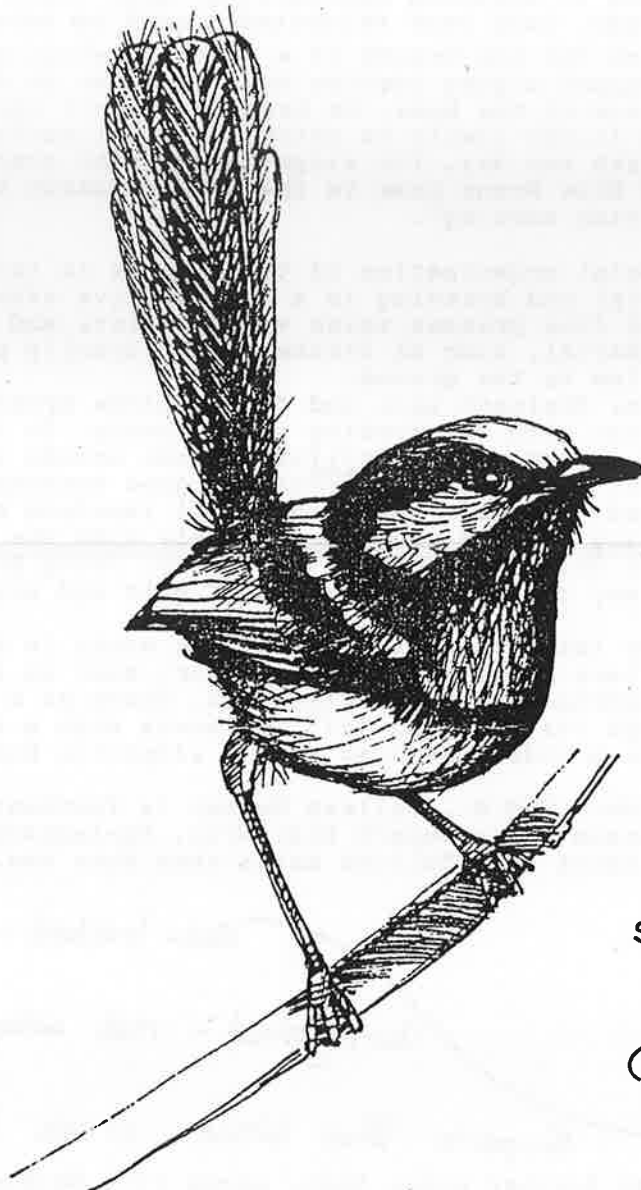


S.G.A.P. BIRDS AND NATIVE PLANTS  
STUDY GROUP

Newsletter No. 12 May 1987



Superb. Blue Wren.  
- *Malurus cyaneus*.

(from Colleen Werner)

WRENS

The tiny wrens, with characteristic cocked tails, move about in small chattering parties. Wrens are insect-eaters, their powers of flight are weak, and their movements have been aptly described as "bouncing hop-searches".

The parties of wrens usually consist of up to eight brown birds - the females and young males - and in the breeding season a strikingly coloured adult male. The mature males of all nine species of wrens found in Australia sport brilliant breeding plumage, the shades of blue, purple and red are quite amazing, impossible to say which is the most beautiful - my particular favourite is the red-backed wren.

Following the breeding season the breeding males, apart from the especially old ones, moult and take on their brown eclipse plumage. In the non-breeding season they are almost indistinguishable from females and young males.

The wrens are usually found foraging in dense thickets and shrub layers. The constant chattering is necessary to keep groups together. Perhaps the best known of the wrens is the Superb Blue Wren. It occurs about large population centres and has adapted well to limited clearing. Urban parks and gardens in which dense areas of shrubs are interspersed with clearings are well-liked by Superb Blue Wrens.

Val Maher, Cranbourne, Vic., describes the local habitat in which she finds Superb Blue Wrens ....

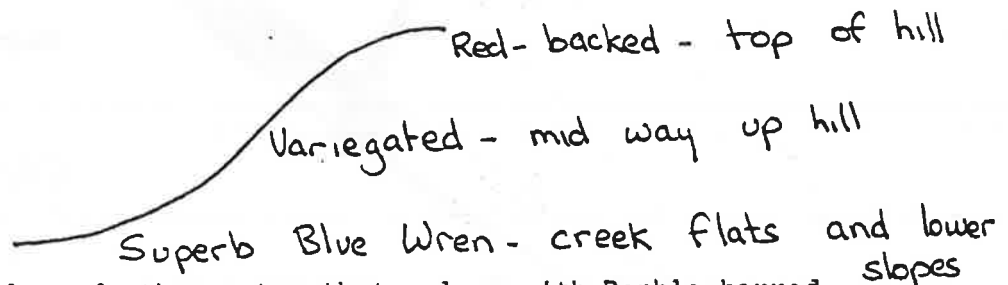
" In large clumps of bracken, especially at the base of eucalypts and prickly titree is where blue wrens frolic and nest. They play and chatter in the open tracks we've slashed then flit into bracken at the noise of anything approaching. Some males are sporting a tinge of blue already. Last year we located a nest by watching both male and female alight on the top branch of a young eucalypt about four feet high - they then hopped zigzag fashion down the tree to disappear in thick reeds and grass at the base. We kept away until the young had flown the nest but it was lovely to watch the brilliantly coloured male bring in a white moth one day, its wings folded back over his head like a mask. The Superb Blue Wrens come to the back verandah with Yellow Robins for cheese each morning".

The social organisation of these birds is interesting. The wrens are territorial and breeding is a co-operative effort. A ball-shaped nest of fine grasses woven with rootlets and spider web and lined with soft material, such as feathers, is usually placed in dense shrubs or grasses low to the ground.

Only the dominant male and female birds breed but the immature birds assist with the feeding of the young. In this way if the season is good and insects are plentiful several broods may be produced in rapid succession. In especially good areas and good seasons wrens may breed all year round. It seems that almost all immature brown birds are young males. As young females grow they compete with the dominant female and are thus driven out of the territory. Young brown males do not seem to offer any threat to the dominant male and are allowed to remain.

Another interesting feature of the wrens is a distraction display they sometimes perform when a predator, such as a snake, or an intrusive human, approaches an occupied nest. Known as a "rodent-run", the adult wren drops its head and tail and moves with a running gait making it look like a rodent running away - effective but quite a sight!

At Kindee, N.S.W., Colleen Werner is fortunate to have three species of wrens - the Superb Blue Wren, Variegated Wren and Red-backed Wren - about her. Colleen notes that they seem to occur in defined areas :



Colleen further notes that, along with Double-barred Finches, they nest in the cockspur thorn, "A very wise choice as cockspur is a revolting bush/ climber which has very nasty thorns".

Around Blaxland we have both Superb Blue and Variegated Wrens. Usually, Superb Blue Wrens are said to be much less shy and amenable to urbanisation than Variegated Wrens. Here, however, the Variegated Wrens are frequent, inquisitive visitors and the Superb Blue Wrens a rare occurrence.

If wrens are to be attracted to gardens/ parks, rather than recommend a particular wren-attractive plant species it would be better to recommend a particular type of plant structure. Areas planted with massed clumps of dense shrubs will be attractive to wrens, providing food, shelter and nesting sites. There are many species of dense, sometimes prickly species from which to choose. Superb Blue Wrens will be even happier if shrubs are interspersed with cleared areas.

### 3.

#### BIRD-ATTRACTIVE GROUND COVERS

from Val Maher, Cranbourne, Victoria.....

"Brachysema forms an easy ground cover here in heavyish soil and is bird attracting, so is Kennedia prostrata (native to this area) and I've had an area 3m by 3m covered by Grevillea 'Poorinda Fanfare'. The so-called prostrate Acacias are not so ground hugging but manage with only rainfall."

Can you add any further bird-attractive ground covers and perhaps notes about their hardiness, conditions they like, size and so on?

#### BEEBLE VISITORS TO ANGOPHORA FLOWERS

The following information is derived from "Beetle Visitors to Flowers of Angophora hispida (Sm.) D. Blaxell (Myrtaceae) and some other Angophoras in the Sydney Region", Webb, G.A., 1987 in Australian Zoologist: Vol 23, No. 4 :-

Forty-one species of beetles were recorded from the flowers of Angophora hispida, A. bakeri and A. floribunda. Apart from beetles ants, bees, flies, wasps, butterflies and grasshoppers, as well as vertebrates such as birds and bats, have been recorded visiting Angophora flowers. It is clear that not only birds, but a diverse fauna is associated with Angophora flowers. It remains largely uncertain to what extent these groups contribute to pollination.

The flowers of A. hispida are large and open, thus are readily accessible to beetles. Flowers of A. floribunda and A. bakeri are smaller but also open. Each of the Angophoras produce copious amounts of nectar. Only A. bakeri and A. floribunda produce sizeable amounts of pollen. Thus A. hispida may attract primarily nectar seeking insects and A. bakeri and A. floribunda both nectar and pollen seeking insects.

#### ARTIFICIAL NEST BOX SUCCESS

Tony Vincent, Inglewood, S.A. has had considerable success with artificial nesting boxes. Tony attributes this success mainly to the scarcity of natural nesting sites around. As an example Tony notes

"In one tall Eucalyptus baxteri I had one horizontal nest at 20 feet, another vertical at about the same height and another horizontal log at about 32 feet above ground. The following happened:-

1) Lower nest was immediately taken over by a pair of Wood Ducks who after about two or three weeks laid and began calling it home. However, Laughing Kookaburras soon commandeered it and evicted the shy ducks and their eggs.

2) Kookaburras became new tenants.

3) Not giving up the Wood Ducks re-established in the log 12 feet above, this time hatching at least one young who unfortunately fell from the nest at about two to three weeks.

4) While all this was going on two pairs of Adelaide Rosellas were fighting over the vertical log. Surprisingly these birds seemed the shyest and no young were raised. They also encountered early competition with Starlings and appeared baffled by the Starlings' cunning and brashness.

Unfortunately towards the end of this time I had a contractor in moving 000's of tons of earth nearby so conditions were not conducive. I was surprised by the Wood Ducks who I believed to be very timid. However, this particular tree is only 20 feet from the back door and the Wood Ducks appeared relatively at ease. Since then I have built further large boxes (logs) based on these and placed them further from the house near the dam. I'm looking forward to next season.

As regards dimensions etc. of nesting boxes:-

The Kookaburras and Wood Ducks logs were about 3-3.5 feet long and I hollowed them all out to about 10in inside. One end was covered with slats of 4in by 1in jarrah.

After winching into position I attached them to the underside of stout horizontal branches with steel strapping which I painted to reduce glare/shine. I picked the underside to make it harder for possums.

On reflection I feel the next ones I build may have a small 50mm lip at the opening to stop young fledglings from rolling/falling out. All nests faced away from prevailing weather and were shaded.

I found the Wood Ducks, because of their bulk preferred a dead branch nearby to the opening from which they could first perch, steady themselves and then enter the box with a short glide rather than approach direct and try to reduce speed and attempt the difficult (duck your head) 10in opening.

The Rosellas, whilst they had a good look at the larger logs, preferred vertical hollow branches. These were about 100-120mm inside diameter and about 500mm long. Rather than just have the end open as the opening I put an angled timber roof over the top and made an opening about 70-80mm down from the top.

Since these boxes I have made smaller boxes for pardalotes which have from time to time used a small notch in a tree as a nest. These designs are based on George Adams' design and I am looking forward to the next season.

I mentioned earlier about lack of natural nesting sites. This was brought home to me one day when I noticed a pair of Wood Ducks frantically attempting to gain access to one of the Rosella nest boxes - what frustration and desperation. As we have up to 36 Wood Ducks at a time in or around the dam it makes you want to just spend your time knocking up more boxes."

#### HOP BUSHES - THE GENUS DODONEA

It is hard to keep up with the continual taxonomic changes taking place in the Australian flora. The DODONEAS were revised in 1984 - there are currently 68 recognised species of Dodoneas, 59 of which are endemic to Australia.

The hop-bushes are woody perennials occurring over a variety of natural habitats. The following examples illustrate just how diverse these natural habitats are:-

<u>Species</u>	<u>Natural Habitat</u>
<u>Dodonea viscosa</u>	Coastal, often on sand dunes
<u>D. triquetra</u>	Dry and wet sclerophyll forest
<u>D. amblyophylla</u>	Mallee shrubland
<u>D. procumbens</u>	Open woodland in flat, low-lying often waterlogged areas
<u>D. polyzyga</u>	Skeletal soils on rocky slopes
<u>D. petiolaris</u>	Gibber plains of arid and semi-arid areas

Most Dodoneas are shrubs 1-2m high but there is variation depending on the species and also conditions under which the species are grown. One, D. humifusa, is a prostrate shrub less than 10cm high. D. viscosa may grow in a tree-like fashion to 8m.

It is the Dodonea fruits, the "hops", rather than the flowers, which provide food for birds. Flowers are generally inconspicuous and short lived. The fruits are dry, three-winged capsules, varying in shape between species. Fruits may take up to 12 months to mature and often change from green to brilliant red or shades of pink and purple as they mature, thus providing a spectacular show.

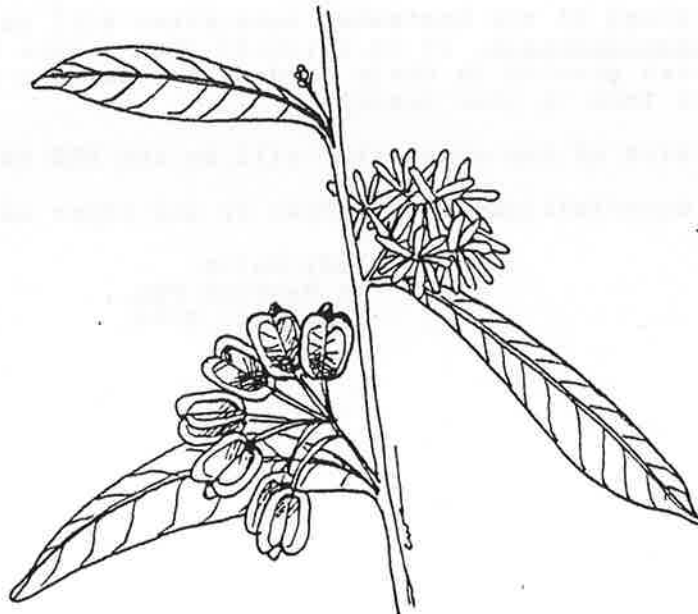
The fruits of several species of *Dodonea* were discovered by early European settlers who used them as a basis for home brews - hence the name "hop bushes". In our garden the hops have only been discovered by Crimson Rosellas and possibly Spotted Turtledoves. The Crimson Rosellas are very fond of the immature fruits of *D. triquetra*. The Turtledoves spend time beneath the bushes but I am not certain if they are actually feeding on the fallen hops. Wonga Pigeons are said to enjoy fallen hops.

I have no other records of birds feeding at *Dodonea* fruits - possibly because *Dodoneas* are seldom grown in gardens. If you can add any observations of birds using *Dodoneas* - either in gardens or in the bush - they would be much appreciated.

*Dodoneas* deserve a place in the garden. Under well-drained conditions they are reported to be very hardy - *D. triquetra* certainly is. They are easily propagated from cuttings or seeds. Fruit colour varies within species. If highly coloured fruits are desired then cuttings should be taken from a parent plant with well coloured fruits. *D. angustissima*, *D. filifolia* and *D. intricata* are hardy with coloured fruits. The *Dodoneas* normally have male and female flowers on separate plants so that plants of both sexes are required if fertile fruits are to be set.

The *Dodoneas* show considerable variation in foliage form. Some are simple leaved. Others, such as *D. boronifolia*, with its red to purple-pink fruits, have much divided leaves and are well worth growing on account of their foliage alone. In some species, for example, *D. caespitosa*, the internodes are very short and the leaves appear to be clustered at the nodes. In *D. filiformis* the leaves are so close to each other that they overlap and obscure the branches. The *Dodoneas*, especially those with divided leaves, should be a source of insect food.

A number of *Dodoneas* including *D. angustissima* and *D. boronifolia* are recommended as screen plants. Species such as these would provide valuable dense shelter for birds.



*Dodonea triquetra*

(- from Colleen  
Werner)

BIRDS IN BRITAIN

The following is extracted from "Garden Dining Rooms Feeding Birds in Britain", by David Glue in Country Life, September 1, 1983:-

"So often today the discerning traveller will chance across eye-catching cases of habitat deterioration and destruction - hedgerows grubbed up, scrub cleared, woods felled, wet pasture drained, heaths 'improved' - all to the general detriment of our birds and other forms of wildlife. In marked contrast, one habitat continues to expand and flourish, literally on the doorstep - our own gardens. Few appreciate their biological importance and extent. As a resource for food, nest sites and shelter for birds they are much underrated. If combined they would cover an area twice that of all our local and national nature reserves.

The British public have long been aware of the extra need of our birds for food and water in cold weather. The practice of putting out foodstuffs in gardens at such times has grown considerably in recent decades through requests to help issued by the press, radio and television. However, it was still a surprise to learn the scale of feeding when the British Trust for Ornithology questioned a sample of householders in 1968. One in ten of the owners said they bought food for their birds, while 50% put out scraps on a casual basis. With over 14 million homes in Britain, thousands of tons of peanuts, wild bird seed and scraps are being provided each winter."

NEXT NEWSLETTER

My apologies for this very late newsletter. The next newsletter will be in SEPTEMBER - hoping it will be on time.

Has anyone any requests for birds or plants of the Newsletter?

The plant of the September newsletter will be the River Red Gum Eucalyptus camaldulensis. It is unlikely that anyone has these lovely inland trees growing in their gardens but perhaps you might have observed birds in them in your travels.

The bird of the newsletter will be the RED WATTLEBIRD.

Any contributions about these or any other matters are most welcome,

Judy Smith  
44 Hawkins Pde.,  
Blaxland. 2774.

This article was reprinted in the NSW Zoological Society Mammal Section newsletter, March 1987. Instructions are for the Northern Hemisphere.

## Build Your Own BAT HOUSE

*For the yard that has everything:  
a homemade nursery filled with flying mammals*

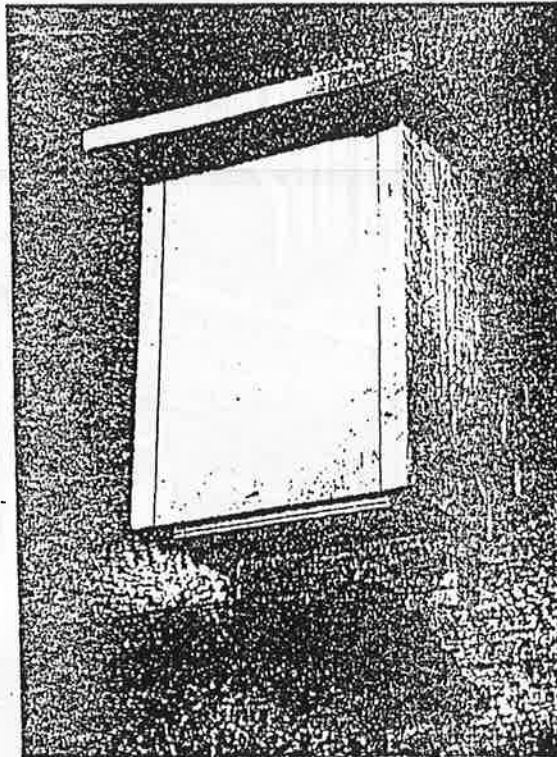
**B**ATS are often despised in North America. But in many parts of Europe, people are fond of the animals—so much so that, for more than a century,

government and private organizations have been building houses for them. In England, as many as 10,000 bat boxes have been placed in public forests since the 1930s. Now, in North America, the image of these diminutive flyers finally seems to be improving. At the same time, their survival prospects are worsening. Result: an increasing number of people in the New World are following the Europeans' lead—putting up boxes designed to give bats a roosting haven.

Recently, in fact, bat experts in the United States have devised a number of new box designs, including the one opposite, for crevice-roosting species of North America. The plans, which home carpenters can follow, are intended to simulate natural conditions so well that bats will move in and begin breeding.

As with birdhouses, though, tenants usually don't arrive overnight. Some houses may remain empty for a year or two. Some may never be occupied. At the very least, says bat expert Merlin Tuttle of the Milwaukee Public Museum, "You'll have an excellent conversation piece. It's very likely that your neighbors don't have one."

Why have a bat house at all? For one thing, the animals are far more appealing than most people imagine. Bats are not dirty, and, contrary to popular belief, they almost never transmit rabies. They are gentle and intelligent, Tuttle says, and as the only major predators of



A small box (above) offers a haven for individual bats. But a larger house (plans, right) can host an entire colony. Bat houses, long popular in Britain, seem to be catching on in North America.

night-flying insects, they help people.

By putting up a house, you will also be doing a good deed for conservation. Although nearly one-quarter of the world's mammal species are bats, bat numbers are dwindling rapidly. Forest management, wetland drainage, agricultural chemicals and spelunking—along with insecticides, fungicides and preservatives applied to human

houses—have destroyed traditional habitats.

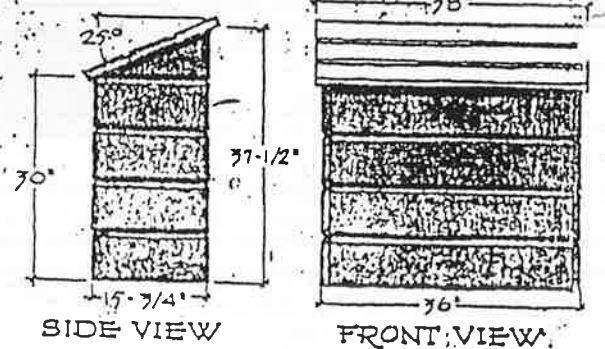
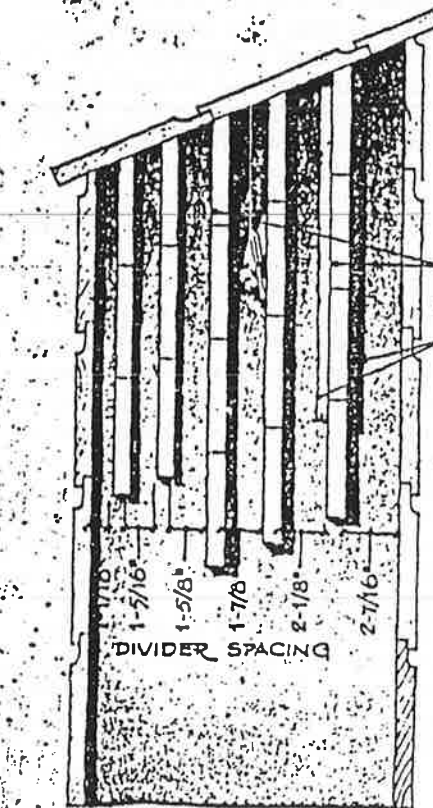
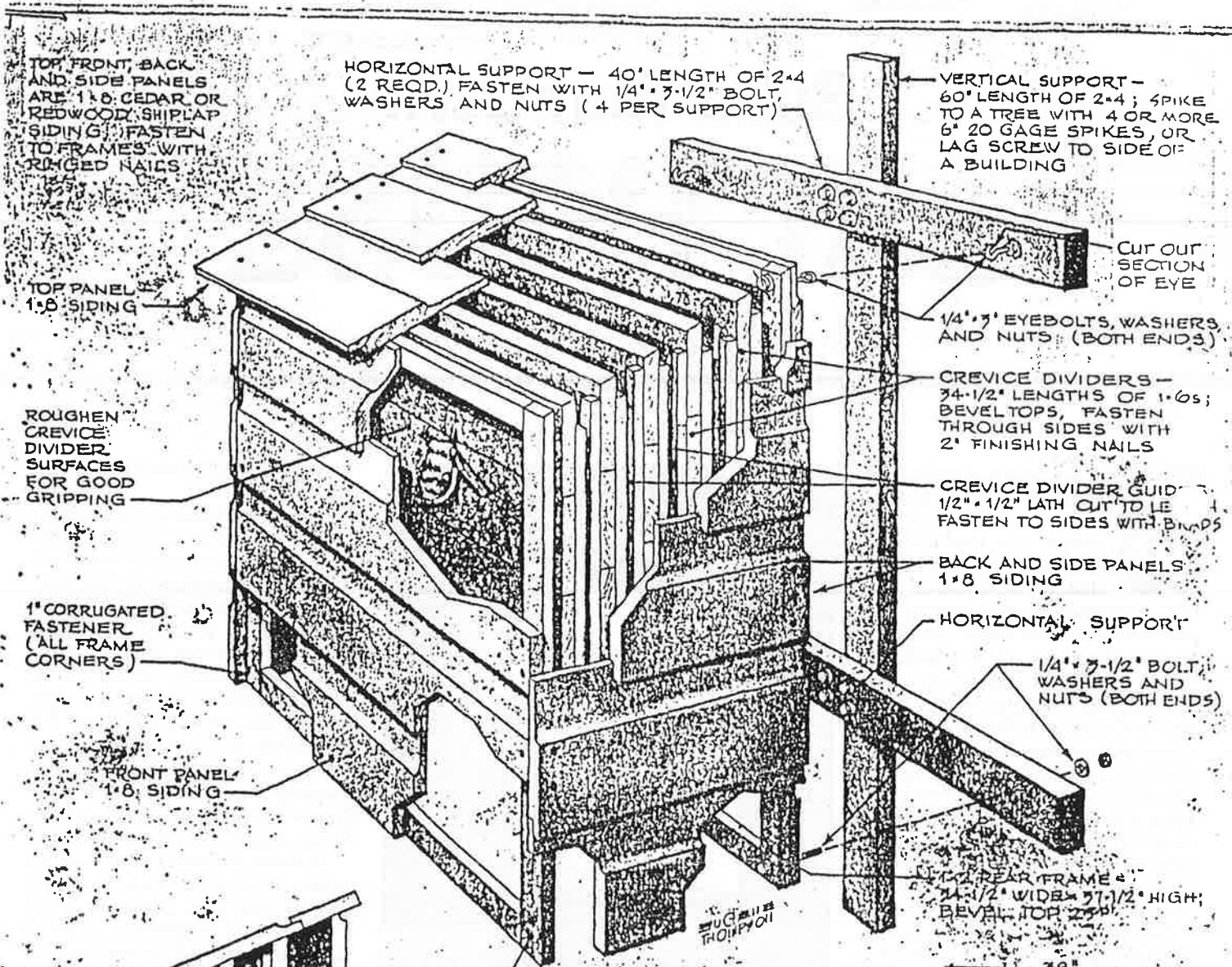
The house shown here can hold a nursery colony of as many as 100 bats. It was developed by Mark Hodgkins, a member of Bat Conservation International (BCI), a membership organization that works to enlighten humans about bats. The materials, which should include rough wood free of preservatives, cost between \$55 and \$90 depending on the size of the house you build. For more information on building bat houses, write BCI, c/o Brackenridge Field Lab., Univ. of Texas, Austin, TX 78712, U.S.A.

To make the house more enticing to bats, it should be located within a quarter-mile of a stream or pond, and it should be secured 12 or 15 feet above ground. In northern regions especially, the box should face south, away from the wind.

If you're lucky, a colony of adult females will begin congregating in late spring, with young born in June or July. Bats rarely produce more

than one offspring every year—a reason why they are slow to adapt to changes in habitat. The mother suckles her baby day and night for three weeks, occasionally leaving the roost for food. After about three weeks, the young learn to fly; they are fully weaned after five weeks. Depending on the species, the roost may remain fully occupied until autumn. At other times of the year, you might find smaller colonies composed of males or females.

To see whether your house is successful, simply shine a flashlight through the open bottom during the daytime, and you may see bats hanging from the box's ceiling.—Jay Heinrichs



DIRECTIONS

1. ASSEMBLE FRONT AND REAR 1x2 FRAMES WITH CORRUGATED FASTENERS
2. FASTEN FRONT AND REAR 1x6 SIDING TO OUTSIDES OF FRAMES
3. ASSEMBLE SIDE PANELS BY FITTING TOGETHER 1x6 SIDING, PLACING 1/2x1/2 GUIDES ON INSIDES TO ACCOMMODATE 1x6 DIVIDERS (SEE SECTION VIEW). NAIL GUIDES IN PLACE
4. NAIL SIDE PANELS TO FRONT AND REAR FRAMES
5. FASTEN TOP SIDING
6. SLIDE 1x6 DIVIDERS BETWEEN GUIDES; NAIL THROUGH SIDES
7. ASSEMBLE 2x4 SUPPORT FRAME
8. PREDRILL ALL HOLES FOR MOUNTING HARDWARE
9. FASTEN SUPPORT TO THE SOUTH SIDE OF A STURDY TREE OR BUILDING
10. FASTEN BOX TO SUPPORT; HANG ON UPPER HOOKS, BOLT AT BOTTOM