

Wildlife boxes and hollows

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We can provide alternative homes for birds, bats and possums by installing nesting and wildlife boxes. By supplementing naturally occurring hollows, providing native food plants, and retaining vegetation corridors, you are sustainably supporting these extraordinary suburban neighbours.

The shortage of hollows

Urbanisation has resulted in the loss of natural hollows in mature trees. More recently, the removal of dead trees and limbs for development, safety and firewood has further contributed to the decline in suitable hollows, both up in trees and down on the ground. This has impacted upon the bird, mammal and lizard species that rely on hollows for nesting and shelter. This is especially problematic given Australian wildlife has the highest rate of hollow dependency in the world.

Small hollows large enough for a small bird can take 80 years to develop, whereas a hollow large enough to support a possum or cockatoo will take over 200 years to form. Therefore, it is important to conserve existing hollows in both living and dead trees. We can also provide alternate homes with wildlife boxes.

Mimicking natural hollows

For a wildlife box to recreate habitat for possums, birds and bats, we must understand what natural hollows do.

In the summer, hollows have their own air-conditioning provided by living trees as they transpire (i.e., lose water through evaporation). Whereas in winter it is warmer within a natural hollow than outside.

The size, orientation and other specific features of a wildlife box will be determined by the animal you are trying to accommodate. There are many different sized hollows in trees, each used by a variety of animals, so there is no one-size-fits-all wildlife box.



Adelaide rosella in a nest box

Possum boxes: Both local species of possum may use boxes. The smaller common ringtail possum tends to make a circular nest, called a drey, out of sticks or leaves in the branches of trees, but it will use hollows during the wetter periods of winter and spring.

The larger brushtail possum must use a hollow or similar shelter. Every morning before dawn they seek out a hollow or suitable location in which to shelter during the day. Wildlife boxes are readily used by this species and provide appropriate shelter which can also minimise the risk of one taking up residence in your roof.

Bird boxes: The height, floor area and entrance hole size of your bird box, will depend on the species you want to attract. Vertical hollow nesting birds include parrots such as rosellas and red-rumps, whereas some pardalotes, ducks and kookaburras prefer hollows on the horizontal.

Bat roosting box: There are 8 microbat species within the Adelaide metro area which can use boxes during the day and during the winter months when they hibernate.

Microbat boxes are designed with a landing pad at the bottom of the box, with a narrow entrance through which they can crawl up inside.

Installing wildlife boxes

When installing a wildlife box, remember to locate it high enough to avoid threats from dogs, cats, rats and foxes (4-8 m), but still at a height where the box can be maintained.

The box entrances typically need to face away from the hot westerly sun, but also be positioned to avoid the wettest winds. In Adelaide, orienting them from a north-easterly to south-easterly direction is preferable.

Positioning an artificial hollow under a leafy canopy will also provide natural shade. However, for most bird species, it is best to avoid placing the box within the canopy of a dense deciduous tree.

Maintaining wildlife boxes

It is important to remember that wildlife boxes for all native species require some management. This means making regular observations of the boxes to inspect their condition and to check for pest species, or other potential issues.

You should have convenient and safe access to the nest box with a ladder or inspection camera or call in a professional.

Where can I get wildlife box construction information?

There are numerous resources providing the dimensions, drawings and details of wildlife box construction for Australian native wildlife. For example:

[The Nestbox Book](#) (2008) by the Gould League, available as an ebook.

Birds in Backyards (birdsinboxyards.net) has developed a series of nest box plans for a range of Australian birds. They contain information on the bird, where it lives, what materials you need, and how to build, install and maintain your nest box.

Wildlife boxes can also be purchased locally from fauNature at faunature.com, State Flora Belair, Fauna Rescue at faunarescue.org.au, or a range of garden centres and nurseries.

Complementary planting

Ensure that large or mature trees on your property are a lasting feature in your backyard, because they provide important hollows for our wildlife.

Planting locally native, dense prickly shrubs as understorey around trees with hollows provides refuge for small birds and can deter predators.

Including locally native plants in your garden provides a range of food sources such as fruits and nectar. They also support native insects, essential prey for insect eating animals such as microbats and small birds. Gardens with a range of plant types that flower at different times across the year provide the greatest benefit.



Common ringtail possum (Photo: Elisa Sparrow).

Wildlife friendly gardening

Gardening is a popular pastime, and what we do in our home gardens has the potential to benefit or harm the natural environment.

By developing and maintaining a garden that follows the 5 tips below, you will contribute to a better local environment, help conserve our local flora and fauna, create important habitat, reduce your maintenance costs, and reduce the threat of invasive environmental weeds.

Top 5 tips

1. Use plants native to your suburb.
2. Plant species that are a range of heights.
3. Use a mix of local native plants that fruit and flower throughout the year.
4. Manage your pets responsibly.
5. Minimise chemical use.

Together we can create a cooler, greener, wilder Adelaide.

Scan to discover a range of gardening resources, including a list of native plant nurseries, on the Green Adelaide website.



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