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Who Built that Nest?

When autumn leaves drop in Mid-November, bird nests that were hidden by the lush summer vegetation, suddenly reveal themselves and become apparent everywhere we look. But whose nest was it? Are there ways to tell?

By Lorna Wallenger
November 21, 2020

This is a time of year to slow down, rest, and notice some of nature's treasures that are hidden or missed earlier in the season. Migratory birds are gone and the forests and fields are quiet. Leaves have fallen and have revealed the housing venues Mother Nature has left here, intriguing clumps of leaves and sticks stuat to draw our eyes' attention. Or that shrub we walked by a hundred times now has a tiny but carefully constructed nest at eye-level, just begging for a closer inspection.

Now! Perhaps like me, you're left wondering which species went to all the trouble of making that talented little cup, or if it is even at all. Could it be a squirrel's hawk? Just a spot where debris got tangled?

In the spring and summer, a careful eye can often determine which bird a nest belongs to by identifying the species nearby or by the color and shape of eggs. But what about in the fall and winter when nests are no longer active? Seasonally there are a few clues to narrow it down. A field guide, the Peterson's *Field Guide Nests of Eastern North America* or the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's NestWatch site, are great tools, but we can start more generally. Asking questions about geographical area, habitat type, height off the ground, and nest structure, size, and material will help point us in the right direction.

- Area and habitat type – Is the nest in a coniferous, deciduous or mixed forest? Is it near a wetland, in a field, or in a suburban or urban setting? Which food resources does that habitat provide (fish, berries, nuts, insects)?
- Location – Is the nest on the ground, low in a shrub, at the top of a tall mature tree, up on a big platform, in the eave of a house, on a building ledge, or in a human-made structure like a birdhouse?
- Nest style – Is it a cavity like a birdhouse or a nest? Is it a nest cup, a suspended hanging basket, an enclosed dome with a side entrance, or just a scrunch in the ground? Is it a single nest in one or it is a group of other similar looking nests?
- Nest material – Is the nest made of custom mud, feathers, sticks, pine needles, grasses, moss, or other dominant components?

Many birds fit into these broad categories, with some species like robins and crows being generalists that build their nests in many places. Other species are more specialized, building nests that reveal some of the characteristics of their nests. There's a lot of variety, but here are some examples of commonly encountered nests.

Telling Summer Nests Apart

Canivore Grey Squirrel vs a Bird's Nest: Squirrels often choose cavities in trees where they are available, but the nests they build in tree branches are often mistaken for a bird's nest. These open squirrel nests are made of twigs, bark, and leaves and are located high in the tree tops. Very few birds use leaves for the main nesting material, so that can often be a pretty clear sign. For example, bird nests of a similar size, such as an American Crow nest, will only be made of general-sized sticks. Red-sided Hawks, for another example, also build similar looking nests, but they are made of sticks and lined with bark, and are in the forks of large bark strips and leaves. These hawks do not begin, up to 1200 off the ground in a nest tree rather than the surrounding trees, where squirrels will not build that high.

A squirrel nest in a tree in Lake Champlain Beach, Vermont. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Bird Eaters vs Oopery: Both of these long-lasting stick-based nests are almost always found near open water and get built upon and reused year after year. Bald Eagle nests are truly massive and heavy, with some of the largest nests recorded weighing in at 2,000 lbs. Bald Eagle nests often put below the top of a tall tree so the nest's edge. On the contrary, Osprey prefer to build their smaller nests at the very tippy top of a structure in a flatter shape that doesn't get as deep. Osprey will use towerage, but regularly build on platforms and powerline towers, when a Bald Eagle will not.

A Bald Eagle nest in Lake Champlain Beach, Vermont. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Bun nests: Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, House Wrens, and Black-capped Chickadees are all cavity nesters that may use artificial nest box structures. Bun nests are made of grasses, pine needles, and feathers. The mission Bluebirds use grasses and pine needles. Tree Swallows also use grasses and pine needles, but add feathers on top which are often arranged to cover the eggs from endangering predators. Chickadees make a messy nest of coarse twigs that fill the box. Male House Wrens may build several nests in a box, but only one will be lined with feathers. Chickadees are less likely to use nest boxes, but will nip a nest box, while nuthatches prefer to use back shrubs. Read more about the dimensions and details of bun nests here.

A Black-capped Chickadee nest in a nest box in Lake Champlain Beach, Vermont. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Red-winged Blackbirds vs Gray Catbirds: Nests of these two species can be confused because their structures look a lot alike—open cup nests constructed with grasses and twigs. To tell these species apart, consider the habitat. Red-winged Blackbirds prefer relatively open marshland, while Gray Catbirds prefer shrubbier habitat near water. Catbirds also have a fan of the water or ground. Catbirds prefer to nest over dry land.

Scarlet Tanagers vs Rose-breasted Grosbeaks vs Wearning Vireos: All of these species build very thin nests made entirely of twigs and that are very difficult to see from below. Scarlet Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks both form cup nests on low branches, but can be distinguished by height off the ground—tanagers prefer the top of forest trees, where grosbeaks tend to nest in mid-story shrubs. Wearning Vireo nests have a similarly flimsy structure but no visible cup and often nest near the trunk of a tree. Wearning Vireo nests are also very difficult to find, even if we know they are there, because they are well hidden and are almost always down below winter activity in the canopy so they are the old nests of other species entirely.

Shrubland Species: Common Yellowthroats, Yellow Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Cedar Waxwings, Chestnut-sided Warblers, and Brown Thrashers are just a few of the many species that choose shrub areas to nest, with most preferring to be closer to the edge and building nests within 1-3 feet of the ground. Small details can help distinguish them from one another. Yellow Warbler nests are constructed of grasses and sided bluebirds like a mixed or deciduous forest nestling wearnings, cavendage their cups with lichen, and Brown Thrashers particularly like dense shrubs with thorns.

A Yellow Warbler sitting on its nest. Photo: Steve Byland/Audubon Photography Awards.

Unique Characteristics

Red-eyed Vireo: Built at any height and found in both forest interior and edges, but always in a deciduous tree and always a cup suspended and hanging in a small horizontal 5 of a branch.

A Red-eyed Vireo nest. Photo: Audubon Vermont/Cassie Mellinger

American Goldfinch: Although an open cup nest of average size and appearance, presence of droppings can be a dead giveaway, since they are the only local species of songbird that allow the accumulation of feces around the nest edge.

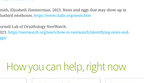
Baltimore Oriole: Intricately woven bags made of grasses, hanging at the tip of a branch, almost always high in a deciduous tree, and on the edge habitats (hedgerows or small forestbed patch transitions).

A Baltimore Oriole nest in a tree in Lake Champlain Beach, Vermont. Photo: Cynthia Capobianchi/Audubon Photography Awards

Ruby-throated Hummingbird: Tiny and unmistakable. This is the only species of hummingbird in Eastern North America, and no one else can fit in a teacup nest the diameter of a quarter. These feathfer nests are often found centered on the top side of tree branches, using soft plant material, spider webs, and flakes of lichen. Usually two eggs, the size of black beans, are laid and the parent may continue to enlarge the strictly nest bigger as the nestlings grow. I mean COME ON how cute is that?

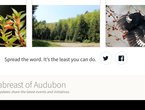
Nestling Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Photo: Audubon Vermont/Laurence Fitzgerald/Audubon Photography Awards.

American Robin: These nests are found in many edge, forest, and field habitats as well as urban/suburban areas. They typically have a thick layer of mud on the top, like a ring of icing on a donut.



An American Robin's nest with a hatchling and two eggs. Photo: Audubon Vermont/Cassie Mellinger

Barn Swallow: These nests are lumps of mud cemented together by the use of their saliva to plan dirt and some twigs onto vertical walls of usually man-made structures.



Barn Swallow parents feeding chicks in a nest. Photo: Jessica Spychalski/Audubon Photography Awards

Winter Wren: Most commonly found in root tip-ups of wind-blown trees that have fallen over within a mixed mature forest.

The impressive nest of a small winter wren tip-up. Photo: Audubon Vermont/Cassie Mellinger

Learn more about bird nests, practice your identification skills, and complete a fun picture-matching activity on Audubon Vermont's website here!

This article was informed and inspired by the following sources. Visit the links below to read about more species in more detail.

Bernd Heinrich. 2009. Which Bird Made that Nest? Northern Woodlands Magazine. https://northernwoodlands.org/article/article/which-bird-made-that-nest

Kenn Kaufman. 2011-2012. Beginner's Tips for Identifying Backyard Bird Nests, Cool Green Science, Stories of the Nature Conservancy. https://blog.nature.org/2012/04/04/beginners-tips-for-identifying-backyard-bird-nests/

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