



*By Colleen DeLong*

# Time To Get

**W**hile temperatures are dropping, it's a great time to prepare one's backyard or field into a special haven for wintertime visitors. Whether gathering scraps of wood for nest boxes or planting winter wheat, get ready to observe some excitement when the snow finally falls.

## **Nest Boxes for Squirrels**

Gray, fox and flying squirrels are three species that use nest boxes heavily in winter. They aren't raising young in them over the winter, but they are using them as a refuge from the weather. Fall is a good time to hang new boxes for our bushy-tailed friends.

Gray and fox squirrels will use the same type of box, but sometimes live in different types of habitats. Both of these species can be found in backyards, woodlots and farm groves. Gray squirrels tend to stay close to hardwood trees such as oaks, hickories and walnuts, while fox squirrels are more often found on farms and in woodlots with few plants underneath the trees.

Flying squirrels will also use boxes put up for gray and fox squirrels and other species like screech owls. However, because flying squirrels are mainly active at night, they are not seen as often as gray and fox squirrels. Southern flying squirrels enter into a state of decreased activity, called torpor, in winter to survive the cold months (northern flying squirrels are active all year). It isn't uncommon to find a number of flying squirrels together in a nest box during the winter months. Be careful not to disturb squirrels in nest boxes. Coming out of torpor requires a great deal of energy, and the squirrels may not be able to find enough food to replace that lost energy.



*Leaving some leftover crops can provide cover for wildlife in the winter.*

## **Winterize Nest Boxes or Build a Winter Roost**

Winter roosts can be provided for birds – especially songbirds -- by winterizing existing nest boxes or by building winter roost boxes. To winterize an existing nest box, which might have been used by a bluebird or wren as a nest site, plug all holes except the entrance hole. Be sure to plug holes with something you can remove in spring. Look for vent holes along the roof where it comes together with the sides of the box and vents drilled in the sides or in the floor of the box. Plugging these vents will help keep cold winter winds from blowing through the box. Don't forget to re-open the holes in the spring for ventilation.

To give the birds something to perch on while they're roosting, place one or two dowel rods inside the box across the width of the box. Dowel rods can be glued in or just use one that is long enough to wedge

# Ready For Winter Wildlife



## Leave Some Grain Crops Standing

If you live on a farm and grow grains, you can share a little of the harvest to provide food and cover for wildlife. By leaving some “waste grain” on the ground and a few stalks of corn, sorghum or sunflowers standing along the edge of your grain fields, you can provide food for songbirds, doves and other game birds, squirrels and deer.

## Plant a Cover Crop on Your Garden

Avid gardeners know that keeping a cover crop on gardens is a great way to enrich the soil and protect against erosion, but this practice also provides excellent wildlife habitat. Winter wheat, annual ryegrass and other cover crops will grow just enough in autumn to provide some cover and food which will benefit deer, game birds, songbirds and small mammals, such as rabbits. These cover crops will also be some of the first plants to “green up” in early spring when food for wildlife is becoming scarce after the long winter.

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Roger Hill/NRCS Photo

tightly between the sides of the box. A 3/8-inch dowel rod should be the right size for most songbirds to perch on.

A winter roost box can be made solely for the purpose of providing winter cover, too. A good winter roost box has room for a few dowels to house a number of birds, and the entrance hole is at the bottom of the box.

Plans for squirrel boxes and winter roost boxes can be found in *Woodworking for Wildlife* by Carrol L. Henderson, published by the Minnesota DNR or by contacting the West Virginia Wildlife Diversity Program, 304-637-0245.

## Downloadable Nest Box Plans

Plans for making your own nest boxes can be downloaded from the following sites:  
[www.dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/wasquirrel.asp](http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/wasquirrel.asp) and  
[www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse)

