

Birds' Nests Provide Good Study Material

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Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

The best season to observe bird nests is in the early spring when the sun shines bright through the leafless trees. At this time there is no harm in removing them for, with the exception of a few of our larger birds of prey, a new home is built each year. However, after the new nesting season begins man's curiosity is disturbing to most species and it is a good plan to use binoculars for your observations.

Last week in Kensington Park we saw a large number of last season's nests. The trained naturalist can usually identify the former tenants by examining the materials used.

Other assisting information includes the habitat in which the nest was found (marsh, meadow, woodlot) and its particular location. (On ground, in tree or shrub, how anchored)

NESTS VARY greatly in materials and manner of construction. It is interesting to take them apart to see how they are built and how many kinds of materials are included.

Mud, cotton, wool, moss, plant fibers and roots, sticks, leaves, spider webs, lichens and feathers are some of the materials used by the various species.

Though birds show great fidelity in building according to an instinctive pattern, they can and do use substitutes when necessary. If the created flycatcher is unable to find a piece of discarded snake skin to line his nest, he may substitute a

PRECOCIAL birds like the sandpiper which nest on the ground in a less protected situation are usually able to fend for themselves as soon as their feathers have dried.

Birds generally nest in the vicinity of their feeding grounds. The kingfisher tunnels his home in the banks of the pond or stream where he fishes for his dinner. The pileated woodpecker seeks out the mature forest where there is an abundance of dead wood in which to drill a nesting hole and where dead bark harbors the insect larvae which he relies on.

The largest number of species nesting high in tree tops like orioles feed largely on insects or fruit hidden among the leaves.

Low nesting birds like the sparrows and thrushes are given to ground feeding of grubs and worms, seeds and grains. Water birds are most highly specialized in their habits and seldom nest far from the water which provides their food.

THERE is also an interesting relationship between the location of the nest and the material used in its making.

In Kensington Park we found many red-winged blackbird nests at the marshy edge where cattails and coarse grasses are abundant and where there are many reeds and bushes from which to construct the nest.

We found several goldfinch nests located in the upright fork of a shrub or small tree adjacent to a sunny area. Here the thistle down which is used for lining material is easily available.

A wood pewee's nest was saddled across a horizontal limb large enough to support it in safety.

The whole period until the young are on their own is very strenuous for the mother and I have often observed her at its end looking considerably the worse for wear. The length of the brooding period varies as does the time of dependence of the young.

Artificial birds like the robin, which make their nests above the ground, are born naked and blind and must have constant care and protection for several weeks.

AS WE PASSED a large elm we sighted the grey woven nest of a Baltimore Oriole. It was swinging on the very tip of one of the highest branches well out of the reach of enemies.

Woven of plant fibers (often milkweed from a nearby swamp) it is re-enforced with pieces of string, horsehair, rags or paper. It is constructed at the top as a further protection against intruders and is suspended from small twigs which will not bear the weight of provokers.

USING HER sharp bill, the mother weaves her material in and out until a well-woven bag some six inches deep is made. Thus the oriole, one of our most conspicuously colored birds, greatly reduces its living hazards by building an ingenious nest high above the dangers that lurk on the ground.

By the time you read these pages this year's nesting season will be well under way. In our region it begins in mid-February with the

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homed owl and continues well into summer. Many species nest more than once and some, like the English sparrow, raise repeated broods until mid-August.

Instinct which shapes so much of life's pattern is nowhere better demonstrated than in the sure certainty which attends the nest-making habits of our friends, the birds.



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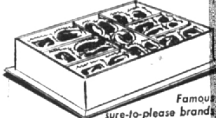
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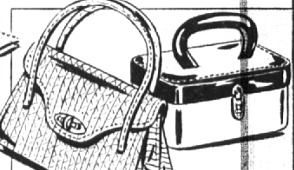
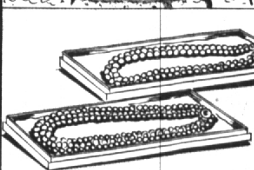
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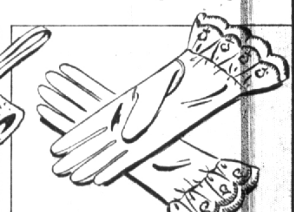
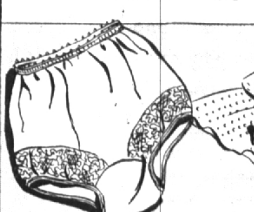
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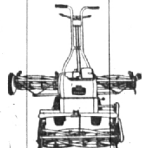
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