

I've always been fascinated by animals who nest in holes. Holes provide shelter from the elements and from predators, and animals usually select holes that just fit them, so that no larger animal can come in.

A red squirrel, for instance, can squeeze into a hole too small for a weasel to enter, and thus be safe from this predator, who can chase the squirrel up and down tree trunks and along slender branches.

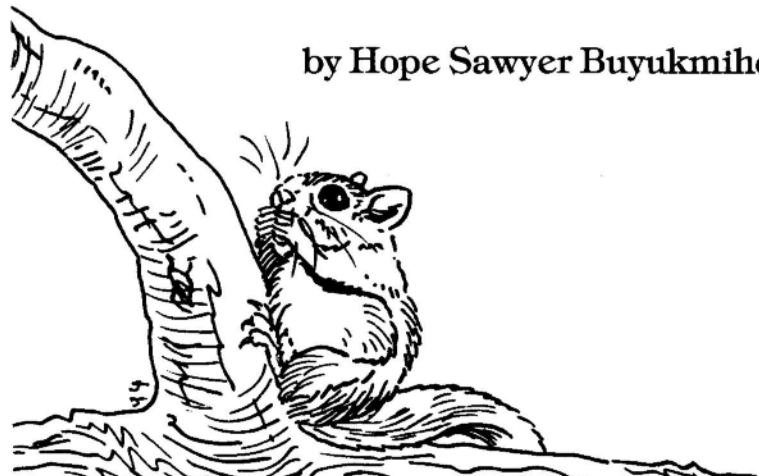
The chickadee, tufted titmouse, as well as other birds, nest in natural hollows such as woodpecker excavations, knotholes, or rotted-out cavities. There is competition for suitable nesting sites, and this past summer I witnessed different species using birdhouses in turn. At Squirrel Haven a deer mouse took over the house in which bluebirds had raised two broods last year. Bluebirds nested in the next house down the path, which last year was occupied by tree swallows. When the mice left the first house, tufted titmice moved in. Meanwhile, chickadees built their nest in another house, and as soon as their babies flew, wrens nested there.

Beside the path to Bluebird Field, at Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, a red squirrel filled a birdhouse with shredded cedar bark and gave birth to her young. Sometimes she looked out as we walked past but more often remained hidden, except when we surprised her outside the hole, when she leaped to a nearby pine and ran away. About six weeks after we discovered the young, they had left the nest. Almost immediately a crested flycatcher, big cousin to the phoebe, laid six eggs in the same house, where they hatched in about 14 days.

For the first time in the 30 years of our experience at the wildlife

# WATCHING AT HOLES

by Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci



refuge, a pair of bluebirds nested in a birdhouse only 50 feet from my studio window. While sitting at my typewriter I could see their daily life. I watched the female bring grass and pine needles for her nest while her mate stood by, giving encouragement and often peeking into the house, though he never took part in the work. Later he perched on nearby twigs or wires as his mate incubated the eggs; then both parents were busy bringing food to the young.

In another part of the yard, giant oaks cast shade over two wood duck houses with 4½-inch-diameter entrances, mounted on the oak trunks. Wood duck houses out in the pond, mounted on metal pipes, are protected by wide metal cones over which raccoons or snakes cannot climb. A wood duck made her nest in one of the unguarded tree houses, however. One day I saw her tail sticking out of the house and heard her giving sharp wood duck-like sounds while a thumping sounded from within. I thought the eggs might be hatching and sat down to watch. After a while she flew away to join a male

who floated on the pond nearby. Later, she or another female entered the house and, with tail protruding, made the same noise, including those thumping sounds. I became aware that two females were involved when another female flew to the top of the house. What was going on?

A later inspection revealed that the eggs were intact. I remembered that two female wood ducks may use the same nest box, incubating in turns or simultaneously. Could it be that one was trying to drive the other out so she could take her turn? I planned to watch daily and learn more.

The mystery was not solved, however. Two days later, feathers lay scattered on the ground among broken shells. A predator, probably a raccoon, had rifled the nest. Lest such a tragedy be repeated I removed both tree-mounted houses—as I should have done before the ducks nested.

Birdhouses may shelter bees or wasps, tree toads, bats or flying squirrels. Each species fits in somewhere, and all are wonderful to watch.