

Bird Nests: Home, Tweet Home

By Linda Butler

Spring is here, birds are here and nesting has begun. Your family may find it interesting to discover how bird families and their nests are formed.

Many birds are migratory, they “fly south” to warmer places for the winter and return in the spring. Birds generally do not live in homes unless they are raising their young. How do birds know when to fly back north again? Since birds don’t have watches or calendars, they rely on the length of day to tell what season it is. When the number of daylight hours exceeds a critical level, changes happen in birds’ bodies which prepare them to breed.

Migratory birds return to their summer areas and look for and defend their breeding territory. Non-migrating birds generally have their territory established. A good breeding territory provides a potential nest site, food sources, and protection from predators.

In addition to claiming a territory, birds try to attract mates. Males advertise their suitability by exhibiting bright plumage, calls, and occasionally dances, during their courtship displays. Females demonstrate their nest-building abilities and sing, drum, or call to the males. Birds pair off and a new bird family will soon begin.

Nests provide a safe place for the birds to lay eggs and raise their young. Some birds don’t really build a nest but lay their eggs in a hidden spot on the ground. Other birds build nests from grass, leaves, mud, lichen, and fur. They sometimes collect human-made materials such as paper, string, yarn, and plastic. Nests can be found in many places—in trees, on the ground, in burrows, on the side of a cliff, on a building... Generally the female builds the nest, but in some species both genders build the nest and in others the male will build the nest.

Robin nests are some of the most common nests that we see. They’re often built into the crotch of a tree and are made out of small twigs, grasses, feathers, and lined with mud. They often recycle interesting human-made items. Once I found small strips of an old blue tarp in a robin nest.



Eagles build their nests from sticks and then stuff the cracks with grass, moss, and cornstalks. The largest eagle nest was nearly 10 feet wide, 20 feet deep, and weighed 4400 pounds. Most eagle nests are 5-6 feet wide and 2-4 feet deep. It takes an eagle up to three months to build, and eagles often return to the same nest year after year, adding a bit to it each season.

Hummingbird nests are among the smallest nests. They build their nests high up in trees, and use small pieces of plants, soft materials, and even spider webs! Hummingbirds lay only 2 little eggs, about the size of Jelly Belly beans. As the babies grow, the nest stretches and expands as well!



Orioles make intricate nests. Their nests look like long bags made from small sticks. Orioles use small twigs, grasses, twine, even horsehair. They line the nest with leaf pieces, feathers, and even wool! Oriole nests can be over a foot long.

Some birds, like quail and beach dwelling birds, don't really build nests at all. They smooth out a patch of dirt or sand in a hidden secure place and lay their eggs there. Since baby quail are born with tiny feathers and are mobile within a few hours of hatching, they don't stay in their nest for long.

Burrowing owls make interesting nests. They live in burrows in the ground. Sometimes they dig their own burrow, but often they will repurpose another animal's burrow—such as that of a prairie dog, badger or tortoise—for their own nest.

Most birds build their nests in quiet, safe, untrafficked places. But some birds, such as swallows, will build their mud and straw nests in the eaves of a barn or house.

After mating, the female will lay her eggs. The number of eggs varies greatly among species. In general, raptors, or birds of prey, lay the least number of eggs. Owls and hawks generally lay 3-4 eggs. Bald eagles lay only two. Songbirds, such as robins, chickadees, and sparrows usually lay 5-6 eggs. Ground nesting birds such as quail and ducks, lay the most, usually between 9-12 eggs.

Birds sit on their eggs, or incubate them, to keep them at the proper temperature to ensure normal development. Most birds incubate for 2-3 weeks before they hatch.

Most newly hatched birds look a lot like dinosaurs, from which they descended. Featherless, sometimes blind, and helpless, all they can do is open their beaks and beg for food. Most of these birds remain safe in their high and secluded nests for 2-3 weeks to grow and develop before they begin to fly or fledge. However ground birds such as ducks and quail hatch fully feathered and are able to run around within a day, or even a few hours of hatching. Large raptors, such as eagles and hawks, may stay in the nest for two months or more.

Birds can find all the materials they need to build a nest in the wild, but you can make their hunting a bit easier if you put out some simple nesting materials. Good material for nests include short pieces of string, yarn, or shredded paper. Grass clippings or stems (both fresh or dry) are also good. Cattail fluff, pine needles, straw, feathers, human or animal hair can also be used.

Drape your offerings over trees or shrubs near bird feeders or sheltered spots. If you have a suet feeder, that can be gently stuffed with nesting materials. A mesh bag that holds onions, or any other large mesh could make a good container.

Avoid plastic or nylon materials. Fishing line can be dangerous. Cotton and wool fibers are better than synthetics. Pieces of fabric, yarn, or string should be 3-6



inches long. Short lengths are not attractive to birds, longer lengths could cause injuries or death if they got tangled around their legs, wings, or necks.

Make a bird nest!

Here's a fun craft that creates a relatively strong bird nest that your child can use as a decoration or as a toy.

You'll need a balloon, yarn (brown yarn will look more authentic, colored yarn is more creative), scissors, washable white glue, a dish, and some blue or brown malt ball candies.

Inflate the balloon. It's best to use a small balloon and barely inflate it.

Cut the yarn into strands about 5-6" long. It takes about 20 strands for a small nest.



Put some glue into the bowl. Thin with a drop or two of water. You don't want the glue to be drippy. Dip the string into the glue, then place it on the balloon. Continue with all of the strands. Criss cross, wiggle, layer, zig zag your yarn—give it a meshy nesty look! I found it easiest to push the balloon into a cup, letting it hold the balloon while we applied the gluey strings. We also just left it to dry in the cup.

You can dry it by tying or clipping the knotted end to a hanger. Let it dry for 24 hours.

When dry, pop the balloon and throw it away. Add a few candy eggs and/or a small stuffed bird to your nest and enjoy!

Here are a few books about birds and nests that can be found at the Pleasant Grove Library: "The bird Book" by Chester A Reed. (this E-book is available at all times through Libby or Overdrive); "The Nest that Wren Built" by Randi Sonenshine; "Nesting" by Henry Cole.