

Protocol for Checking Nest Boxes

General protocol:

1. Before approaching the nest box, watch briefly to see if the female is visiting the nest with material. That way you can avoid disturbing her if possible.
2. Approach nests with care. Avoid leaving tracks that can direct predators to nests. Nest predators are everywhere and many are smart enough to watch you. Be careful that predators such as cats, crows, and jays are not following you. Minimize damaging or trampling vegetation that could emphasize a nest box.
3. Before opening the box, scratch or tap the sides a few times to encourage female to leave if she is inside, then tap again when open to allow the parent to slip away before you stare directly into the box. If a sitting bird does not leave on its own, do not force it off the nest. In this case, you will need to come back later.
4. Make visits brief, quick, and very quiet. Nest visits should last no longer than one minute. Assess the nest stage, count eggs, age nestlings and then leave the immediate area to record your data. Record information on the data sheets as thoroughly as possible.
5. If contents are hard to see in the box, use a small mirror to get a better view. Do not handle birds or eggs. Eggs can be easily cracked or small nestlings injured. Small nestlings are remarkably helpless and may not be able to crawl back into the nest cup if displaced, even inside of a nest box. Remember, if you can't get an exact count or age, it's okay. Safety of the birds should be your top priority!
6. Use different routes for approaching and leaving the nest site. Don't leave a dead-end trail - whenever possible, take a different route away from the nest site than the route you took to reach it. Walking to the nest and back along the same path leaves a dead-end trail that can lead predators directly to the nest.

Things to note:

1. Because we are performing box checks minimal times throughout the season some of the following may be unavoidable. However, in general you should AVOID visiting nests under the following conditions:
 - **Do not check in the early morning.** Most birds lay their eggs in the morning so plan on visiting nests in the later morning or afternoon. Also, most adults will temporarily leave the nest when you are near, and eggs and young nestlings can become cold quickly if left alone in the morning.
 - **Avoid nests during the first few days of incubation.** If necessary, observe nests from a distance and approach only when the female leaves the nest.
 - **Avoid nests during bad weather.** If it is cold, damp, or rainy, postpone checking nests until another day. Checking nests during this time can be very stressful for birds.
 - **Do not check nests at or after dusk,** when females may be returning to the nest for the night.
 - **Do not approach nests when young are close to fledging.** When the young are disturbed during this stage, they may leave the nest prematurely (Before they are fully feathered and ready to fledge). Young that fledge prematurely usually do not stay in the nest despite

attempts to return them, and their survival rates away from or outside the nest are low. When young birds are fully feathered and very alert, only observe the nest from a distance.

2. If premature fledging occurs:

- gather the birds quickly and replace them gently but firmly in the nest cup, the smallest on top, and covered with a hand or tissue.
- Withdraw the cover smoothly after giving time for the nestlings to settle. This is most successful if you can keep yourself out of sight.
- If they leave the nest again, it's best to let them be and allow the parents to round up the young themselves. The adult birds will continue to care for young that fledge prematurely.

3. Abandonment

- Do not assume a nest is abandoned just because you don't see or hear an adult bird in the vicinity, even for long periods of time. The eggs of most birds will remain viable for up to two weeks after being laid even before they are incubated, so as a rule of thumb, you should wait at least one month after the expected hatch date before concluding that a nest is abandoned.
- It is illegal to remove any materials from an active nest.
- If you have a nest with eggs and no parents, verify whether the nest is indeed abandoned – wait at least one month before cleaning out box. Box cleaning will generally occur in September, well after the nesting season.