

# Tutorial: Gourd Bird Houses



*Wren bird house, "Puzzle" bottle gourd by Pat Moore*

Making bird houses with gourds has been a practice for probably as long as gourds have been grown. Many sizes and shapes of gourds can be suitable for crafting a bird house once they have dried and been cut and cleaned. The gourd bird house can be left natural, painted white or decorated. This article is intended to help you attract the bird varieties you hope to see and how to be the best landlord for your feathered tenants.

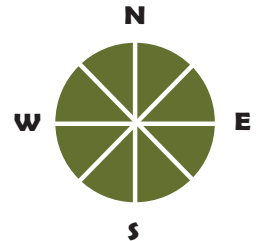
## Tenants for Your Bird House

Birds who choose a gourd birdhouse belong to a group called cavity nesters. Birds are either a cavity nester or they aren't! If you use the interactive tool provided by Cornell's Ornithology Lab called Nest Watch

## Right Bird House for Your Tenants

Now that you know what cavity nesting birds you can attract in your area you need to know what size gourd and hole size is appropriate for them. You also need to know the position the opening should face (N-S-E-W), how high to place the gourd birdhouse and spacing between birdhouses. Click on Learn from the Nest Watch home page, or enter this url <https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/right-bird-right-house/>

Why should you be so specific regarding gourd size, hole size, placement and so on? Having a hole that is larger than your intended bird variety invites predators to disrupt the nest. Details matter. You can use the information of the plans to build a wooden birdhouse to inform the building of the gourd birdhouse.



## Features of a Good Bird House

A good nest keeps out predators, welcomes the parents and protects the eggs and little ones until they fledge. But there are dangers.

### *It Keeps Predators Out*

Do not add a perch. These look cute but the birds don't need them, and they allow predators better access to the nest. Its best to take the bird house down in the winter as mice and squirrels will move in for shelter, sometimes chewing the entrance hole to accommodate their size.

### *It has the Right Entrance Size for the Right Bird*

Entrance hole size matters. By providing a properly-sized entrance hole, you can attract desirable species to your birdhouses while excluding predators and unwanted occupants.

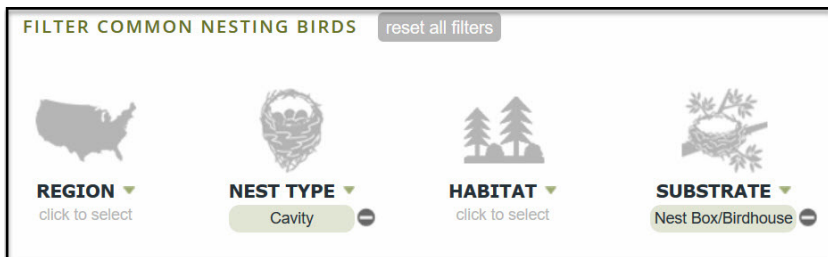
-House sparrows compete with Bluebirds, taking over their birdhouse/nests

-House wrens may destroy the eggs or nestlings of nearby cavity nesters

-Cowbirds lay their eggs in other bird's nests

### *It Keeps Birds Dry*

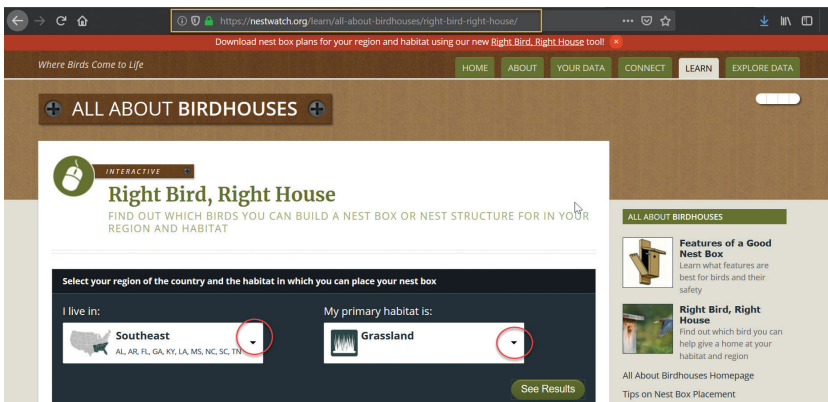
One of the biggest mortality factors for nestlings is wetness! So, make sure any water that gets into the nest can drain away via four drainage holes (3/8" to 1/2" diameter) in the lowest part of the gourd bottom.



*Birds are associated with one of three nest types: Cup, Platform & Cavity.*

*To see which of the birds in your area are cavity nesters, search your state game commission or state park website for a list of cavity nesters.*

you will identify a number of common nesting birds in your region. <https://nestwatch.org/learn/focal-species/> Filter by Region, Nest Type (for gourds, choose cavity), Habitat & Substrate (for possible gourd nesters you should choose Nest Box/Birdhouse). You will be presented with a variety of birds that fit the filters you input. For each bird presented you are shown images, hear their calls & songs and information about when & where to look.



*Continued on page 28*

## Bird Houses continued

To further protect the nestlings from wetness, attach a sloped roof that extends 2-4" over the hole to help keep out driving rain.

### *It Helps Regulate Temperature*

Thicker walls provide some insulation from heat, but ventilation holes are always necessary. For adequate ventilation, there should be two 5/8" diameter holes on the side walls near the top.

### *It Helps Fledglings Leave the Nest*

Rough interior walls, especially below the entrance hole help nestlings climb out of the box.

### *It Provides Adequate Room*

The bird house needs to be large enough to be comfortable for the brooding adults and all of its residents and still provide adequate circulation and ventilation. Considerations: the more eggs a bird typically lays, the larger the base of the house should be. Fledgling size matters too. Some baby birds are nearly the size of adults by the time they leave the nest and will need a bigger house to accommodate their growth. A house that is too tight can erode the adults' feathers and make them more vulnerable to predators and poor weather.

So, yes it is necessary to clean the gourd guts out to make room for the nest and inhabitants.

### *It should be a Clean House*

Dirty bird houses can also harbor rodents, insects, feather mites, fungus and bacteria that can spread disease to nesting birds and vulnerable hatchlings. Cleaning a bird house minimizes these hazards and makes the home more attractive to nesting birds. A clean bird house encourages reuse with either the same bird family or additional birds looking for suitable nesting sites at different times of summer, which can bring even more bird families to the backyard.

Once the young birds leave the nest that first time, they do not come back! They usually leave the same day as their nest mates, but this may take several hours. They leave behind a well-worn nest and a lot of organic matter that breaks off from the emerging feathers as they unfold. Left in place, this broken-down sheathing will attract scavenger insects and there may also be mites and other critters. Wear gloves when removing the old nest and do not bring it inside for decoration.

Bird houses with movable or hinged panels are easier to clean without weakening the structure of the house. To make the cleanout door of the gourd, create an opening large enough to accommodate a small adult hand or tools into the gourd. Reattach the cutout as a door with a hinge and latches. The cleanout door

will make it much easier to do the initial cleaning of the gourd. The cleanout door will also facilitate the clean out old nests, which should be done as soon as the brood fledges so that the nest box can be used for a second nest attempt.

Cleaning your birdhouses also means you should check that all ventilation and drainage holes to insure they are unobstructed. If needed, drill additional holes to provide extra ventilation

or drainage to improve the house. Cleaned out gourds may well be used again the same season by the same parents for a second brood.

One last thought. When you sell or give away your bird house, instruct its owner to hang the gourd so that the hole is facing away from the prevailing wind. And, at the same time its best if the hole faces a safe landing spot like a

branch within 10 feet or so, so that when the nestlings leave the bird house on their maiden flight, they have something to aim for.

### **Main Contributors:**

**Helen Olena**, from Shillington, PA is a former high school biology teacher and also worked as an environmental educator for both PA State Parks and the PA Dept. of Environmental Protection. She has been gourding since 2001 and has made close to 1,000 bird houses.



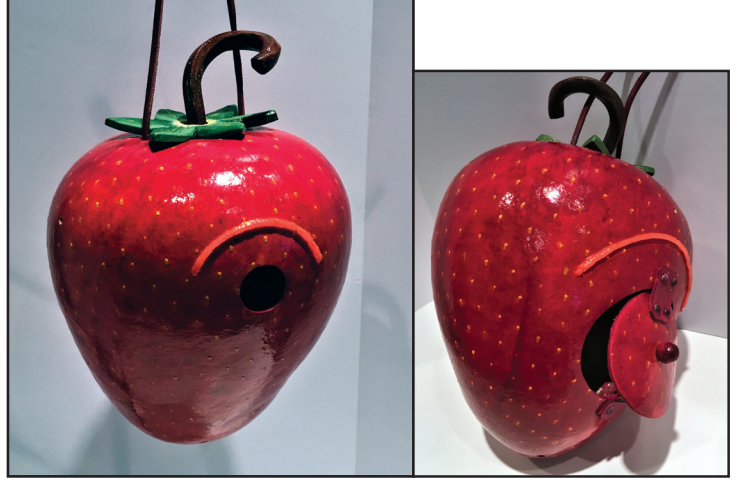
*Gourd Bird House Photos from Helen Olena*

**Pat Moore**, from Bloomington, IN is a veteran gourd grower, gourd crafter and exhibitor. She has been growing gourds since the mid 70's, belongs to 3 Gourd Societies, including holding an office in the Indiana Gourd Society as well as being a Certified AGS Judge





Bluebird House, natural gourd with clean-out door



Wren bird house, "Strawberry" bird house with clean-out door on a strawberry gourd

Wren bird house, hand gouged covered bridge design on apple gourd



Wren bird house, "Tomato Country" bird house with Red Gold Tomato Labels and carved green top



Wren bird house, hand gouged quilt design on small kettle gourd



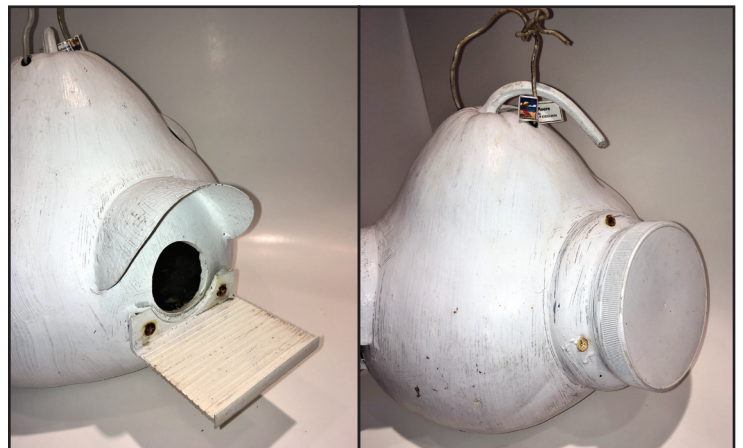
Wren bird house, painted "Pink Pig" with spinner gourd feet and small bottle nose



Purple Martin bird house, large gourd cut open with second gourd cut for the top. Top raises for clean-out



Wren bird house, small purple bird house, decoupage with construction paper



Purple Martin bird house, large martin gourd with awning, porch and clean-out port, white house paint



# Bird Houses continued

**Susan Zanella**, from Baldwin, MD is a gourd artist and teacher who manages an art gallery

*Susan Zanella's photos*

**Gourd Birdhouse Door:**  
Created using a Bottle Gourd, added gourd roof, added gourd pieces for window boxes on sides and porch roof. Woodburned, cut outs with mini jig-saw and colored with ink dye. Dried flowers added to window boxes.



**Gourd Birdhouse with Seed Roof:**  
Created using a Bottle Gourd, added gourd roof, added gourd pieces for window boxes on sides and planters beside the door. Brick finish created by carving lines between "bricks," door is woodburned, windows cut out using mini jigsaw. Chimney created with banana gourd and bricks carved the same as "house." Top of Martin Gourd used for roof and glued seeds. Dyed using leather dye.



**Owl Birdhouse:** Created using a Kettle Gourd. Chest feathers gouge carved with #9 Palm Gouge, side wings created using pine cone pieces. Beak is a Pinecone piece and eyes created with acorn cap centers surrounded by gourd seeds.

**Betty Sparrow**, from West Point, MS is a member of the Mississippi Gourd Society.

*Betty Sparrow's Photos*



The bird holes are 1 1/2 inch diameter. The birds that build in them are red-headed Finch, orange-headed Finch, Sparrow, and even, once, a Bluebird. I try to attract the birds that are around my home every day. The finish on the outside is Spar Varnish to make them weather resistant and the feathers on the birds are natural. The Finch tend to raise 3 nests in a single gourd in the Spring season

**Graham Ottoson**, from Ithaca, NY is a founding member of the NYS Gourd Society and owner of Gourdlandia where she grows and manipulates gourds and teaches classes.

*Graham's photos*



Graham shared some birdhouse photos and a couple of them have clean-outs on the bottom. I generally use 1.25" openings, because lots of birds like that around here. 🐦