

MAKE YOUR OWN

Home Tweet Home

Check out these designer dwellings – they're for the birds.

BY LORRAINE FLANIGAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL CHMIELOWIEC





1 | Designed by Heather Schibli and Tristan Zimmermann, this **purple martin** house is inspired by Montreal's Habitat 67 residences.

2 | Designed for the **house wren** by Kate Fox-Whyte. For instructions on how to build this style of birdhouse, see page 112.

3 | Designed for the **tree swallow** by Denis Flanagan and Mike Wasilewski, this birdhouse is made of recycled wire and bark.

4 | Designed for the **chickadee**, this birdhouse was created by Kathleen Fall and her son, Christopher.

THE EARLY MORNING chirping and chatter of songbirds makes a welcome start to any day. But as bird populations become increasingly threatened by pesticide use, city lights, global warming and destruction of habitats, the birdcalls are diminishing.

Last summer, the Toronto Botanical Garden launched a birdhouse design competition called For the Birds. Entries from three categories – professional designers, students, and individuals with an interest in birds – were submitted for display and judging. The showcase of birdhouses helped raise awareness of the plight of songbirds and promote ways of providing safe nesting sites.

BUILD IT RIGHT

Bring the birds back to your yard by building a nesting box that's custom-made for the songbirds in your region. Each species has its own particular wish-list of household amenities. Purple martins, for example, like to live in colonies that look more like bird condos than snug little bungalows. Screech owls need a generous entrance hole (about seven and a half centimetres in diameter), while house wrens require a scant three-centimetre opening. A little research will help you design your dream birdhouse – and while you're at it, you'll learn more about the fascinating life of songbirds, too.

Building a birdhouse needn't be complicated or require creative flights of fancy (although it's fun to add your own distinctive touches). The goal is to make a house that's durable, weather-resistant and safe. Start with the right materials: natural cedar weathers well and is untainted by preservatives; the exterior may be painted white to reflect heat, but never paint the interior.



To keep the inside dry, allow the roof to overhang the walls. Recess the floor and add drainage holes to prevent rainwater from seeping under the nest. Also, be sure to drill holes for ventilation – birds need to breathe! Incorporate a removable roof or wall, too, to make it easy to access the box to clean out old nests before the next breeding season. To discourage predators, extend the roof beyond the face to make it difficult for raccoons and other marauding animals to climb on top and reach into the entrance hole.

Where to place your birdhouse depends on the type of bird you want to attract: bluebirds, for example, like wide open spaces, while barn owls prefer their abodes on lofty tree limbs. Wherever it's situated, your birdhouse should be installed before the breeding season begins, typically from late March to early May, depending on the species. And be patient – it might take time for birds to find their new home.

CREATING BIRD-FRIENDLY BACKYARD HABITATS

To attract birds to your nesting box, check out the “neighbourhood” to make sure your backyard is bird-safe and offers easy access to food and water. A perimeter border of evergreens can provide shelter and roosting sites, while beds planted with fruiting shrubs and vines can offer a smorgasbord of berries. Because the primary diet of nesting songbirds is insect life, mulch your garden with leaves, which attract such delicacies as worms, bugs, caterpillars and spiders. Fresh water is essential for both drinking and washing feathers. Place birdbaths near protective shrubbery and clean them regularly. Most important of all, garden organically. Pesticides and herbicides destroy bird habitats and food sources, including insects.

BEST PLANTS FOR BIRDS

- Summer-fruiting shrubs: serviceberry (*Amelanchier spp.*); mulberry (*Morus spp.*). Sweet fruit is a quick energy source for parenting birds.
- Evergreens: spruce (*Picea spp.*), red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*). Boughs provide shelter; seeded cones offer fall food for migrating birds.
- Fall-fruiting shrubs, trees and vines: dogwoods, including grey, red osier, rough-leafed and mountain (*Cornus spp.*); flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*); wild grape (*Vitis spp.*). Fatty fruit provides fuel for fall migrants.
- Plants with persistent winter fruit: nannyberry; highbush cranberry (*Viburnum spp.*); bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*); sumac (*Rhus spp.*). These are good sources of food for returning migrants.

BIRD ON A WIRE

Known to build their nests in the pockets of clothes hung to dry on the line, house wrens inspired Kate Fox-Whyte, a professional landscape architect, to design these adorable abodes. Although her birdhouses are clad in vintage-style patterns, the technique Kate used to do this is a little tricky. To simplify the project and get a similar (and more weather-proof) result, she suggests painting your own designs on the birdhouses.

SUPPLIES FOR ONE BIRDHOUSE:

4-foot length of 1x8* cedar

1/16-inch diameter stainless-steel cable (length will be determined by location)

3/16-inch diameter stainless-steel rod

Exterior wood glue

Wooden clothes pegs

Exterior-grade clear epoxy

1/4-inch wood screws

1/2-inch finishing nails

Wood filler (LePage Plastic Wood)

220-grit sandpaper

Exterior wood solid-hide stain in desired colour

Paint brush and tray

2 1/8" wire rope clips

2 heavy-duty screw hooks

Compound mitre saw or table saw

Drill with bits (1/4-, 1/8- and 1/32-inch bits; 1/2-inch Forstner bit)

Hammer, nail set; corner clamps; small clamp; measuring tape; pencil; carpenter's square; file or rasp (to smooth edges of steel rod); wire cutters; hacksaw

*Nominal sizes; actual dimensions will be somewhat smaller.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1 | Using compound mitre saw or table saw, cut all 6 pieces according to diagram A.

2 | Drill entry hole in front (diagram B) using Forstner bit; ventilation holes in sides (diagram C) using 1/32-inch bit; and drainage holes in bottom and holes for stainless-steel rod in sides (diagram C) using 1/8-inch bit.

3 | Paint exterior and edges of all pieces with 2 coats of exterior stain. Let dry overnight. Do not paint interior.

4 | Assemble box as follows. Glue then nail top to front, bottom to front, and both side pieces to top and bottom of box as shown (diagram A). Ensure all pieces are flush for neat finished product.

5 | Countersink all finishing nails. Fill holes with wood filler and let dry.

6 | Dry-fit back panel in position. Mark holes in corners of back panel and transfer marks to edges of side panels. Remove back panel and set aside.

7 | Carefully predrill the 4 marked holes in back panel. Predrill 1/2 inch into edges of two side panels with 1/4-inch bit.

8 | Sand box, including edges and access hole.

9 | Attach back panel to box with wood screws.

10 | Using hacksaw, cut stainless-steel rod to 12 inches and thread through predrilled holes in sides of box. Using toothpick, carefully apply epoxy around rod at points where it meets hole. Allow to dry thoroughly.

11 | Using a pencil, mark 1/2 inch in on each end of rod. Apply epoxy to inside of clothes pegs, one at a time, and clamp to rod as shown. Let dry thoroughly. (TIP: Epoxy dries quickly and can not be easily removed. Once you have clamped peg to rod, do not adjust location.)

12 | Screw hooks into desired locations. Measure stainless-steel cable to fit between hooks, adding 20 inches to length; cut cable. Loop one end of cable around wire rope clip (photo, page 113) and secure, following package instructions. Thread other end of cable through metal spring loop on each clothes peg. Loop remaining end of cable around wire rope clip and secure, following package instructions.

13 | Have a friend support the weight of the box while you hang birdhouse.

14 | Clean your birdhouse after each nesting season by removing back panel and shaking out debris. ■

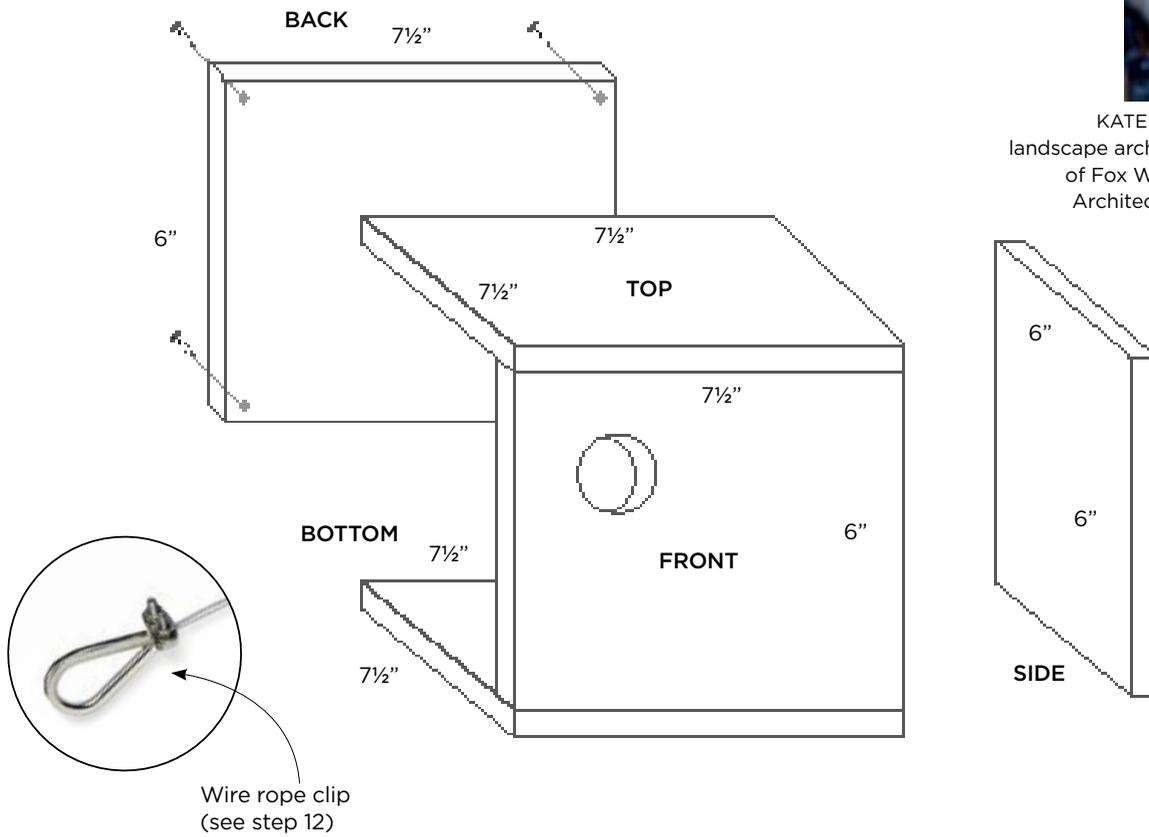
ENTER YOUR BIRDHOUSE

For more information on building birdhouses, and to learn how to enter the *Canadian Living* Individual category for the Toronto Botanical Garden 2010 For the Birds competition, go to canadianliving.com/may.





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ILLUSTRATION, KATE FOX-WHYTE, FOXWHYTE.CA (BOTTOM)

