should also be careful when choosing the food for your heron feeder. They will eat food up to around 30.5cm in length, but do prefer smaller, more plentiful options.

I hope this helps in your heron feeding success!

And remember, if you leave any of these things out, it may stop your heron from snacking on all your pond critters.

Sing, My Birdie of Music

BY KELSEY

Much of the research into bird song has had a disproportionate focus on male bird song, as the running theory was that female birds simply didn't sing.

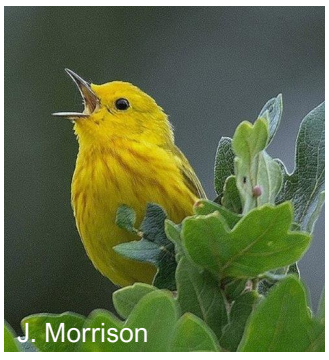
It was thought that songbirds evolved their complex songs and large vocal repertoires as a result of sexual selection through male to male competition and the choices of female birds. Female birds were seen as simply lacking the ability to sing altogether, and bird song was treated as a male-specific behaviour.

Songbirds have a specialized neural circuit, called the *song system*, that's a necessary part of their ability to sing. Research found that not only did singing males have this circuit, but females of the same species did as well, even if they didn't sing. In most species, the song system was smaller in the female birds, but it persisted in both singing and non-singing females.

Many studies done since have proposed that, because the majority of past studies were done in more temperate North America and Europe locations, there was an unintended bias in the research.

These areas are much more likely to have male-specific songs, and if the females do sing, they are less likely to do so during breeding season, when the woods are filled with migratory species, and are more likely to be drowned out by the louder male songs.

Male bird song is a big enough part in the theory of sexual selection that, for many birds, it's also used to positively identify a species. For birds heard but not seen, or monomorphic species where the two sexes are nearly identical, bird song is often used to identify males of the species.


J. Morrison

The result? Female birds that sing can be misidentified as male, and further perpetuate the idea that only male birds sing.


R. Hocken

Bird song actually evolved in the tropics, in both male and female birds. As bird species expanded their ranges and dispersed into more temperate regions, instances of female bird song were reduced or lost altogether.

One theory believes that with the different environmental pressures in the birds' new locations, quieter, more discreet female birds were more likely to survive and breed, thus passing the behaviour along.

It's also been suggested that sexual dimorphism in bird species was not the result of male-specific adaptations towards attention-grabbing signals, but rather more female-specific adaptations to reduce them.

Female *passeri* birds that sing do it for the same reasons as their male counterparts—courtship and competition. Their songs may be less frequent, quieter, and sung from lower perches, but female birds also have a need to compete for food, mates, and nesting sites.

A 2016 study found that in over 1000 sampled songbird species worldwide, 64% of them had female bird song. In North America, nearly 150 songbird species were found to have females that sung. It's theorized that many other female birds also sing, we just lack the necessary documentation to prove it.

We only have enough information about 27% of *all* songbird species to determine if the female sings or not. For the other 73%, we literally don't have enough data to tell. Recent works suggest that female bird song is an ancestral trait, and far back in their evolutionary past, it was normal for female birds to sing. Despite this, we don't have a concrete answer for the change.

References:

Female Songbirds: The unsung drivers of courtship behavior and its neural substrates

Many Female Birds Sing Beautiful Songs—All We Have To Do Is Listen

New insights from female bird song: towards an integrated approach to studying male and female communication roles

Lost Voices: Uncovering Female Bird Song

Female song is widespread and ancestral in songbirds

Audubon Bird Call

Imitate a variety of notes to attract the attention of local birds. By varying the pressure used, you can create different chirps and bird sounds and see who responds.

Comes in a small metal tin with included rosin capsule to maintain the chirp.

$14.99 ea.

Bird Walks

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to thebirdstore.blogspot.com.

All bird walks are weather permitting and cancellations are posted to our blog the morning of the walk by around 8:00 a.m.

We decide on the location of each bird walk the week before the scheduled bird walk outing. During the week, we compile information about what birds are being seen and examine the weather forecast to ensure the walk is scheduled for the most productive location.

Bird walks are not held during the summer months (July & August) but resume in early September. They also go on pause during the winter (December & January), resuming in early February.

There's no charge for our bird walks, and they are designed to conclude before lunch, averaging roughly 2 hours. **All experience levels welcome.**

Bring your own binoculars when possible, and decent walking shoes for the best experience.

Check out our **online map** for common bird walk locations around Nanaimo and Parksville.

Hours of Operation

Monday-Saturday 9:30-5:30
Sunday 12:00-4:30

Upcoming Holiday Hours

April 3rd, *Good Friday*: CLOSED
April 5th, *Easter Sunday*: CLOSED

Bird Sightings

Report bird sightings by emailing birding@thebackyard.ca or calling 250-390-3669

February 17th

Summer Tanager at Willow Road, Qualicum Beach.

February 23rd

2x Varied Thrush off Metral Drive.

Delivery Schedule for March

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley
March 11th and **March 25th**
South Nanaimo to Duncan
March 4th and **March 18th**

March

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
1 Nanaimo Bird Walks Start		Parksville Bird Walks Start	S			
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Local Field Naturalist Groups

Nature Nanaimo | Arrowsmith Naturalists | Comox Valley Nature | Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society | Malaspina Naturalists | Rocky Point Bird Observatory | Saltspring Trail & Nature Club | Victoria Natural History Society | Yellowpoint Ecological Society

Contact Us

6314 Metral Drive, Nanaimo, BC
250-390-3669
Toll Free 1-888-808-BIRD [2473]
info@thebackyard.ca
thebackyard.ca
thebirdstore.blogspot.com

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