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HOW TO ...

Build a nestbox in a wall cavity



1 Use mortar to make the wall cavity the right size and shape. **2** A piece of old floorboard cut to size makes a good – and free – cover for the nestbox. A 32 mm diameter drill bit was used to make the hole. You can use different sizes to attract various bird species. The British Trust for Ornithology advises the following hole sizes: 25 mm or larger for Blue, Coal and Marsh Tits; 28 mm or larger for Great Tit and Tree Sparrow; and 32 mm for House Sparrow (see www.bto.org/about-birds/nbw/make-a-nest-box). **3** Left-over mortar can be used to seal the sides and top, while the bottom remains open to provide ventilation. Remember that you'll need to remove the cover once the birds have left to clean out the old nest.

PHOTOS: CHARLES HIPPLISLEY-COX

WORKING with old buildings is fraught with dilemmas. On the one hand there is the pressure to conform to all the expectations of the planning process, and on the other the need to provide all 'mod cons' to expectant building users. Some natural clients, however, are not quite so fussy and are more than willing to accept a hole in the wall as a home.

As part of my ongoing research into the biodiversity of historic buildings, I stumbled across an opportunity to use a small recess in a stone wall of my own house to accommodate a nestbox. It only took about half an hour and it was relatively straightforward to do. You might like to consider doing something similar.

The hole

Initially I wondered what the hole was for. It looked deliberately

hollowed out to support scaffolding, perhaps when the building had been re-roofed about 60 years ago. The generous overhang of the eaves had meant that the wall had remained protected from the elements and the hole left unrepaired for two generations.

I had been feeling a little guilty for pointing up an adjacent wall where I knew Blue Tits nested each year. Here was an opportunity to put things right by providing alternative accommodation for next year's brood.

The hole was not exactly the right size and shape, so I made up a weak mortar of six parts of sand to one of white cement and applied this to create a smooth interior. I cut a piece of old oak floorboard to size to provide the front of the box. Suitable

points for fixing the board were determined by the uneven surface of the masonry. In this instance three screws were used in combination with plugs in drilled holes of 8 mm diameter. For the entrance hole, a flat drill bit of 32 mm diameter was used. This is actually a little on the large side for Blue Tits; a smaller hole might suit them better and exclude the slightly larger Great Tits.

Finishing it off

Some spare mortar was used to make the top and two sides weather tight, with the bottom left to provide some ventilation so fresh air would rise through the nest and stale air out of the entrance. I put a coat of water-based fence paint on the front of the board, but left the inside natural in case the paint was harmful to the birds.

Maintenance

The mortar will remain in place when the cover is removed for the old nests to be taken out. Old nests can house parasites harmful to the next generation of chicks, and the wood around the entrance hole should also be cleaned each year.

If you are tempted to do something similar, you might consider fitting a camera inside the nestbox. Remote battery-powered cameras are now sufficiently low in price, and can be used in conjunction with wi-fi to stream photos to your laptop or PC.

Charles Hippisley-Cox

Birdwatch says: are you thinking of following Charles's instructions and turning a wall cavity into a nestbox? Tell us about it at letters@birdwatch.co.uk. ■