



DO YOU KNOW.....ABOUT NESTS?

By Brittany Davis, Staff

As we all know, many animals use nests to raise their young. Some animals spend days to weeks painstakingly assembling, carving, weaving, excavating and lining their nests while other animals will simply use someone else's hard work.

When a mated pair of Northern mockingbirds is ready to raise a family, the male (with some help from the female) will spend many days building several sturdy, platform-like nests out of small, dead twigs onto which layers of leaves, grasses, moss, hair and possibly some paper products are arranged. The interior cups of the nests are then lined with soft plant rootlets, wool and even string material. When all of the nests are complete, the female mocker chooses her favorite and begins laying her eggs. Common nesting sites include deciduous trees, tall shrubs and building eaves. As mockingbirds may or may not choose new mates each year, new nests are generally built from scratch every spring. It is usually not hard to find a mockingbird nest as these fiercely defensive parents will dive-bomb any potential predator including eagles, hawks, owls, crows, cats, foxes, dogs, squirrels, raccoons, people and moving vehicles.



Some of our orphaned baby songbirds awaiting their next meal in one of our make-shift nests. Clockwise from top: white-breasted nuthatch, house finch, chipping sparrow, house finch, house finch.

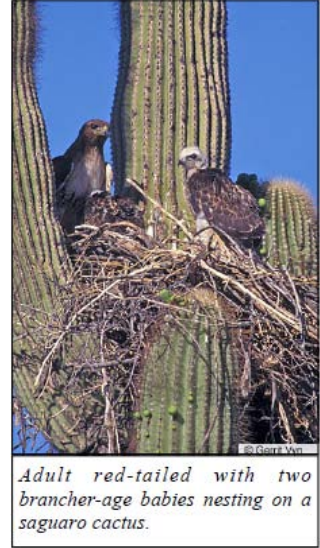
Contrast to that, Brown-headed cowbirds are brood parasitizers, meaning that when the female is ready to lay an egg, she will choose the momentarily-unoccupied nest of a wren, nuthatch or oriole. Her eggs are cream-colored with brown speckles and could easily blend in with the similarly marked eggs of the birds she is trying to dupe. Most of the would-be adopters are able to spot the errant egg and remove it before it hatches but some may miss seeing it and will raise the baby cowbird, usually to the detriment of their own young.



Three nestling American crows in a very well-constructed nest.

Then there are birds that deem nest building to be a family affair. Mated pairs of American crows will spend many days assembling a large nest of branches, stems, grasses and corn husks, aided by the unmated juveniles in their family group. This group nest building helps the mated pair build a sturdier nest much more quickly than if they were alone and also helps teach the younger crows what does and does not work in nest building. Once the frame of the nest is established, the group works on lining it with hair, fur, fleece, moss and soft leaves. American crow nests are usually found on thick, horizontal tree limbs, near the trunk. Nest building begins in mid-March.

Studies are still inconclusive as to who does the most nest-building chores among mated pairs of Red-tailed hawks, but there are usually at least two nests per territory that are alternated between each breeding season. The large, bulky nests are constructed of deciduous sticks and branches and are lined with thin strips of soft bark, evergreen sprigs and corn husks (when available). Nests are usually in the crotches of tall oak trees (in deciduous forests), tall pine trees (in coniferous forests) or saguaro cacti (in arid, desert-like regions). Nest-use activity begins in late February to early March and, during egg and nestling incubation, the female spends most of her time in the nest while the male hunts for the family. Once the young are mostly feathered, the female resumes her duties of hunting for everyone while the male stays close to the young.



Adult red-tailed with two brancher-age babies nesting on a saguaro cactus.

Great Horned owl pairs are not known for their nest building skills and will actually prey upon Red-tailed hawks, usurping their territory and nesting sites. Great Horneds are also big fans of old woodpecker nests and man-made nest baskets.

Whoever's nest they use, the owls will line them with their choice of feathers (some of which may be their own), fur and soft leaves. Nest hunting begins anew each February.



Grey squirrel's nest

Like birds, many mammals in our area use nests to raise their young.

Female Eastern grey squirrels may use several different nests when raising their babies. All of her nests are constructed mostly from twigs and leaves and the internal chamber varies in size and lining material, depending on the age of her young. Birthing nests are generally small and cramped, lined with soft material to keep her furless babies warm and cozy. When the young are about four weeks old, mom may move them to a secondary nest (or even to her own year-round nest) until they are old enough to find their own territories, though mom may over-winter with her fall season daughters. Year-round squirrel nests can be found in the tops of tall deciduous trees or in attics. Birthing nests can be found in attics, chimneys, car engine blocks or abandoned woodpecker nests and are sometimes made new each season (as mom is usually evicted from her attic residence before too long); year-round nests are carefully maintained throughout the squirrel's life.

Female North American raccoons may also use their year-round dens to raise their young but, like the grey squirrel, may also have a birthing- or nursing-nest. Year-round dens are usually established in tree holes, hollow logs or the occasional root hole left by a fallen tree and are lined with leaves, pine needles and fur. Separate birthing- or nursing-nests are usually in similar locations (and may also include chimneys and attics) but much smaller in size and are more heavily lined with soft materials, including many man-made items. All nests and dens are used every year, provided they are in a hospitable area. Raccoon moms are fiercely protective and usually over-winter with their daughters (sons usually leave around six months of age), as they are a mildly social specie. The increased time mom spends with her daughters increases their chances to survive and raise successive daughters.

When a female Eastern cottontail is ready to birth her litter, she creates a shallow dip, typically (though not always) on the edge of a field or lawn, under a bush or in a convenient garden. Once excavated, she will line and cover the nest with grass, leaves and her own belly fur. She prepares her first nest in early to mid-March and her first litter will live there until they are about four weeks-old. By this time, mom cottontail will have a second nest with a second litter of young, possibly nearby. Once the first litter is about five to six weeks-old (and no longer using the nest as “home base”), mom may re-use the nest for her third litter, provided that the space has not already been overtaken by another rabbit. Female cottontails may have six to ten litters of young from early spring to mid fall and, depending on the neighborhood, could make new nests for each set of babies.



Whether it is a bird carefully weaving small branches for its nest or a raccoon stealing a towel to increase the softness of her birthing-nest, nest-building is a fascinating subject. Be sure to drop by your local library (or online encyclopedia) for more information about how your favorite species builds its nest.

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