

Ambassadors for Nature: Nest Box Designs

Building and erecting nest boxes is one way to help urban wildlife. It is also a good way to engage diplomats, staff and families to take part in making the boxes, choosing sites and monitoring whether the boxes attract birds and, if so, the progress of the birds in the breeding season.

Building nest boxes is not well-established in Beijing, so there is little evidence of what works and what doesn't for Beijing's native birds. However, several species are the same or very similar to those in Europe, where there is a wealth of experience, so the general guidance and three specific suggestions outlined below will offer a good chance of success.

For a general guide on nest boxes, see this short article from the British Trust for Ornithology. <https://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/putting-nest-boxes-birds>

For guidance on where to put up boxes, see this link: <https://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/putting-nest-boxes-birds/putting-nest-box>

Three species in Beijing could benefit from nest boxes as part of the Ambassadors for Nature initiative:

1. The Beijing Swift 北京雨燕 Běijīng yǔyàn



Note: only an option if you have a large, open area and enough room for several boxes

The Beijing Swift is a highly aerial, insectivorous bird that breeds in Beijing and then undertakes an incredible migration to southern Africa for the winter, a journey of more than 26,000km that we think (still to be proven) it makes without landing at all. This bird eats, drinks and sleeps in the air. There is some information about the Beijing Swift here: <https://birdingbeijing.com/the-beijing-swift-project/>

There is a variety of nest box designs out there. See here for a selection (with downloadable PDFs and links for instructions):

<http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/p/diy-swift-box-designs.html>

Swifts are colonial nesters and highly sociable, so putting up boxes for this species is only a good idea if there is space for at least five boxes and, given this species' aerial lifestyle, they need to be placed fairly high (at least 4-5m above ground) and with a generous space in front (to allow the birds to swoop in and out unimpeded). The birds generally arrive between early April and mid-May so the boxes would need to be in place around late March at the latest and, to increase the chances of attracting Swifts, it is a good idea to set up a speaker to play the .mp3 call of the male and female "duetting" (this can be done in the evenings to minimise any disturbance during business hours). A .mp3 file of the call is available on request. Swifts have been associated with Beijing since the 1400s when they first moved into the city to take advantage of the nooks and crannies in the original city walls. Their population has fallen as the old buildings are torn down to be replaced by modern, shiny buildings with straight edges. So helping the Swift in this way would be a good thing to do. Swifts eat lots of mosquitoes and other flying insects – a natural insecticide - so they're also good to have around the human environment.

2. The White-cheeked Starling 灰椋鸟 Huī liáng niǎo



This bird is a resident in Beijing, especially in the embassy district, and a hole-nester. Placing some boxes on trees around embassy or residence grounds would help these birds to find nest sites. They usually begin to breed in late March, so the boxes should be in place by February to allow the birds to get used to them.

The White-cheeked Starling is similar to the European Starling, so the box designs used in Europe should be appropriate for the Beijing birds.

Here is a link to find out more about designs and tips on placement.

See here: <https://www.bto.org/about-birds/nnbw/nesting-birds/starling>

3. Japanese Tit 大山雀 Dà shānqué



The Japanese Tit is a resident in Beijing and a familiar bird in the embassy district. It eats insects in summer and nuts/seeds in winter. It is a tree-hole nester, so should adapt well to nest boxes. The Japanese Tit is very similar to the Blue Tit and Great Tit from Europe, so the designs used successfully in Europe for these species should work for the Japanese Tit in Beijing. For designs and tips, see this link (note the importance of the hole size depending on which species you would like to attract):

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/nestboxes/nestboxes-for-small-birds/making-and-placing-a-bird-box/>

If you go ahead and make and erect nest boxes in your compound, please do share your experience with the group so that we can learn what works and what doesn't. Thank you!