

BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz

“A bird’s nest suggests design, and yet it seems almost haphazard; the result of a kind of madness, yet with method in it. The hole the woodpecker drills for its cell is to the eye a perfect circle, and the rim of most nests is as true as that of a cup. The circle and the sphere exist in nature; they are mother forms and hold all other forms. They are easily attained; they are spontaneous and inevitable. The bird models her nest about her own breast, she turns round and round in it, and its circular character results as a matter of course. Angles, right lines, measured precision, so characteristic of the works of man, are rarely met with in organic nature.”

--John Burroughs, Ways of Nature

With the arrival of the neotropical migrants in the southern Appalachians, a flurry of breeding begins. The large degree of unbroken forest in our mountains provides a healthy habitat for our returning songbirds to raise their young. One breeding task performed by all songbirds, except the parasitic Brown-headed Cowbird, is that of building and maintaining a nest. Although done each year by most passersines, it may be the least observed activity of birds. We see them as they bathe, fly around, and eat at our feeders, but how often do we watch them building a nest? The gathering of materials for the nest and the weaving of the sticks, weed stems, spider webs, animal hair, mud, saliva, and bits of leaf matter goes largely unnoticed. Occasionally, we spot an old nest in a tree during the winter, made easy by the absence of leaves. If we have been fortunate to hold a bird’s nest in our hands and look at its construction, we realize it is not an example of shoddy workmanship. It seems perfectly suited for its functions; protection, insulation, and positioning of eggs.

Many birds have rather primitive nests which may be nothing more than scrapes or depressions in the ground. To provide better protection from predators, some birds moved their nests up off the ground into vegetation. Materials used for the first nests were most likely loose platforms of sticks such as still used by herons. Songbirds developed cupped nests which have many forms and locations. Thrushes build cups of mud and grasses in the forks of trees. Orioles build woven hanging nests on twigs at the ends of branches. Phoebes and some swallows plaster their nests onto the sides of various structures. Other birds, such as Bluebirds, Chickadees and Wrens, place their nest in cavities. Some song birds, for instance Meadowlarks and Ovenbirds, will construct their woven nests on the ground. Nests are usually lined with a variety of material such as fine grasses, down feathers, horse or dog hair, pieces of cloth or mop, pine needles, mosses or dead leaves. The Great-crested Flycatcher usually incorporates a snake skin into its nest. Many birds will make use of the natural pesticide contained within fresh green leaves and periodically add them to their nest.





Avian adaptability is evident in their nest building. At the turn of the century, the Chipping Sparrow used to be called the hair bird from its practice of incorporating horse hair into its nest. The introduction of the automobile led to a decline in the number of horses and the Chipping Sparrow switched to other materials to line its nest such as cellophane or fiberglass insulation.

Some species may build more than one nest during the breeding season. The male and female may cooperate equally with nest construction or may have different levels of involvement. This varies with the species

An excellent resource for information about bird nests is Hal Harrison's book, A Field Guide to Birds' Nests of the Eastern United States. He provides general information on the topic of birds' nests, as well as photographs and descriptive notes of individual species' nests with their eggs.

Our migrant songbirds are with us a short while, and during this time their major activity is raising a family. The nest is the focal point for much of this activity. The key to finding an active bird nest during the breeding season is careful observation of bird behavior. Watching birds carrying nesting material in their beak is a sure sign that nest building is in progress. Try to follow the bird to see where it goes. If it makes a number of trips to the same area, it is likely that you have found the general location of the nest. Remain motionless in that area and wait for the bird to return. If you find a nest with eggs or young, do not spend too long at the nest, for incubation is essential for proper development of the egg and young need to be fed frequently.

If you have any questions or comments about this month's Bird Notes, please email me at eapyeritz@gmail.com.

Addendum: A book has recently come to my attention which I recommend to anyone who is interested in nests and eggs of birds. A young woman, Genevieve Jones, produced Illustrations of the Nests and Eggs of Birds of Ohio in the 1870's. Her original work was two volumes of lithographs of 129 nesting birds and eggs in Ohio. Currently, only 26 complete hand-colored copies exist today making the set exceedingly rare. Joy M. Kiser, a librarian for the National Endowment of the Arts, produced a book, America's Other Audubon, which contains copies of Genevieve's nests and eggs – a most beautiful book.