

# Unusual Nest Site Selections: Opportunists or Just Desperate?

by Mary Hennen

Sometimes circumstances create conditions that result in an atypical nesting by a bird species. For instance, a 10 January 2002 article in the *Chicago Tribune* focused on a recent out-of-season nest attempt by local American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*). Historical accounts of numerous species record unusual nesting circumstances such as Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) nesting on moving trains (Bent 1942).

Weather may restrict or prolong nesting seasons. Competition within the species may force some individuals to choose sub-optimum habitats or nest locations. But can we determine whether a nest location is just unusual or an indication of desperation?

Recently, nesting locations of two Illinois bird species seem to beg the question – what were they thinking? During the 2000 nesting season for Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*), one local Chicago pair chose to nest within a decorative flower pot on the 24th floor terrace of a downtown hotel. The summer of 2001, near Paris, Illinois (Edgar County), a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) utilized a Peterson bluebird nest box on a county park trail. (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** A Red-headed Woodpecker at the entrance of a Peterson bluebird box, in which it laid five eggs the summer of 2001. Photo by Tracy Ford.

## Opportunists? Or Just Plain Desperate?

In the case of the Peregrine Falcon, a naturally cliff-dwelling bird, consider that various architectural styles provide a variety of ledges upon which they can nest. The female lays her eggs in a slight depression in the gravel, called a scrape. She brings in no supplementary material. Chicago peregrines tend to choose locations that are not too deep, so the incubating adult can see over the edge of the ledge. They remain to the side of the building and typically choose a spot with ample wind protection and shade from the midday sun.

A flower pot may seem ridiculous, but made practical sense from the birds' point of view. The pair of peregrines took advantage of the nest site because it had all the criteria to ensure a secure nesting, and

indeed the pair fledged three young. In fact, in recent years the Chicago peregrine population has remained stable with eight to ten pairs breeding annually. The pair returned in spring 2002 to use the flower pot again as a nest site (Fig. 2).

The summer of 2001, Eastern Bluebird monitors Donna and Homer Clem, made an interesting observation in Edgar County. The entrance hole of their Peterson box had been chiseled wider, and five white eggs were inside. Tree Swallows? Then why the enlarged entrance? Where was the feather lining of the nest? After calling Loren Hughes to help identify the species, they discovered the nest belonged to a Red-headed Woodpecker. Three of the eggs hatched, and the young woodpeckers fledged in late July.

Can nest boxes help a species that some believe to be declining in recent years? While woodpeckers have been known to use artificial boxes, it is not common (Winkler et al 1995). It seems unlikely then that establishing artificial nest box trails for Red-headed Woodpeckers could help the population recover as did establishing nest boxes for bluebirds or Purple Martins (*Progne subis*). Also, the decline of Red-headed Woodpecker numbers is linked to other factors such as acorn abundance.



**Figure 2.** A Peregrine Falcon pair has once again decided to nest in a flower box in downtown Chicago. Photo taken in early spring 2002.

While the unusual nest sites, such as with the peregrines and woodpeckers, as well as early nest attempts by the robins excited interesting debates (Did warm weather trigger the occurrence in spite of the nesting behavior being normally initiated by sunlight and day length patterns?), they were hardly an indication of a species in trouble.

Isolated instances of an unusual nesting should not be used as an indicator for the health of an entire species.