

What's in a Hole? A Preview of Cavity Nesting Birds Education Program

by Rebecca Auletta

True or False: All birds live in stick nests in trees. **False!** Many birds, such as the American Kestrel, Western Screech-Owl, Burrowing Owl and woodpeckers, nest in cavities. The cavity may be a hole in a tree or in the ground.

Five schools in the Albuquerque area, in partnership with Hawks Aloft and PNM, will conduct an in-depth study of cavity nesting birds and their environment. During four classroom visits, students will explore the wide diversity of cavity nesting birds and the environments that best meet their biological needs. Students will learn what cavities make the best nests and what birds are most likely to use them. They will make observations and collect data during an ongoing, scientific study of cavity nesting birds. Students will also observe how nest boxes aid in reproductive success. Hawks Aloft educators will compile a program packet, which will provide background information, as well as ideas for extracurricular projects. Each class will build three wooden cavity nest boxes and determine the optimal location for these boxes in or near their schoolyard. With the help of PNM, the boxes will be hung while students wait with great anticipation for the arrival of new occupants. Throughout the school year, students will collect scientific data regarding which species utilize the nest boxes, when they occupy the box, whether or not prey is delivered to the box, and nesting information. They will record the weather and unusual bird behavior on observation days. In addition to studying the bird boxes at their schoolyards, students also will have the opportunity to monitor Burrowing Owls located at the PNM Reeves Station via web cam. This web cam can be accessed through the PNM website or the Hawks Aloft website.

Schools and local wildlife will benefit from this project. Imagine going to a school where American Kestrels or Downy Woodpeckers are raising their chick in the schoolyard. Students not involved in the project will also have the opportunity to view these amazing birds and listen to their calls. Attracting wildlife to the schoolyard has been an ongoing practice not only in the United States, but all over the world. Students will have the opportunity to view the birds and have a more personal connection with wildlife. Unfortunately, the habitat destruction and



deforestation that occur in order to build schools and cities make it harder for cavity nesting birds to find suitable habitat to raise young. Cavity nesting birds often use cavities in old or dead trees. These trees are often the first to be cut when humans develop the land. Nest boxes may be a partial solution to this problem, by replacing the cavities that were lost when the trees were cut down. Well built nest boxes can attract a wide variety of cavity nesting birds to a place that otherwise would be uninhabitable. Next time you see an American Kestrel or a Northern Flicker darting in and out of the trees, that bird may be living in your child's schoolyard!



Left: Kestrel nest boxes built by Ms. Beers' 5th Grade class.
Above: PNM and Trees Inc. hung the nest boxes



Photos by Norman Johnson, Illustration by Kalen Malueg

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