

FAUNA

BIRD NESTING BOXES

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IN the early weeks of 1998 I asked *Land for Wildlife* if they had any information on bird nesting boxes. We were duly sent a set of drawings (see *Wildlife Notes* No 3 January 1997) from which my husband, Bill, made seven boxes. He chose rough sawn untreated pine and made them with entrance holes varying between 8cm to 16cm and styled three with plain fronts (which we called A's) and four with a hollow log front entrance (B's), in the hope of attracting different species of birds. He notched the front inside as required and spread the bases with mulched jarrah bark for nesting material. To these home-made units we added three natural hollow logs of suitable size and shape.

Once finished, all ten were fastened to the boughs of trees, mainly Tasmanian blue gums and lemon scented gums on our one-hectare block in the foothills. Amongst the larger birds in the area kookaburra, black cockatoo (red and white tail) galah, redcap, Port Lincoln ringneck, heron, egret, ibis, magpie, ravens, butcher birds, numerous ducks and doves were amongst those we had been able to identify, and some of these we knew nested in holes in trees.

Now, with ten homes open and ready for inspection we sat back to await results. It was July before we got our first prospective clients. A pair of Port Lincoln ringnecks (28's) showed interest one of the plain fronted boxes, which we named A3 for easy identification. Surprisingly it was one nearest the house and the greatest area of human activity. The box was four metres from the ground and proved very popular.

Another pair of 28's investigated it, followed shortly by a pair of maned wood ducks. The MWDs spent half an hour examining the nest box both inside and out, from



roof to its underside. They returned twice more that day, then vanished. A fortnight later the 28's returned for a further inspection, a second pair alighted in the same tree but were chased off after a short noisy argument. The victorious 28's returned and were about to claim their house when a maned wood duck swooped and flew straight inside the entrance claiming it for herself.

From then on we watched the activity of both the male and female ducks as daily they returned to their

nest site. For the first few days the male sat on the roof of the box, leaned over and chatted to his partner. Sometimes he shared the box with her, on several occasions we saw both ducks leave the box one after the other, though it did not appear to be large enough to accommodate both of these large breed of duck. Even the entrance seemed a tight squeeze. Often when she was sitting the female would show herself by putting her head out of the hole, or perching on its rim.

By September the ducks in A3 (the one nearest the house) had left with their family, unfortunately we missed this event. They had been so evident that when we had no sighting of them for two days we checked the box and found the remains of at least three hatched eggs and two infertile. We removed all the debris and to our surprise another pair of maned wood ducks moved in the next day.

The birds appeared to be queuing up for homes. As each box was vacated it was taken over by another pair.

A3 housed 2 pairs of maned wood ducks and one of 28's

A1 - one pair MWD's

B2 - 2 pairs of 28's and one pair MWD

B3 - 2 pairs of 28's

Out of a total of ten nesting sites, only four were used, but used repeatedly to raise nine families. The remaining boxes stayed empty over the whole period. The three hollow logs were more inaccessible and could not be observed clearly. Kookaburras constantly cavorted around one of the relevant trees, but we were unable to confirm use of these particular sites without causing possible interference.

After carefully comparing the most popular ones, A3, and B2 with

those not used, we came to the conclusion that their popularity rested on having a small branch in front of them, where the birds could perch and peer inside. Also the entrance holes of the three unused boxes were larger than the 12cm of the popular ones.

The experiment has shown us which birds on our patch need homes, and it seems they need more of them. So, for the coming year we have altered the unused boxes slightly to match the popular A3 and have built on a perch - like a balcony so they too can be peered into - we wait with great interest for the next nesting season!