

Bird Homes

By Dr. Leonard Lee Rue III

Bird homes are almost as varied as the different types of birds themselves. Although some birds make similar types of nests, most of the nests are unique unto each species in shape, material or location. In fact, the nests are so distinctive that there are many books available which will tell you how to identify the bird that made the nest, even if you have not seen the bird.

Nest building is an instinctive trait. The birds don't have to be taught. Let's say a bird's egg was hatched in an incubator and the bird was raised in complete isolation, if given the proper material at the proper time to build a nest, the bird would build a nest typical of its species. However, just as some people are more creative, more ambitious or just smarter than others, some birds of the same species build better nests than others. The mourning dove does not make a very strong nest, and I have seen some nests that had so few sticks that you could look up through the bottom and see the eggs.

The hummingbirds make the smallest nest. It's so small that it can be completely covered by a silver dollar. The bald eagle makes the largest nest, some measuring 6' to 8' across and weighing tons. Most of the smaller birds build a nest, use it one time and then abandon it. The reason for this is that most small birds raise two or three broods of young per year. Most birds are plagued with body lice and the lice will infest the nest. The first brood is not exposed to many lice. However, if the nest is re-used for a second brood in the same season, the build up of the lice would probably kill the baby birds.

Birds that raise only one brood per year often use the same nest year after year because the lice die over the cold winter months. Hawks, owls and eagles use the same nest over and over, adding new layers each year. Such nests, used for many years, often become so large and heavy that they can cause the tree to break.

Shorebirds probably make the simplest nests of all; they are merely hollows, scraped out in the sand or gravel, and have no added material. The eggs are lightly mottled to match their natural surroundings. Woodpeckers hollow out a new den hole each year which seems like such a waste of a perfectly good den hole. That too is part of Nature's plan because abandoned woodpecker holes make ideal nesting spots for birds as the chickadees, titmice, swallows, wrens, etc. that live in such holes but cannot make their own. Flying squirrels are also quick to use such holes. The extra large holes made by the Pileated woodpeckers are used by wood ducks, mergansers, screech owls, gray squirrels, etc.

Nests are made out of twigs, grass, rootlets, cattail fluff, deer hair, horse hair, spider webs, lichens, mud, etc. Some birds even use pieces of string, plastic and ribbon. Several use a cast off snake skin to scare other birds and predators away. Some birds build floating nests. Many birds use houses that are man-made because there are not enough natural cavities for them. Wood duck boxes, bluebird, swallow and martin houses, are needed and readily used. Birds are highly adaptable and many build on or near people's houses, barns or garages because it gives the birds protection from the predators that are afraid to come that close to a developed area. While some birds' nests are strictly utilitarian, other nests are truly works of art. No matter what the nests look like, they all do the job for which they were built; otherwise that bird would not be with us today

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Accommodate	To take care of.
Adaptable	Able to change.
Beneficial	Good; helpful..
Brooding	When a mother bird provides body heat to keep her baby birds or eggs warm.
Burrow	A home in the earth.
Camouflage	rotective coloration; to blend in.
Cavity-Nesting	In a hole in a tree.
Clutch	A group of eggs.
Corresponds	The same as; similar to.
Crotch	Where a tree branches into a Y.
Decline	Less of.
Dense	Thick.
Deprive	Take away.
Designed	Planned.
Desirable	Good to have.
Determined	With a mind made up.
Eaves	The under part of the edge of a roof.
Ecological Mistake	Bad for the environment.
Egg Tooth	A small hard top on a baby birds bill that it uses to cut open the shell. It falls off three days after hatching.
Escape Detection	Not found, hidden.
Excavate	To dig.
Fierce	Without mercy. Frightening.
Gobs	A large portion.
Hatch	When a fully developed bird comes out of the egg shell.
Imitate	To make a sound exactly like the sound heard.
Imported	Brought into.

Incubator	A machine for hatching eggs.
Inherited Trait	Something done the same way as the parents do, without being taught.
Larvae	Undeveloped insect.
Mimic	Capable of imitating other sounds.
Mottled	Spotted.
Natal Down	The soft down covering of just hatched birds.
Particular	Different from the other.
Pendulous	Hangs down.
Platform	A base or bottom.
Predator	A creature that eats other creatures.
Previous	What has gone before.
Primarily	Mainly.
Producing	To make something.
Protesting	Not in agreement.
Quantities	Amounts
Regurgitate	To bring food that has been swallowed back up to the mouth.
Remnants	Small left over pieces.
Resist	Doesn't want to.
Resolved	Decided.
Ritual	An action done the same way each time.
Rootlets	Tiny plant roots.
Structure	Something that has been built.
Telephoto Lens	A large lens used with a camera that magnifies like binoculars.
Tubular	Round as a pipe.
Weave	To make a cloth.