

# Instant Chickadees . . . just add birch tree

By Bob Tamm

I've always liked black-capped chickadees; even as a kid their familiar "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" call and their friendly almost tame disposition attracted me to them. To be sure, bluebirds would have also attracted me during my "growing up years" – the 50s, 60s, and even the 70s – but, alas, back in those days, bluebirds were indeed a very rare sight.

Today I occasionally will get a pair of chickadees to occupy a box on one of my bluebird trails, but too often their hopes of raising a family are cut short by the more aggressive tree swallow, house wren, or even the bluebird. The diminutive and passive chickadees offer little resistance, resulting in failure.

I believe that a big part of the problem is that chickadees are at times attracted to nest boxes that are part of our BLUEBIRD trails – boxes that are in optimal sites for bluebirds or perhaps tree swallows – but hardly optimal for chickadees! Also, the box itself is obviously optimal for bluebirds, but not nearly optimal for chickadees!

The solution, then, is two-fold. First, we have to create a box designed specifically for chickadees, not their larger cavity nesting neighbors. A smaller version of a typical bluebird box will do – with 3.5 to 4" square floor and 6 to 7" sides/ front. (Don't forget to hinge side door or front for monitoring) The entrance hole should be 1 1/8" to 1 3/16" diameter, and situated so that the bottom of the hole is about 4" above the floor. Second, place the box in ideal chickadee habitat. That may very well be your own yard! If your yard is like mine, you have a variety of trees, along with some shrubs, and, of course, a few bird feeders. Since chickadees are quite common, I decided two years ago to construct a chickadee box and place it on an arbor in my back yard, within easy viewing distance of our kitchen window. Within a couple of days, the C-dees started checking out the box. Days later, they were STILL checking it out, but not getting down to the business of building a nest! After giving this some thought, I decided to change two things. First, I was going to move the box to the front yard, where we have some clump birch trees. That always seemed to be a popular gathering spot for chickadees in the past, so why not? Second, I decided to try and make the box an extension of the birch tree by covering it with birch bark! And so I did. Two days later I mounted this birch box on the birch tree. Within an hour, chickadees not only spotted the box, but began building their nest. Six young chickadees fledged that year from this new box. Last year, same results. And this year? Well, in late March I went outside to mount the same box again on the tree (I take it down each year after the "season" is over). There to greet me were two chickadees, anxiously waiting for me to finish attaching the box. One almost sat on my shoulder while I held the box in one hand while searching for last year's screw holes! As soon as I had it securely mounted, I moved away, and instantly, the chickadees were on it AND in it!!! There is no doubt in my mind that as soon as the weather warms, the chickadees



will once again begin nesting activities.

Last Christmas, I gave away a few of these boxes (see pics) as gifts and attached a label that read: "Instant Chickadees - Just add Birch Tree." I think that birches are very attractive to these little birds, in part because the wood, when decayed, is soft – and can actually be excavated by chickadees! Dr. Kent Hall recently told me that he has witnessed three different chickadees excavating cavities, just like their bigger relatives, the woodpeckers. This year, I have also witnessed this very same thing in my birch trees, one of which is almost totally dead from birch borers. There is one industrious chickadee that daily works on an old hole where a branch used to be. He is now to the point where he is well over half buried in the cavity when he reaches down into it. So, at least to some extent, they can be excavators, not just secondary cavity nesters. Hence, their attraction to birch trees. Besides, there are ample bugs on these trees to satisfy even the most discriminating chickadee!

So, if you like chickadees – and who doesn't? – you just may want to try this method. Of course, you will need a birch tree, AND a source of birch bark! No, you don't want to strip bark off a living tree! My source of birch bark comes from my acreage in Door County, where I have many old standing birch trees as well as a lot of wind falls. I use a good grade of waterproof exterior glue for gluing strips to box. Some boxes, like the one on my tree these last few years, I give a rustic natural look by attaching smaller strips and letting the curls in the bark go. On some boxes, I take bigger square strips and "laminates" them to the box. (again, see pics.) That's for the cleaner look. Just put some weight on the bark while it's drying.

Next spring, mount the box on a birch tree at eye level, and chances are, you won't have to wait long before you get new tenants, with an excellent chance of raising a family WITHOUT being disturbed!

