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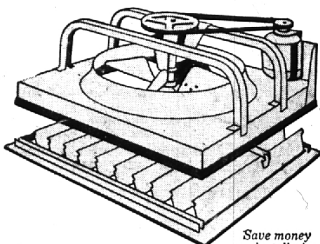
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NATURE NOW

By Lydia King Frehe
Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

Bright Baltimore Oriole Sings Vibrant Song, Too

All spring in our suburban area we have been seeing flocks of the Baltimore oriole and hearing his intriguing song. These birds are brightly-gowned singers in the usually somber and unmusical blackbird family.

On May 15 while "naturalizing" in the Rochester area, we discovered a female Baltimore oriole just beginning to weave her nest. Although she is partial to the cypress, this bird chose to build on the tip of a swaying branch of an old box elder which shades the farm house. From my vantage point on the porch I held a reserve seat not more than 20 feet away from the performance.

AT THIS TIME the outline of the deeply cupped and pendulous nest was just visible. It shone like a delicate cobwebby veil glistening in the sun. The first suspension strings were firmly tied to the branches thus outlining the nest and forming the warp over which the subsequent materials were to be woven.

And so as the morning advanced we observed a demonstration of one of the most exciting examples of bird craftsmanship. The female appeared at irregular intervals, her mouth filled with thin shreds of the silvery outer fiber of last year's milkweed stalks.

Since she works from within the structure, her movements were visible only in the first part of her task when she was plainly in sight through the yet transparent nest. As she wove the plant threads in and out with her sharp bill, so fast and sure was her skill that my eye could not follow her separate movements.

WHEN WE RETURNED four days later, we were surprised to see the nest already firmly woven. Now the mother could no longer be seen at work inside her masterpiece as she lined it with feathers within the gourd-shaped pouch four to six pale eggs, spotted and scrawled with black and brown. During the period of nest building the bright orange and black male sang lustily from a nearby bough. However when the incubating period begins, he shows much concern for his mate. On hot days he has been seen alighting on the nest, a claw on either side of the cup-like opening, devotedly protecting her from the hot sun.

ALTHOUGH THEY prefer to build with milkweed fiber, orioles, like most birds, make adjustments in the materials used. Rootlets, grass, string, paper, hair, are often incorporated in the nest. If lengths of bright yarn are strewn about, these may be used. However the finished product is usually soft light grey in color.

Orioles frequently mate for life. So well is the nest constructed that it may be used for several seasons. Sometimes the swinging woven basket survives the tug and pull of the elements for as many as five years.

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