SPRING is undoubtedly the time when the wild birds make their strongest appeal to the human mind. It is the song season and the birds are now more active, more brilliantly colored and more in evidence than at other times. In fact the words birds and spring seem almost synonymous, so accustomed are we to associate one with the other. All the wild, riotous singing, all the flashing of brilliant wings and tail, all the mad dashing in and out among the thickets or soaring upward above the tree tops is impelled by the great natural instinct for mating and rearing young, which controls the actions of all feathered creatures from the wren to the condor.

One may learn more about a bird’s habits by observing its movements during a few spring days than by watching it for a month later on. There are few sights more stimulating to interest in outdoor life than spying on a pair of wild birds engaged in nest-building.

One spring a pair of robins established their nest on the bough of a small balsam standing beside a much-used walk on a college campus near my home. It was my good fortune to discover the female in the act of bringing one of the first twigs for its construction, and I immediately laid out for myself the task of watching these birds closely in order not to overlook any of the processes of building which were to follow.

In gathering their nesting material the greatest care was exercised to work at those hours of the day when there was the least chance of being observed. Thus, the greater part of the work was carried forward in the early morning while as yet few people were astir. Seldom would there be any activity from the breakfast hour, which occurred at seven o’clock, until after the students had ceased to cross the campus in numbers two hours later. Then, for an hour or more, building was rushed. The early morning was decidedly the favorite time for nest-making,—doubtless one reason being was that the dead grasses, straws, twigs and other nesting materials were then damp and pliable owing to the night dews which rendered them more easy to weave into position than after the sun had dried them thoroughly. Mud for daubing the nest was gathered from a little pool at the end of a leaky horse trough.

On April eighteenth all operations were suspended—the nest appeared to be completed. On the twenty-second the female began sitting. One could see her tail extending over the side of the nest and her bill pointing upward at a sharp angle over the opposite rim. The first day she flew off when the hundred young men, who frequented the
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walk, came along on their way to meals; but the second day she seemed to have become accustomed to them and sat quietly though numerous heads passed only a few feet away. No one disturbed her or the nest with its four blue eggs. On May sixth she began feeding the young. About two weeks had been required for the eggs to hatch.

Four days after this interesting event, I noticed the heads of the youngsters bobbing above the nest. Strength was coming to them quickly. When the morning of May seventeenth broke it revealed that a drizzling rain had been falling for hours. This dreary morning happened to come on the date when the young robins desired to leave the nest and rain could not dampen their wishes or check their plans. At seven o’clock three of them could be seen sitting motionless a foot or more from the nest on the limb which supported it. For fifteen minutes I watched, but they scarcely moved during that time and only when I approached them did they appear to notice me. Each had gathered itself into as small a space as possible and, with head drawn close to its body, it seemed waiting for something to occur. The fourth one could not be found.

A little later the weather cleared and the parent birds quickly led their young from the open campus to the more sheltered cover of a nearby garden.

AFTER the family had once departed from the nest there was no hope of their ever returning. In order to examine it more closely, I moved it from the limb wishing to know just how all that wonderful structure was put together. From notes made at the time, I quote: “In its building a framework of slender balsam twigs had first been used. There were sixty-three of these, some of which were as much as a foot in length. They served as the sills and stud- ding of the house. Intertwined with them were twenty fragments of weed stalks and large grass stems. The red clay cup, the plastering of the house, which came next inside, varied in thickness from a quarter of an inch at the rim to an inch at the bottom. Grass, worked in with the clay while it was yet soft, aided in holding the mud cup together. Last of all came a smooth, dry carpet of dead grass. The whole structure measured eight inches across the top. Inside it was three inches in width and one and one-half in depth.” This was the nest of the robin, one of those wonderful natural objects which had been made for a purpose and had served that purpose well.

The robin, in common with a large number of other birds, builds a nest open at the top. The eggs are, therefore, exposed to the view of the crow, the pilfering bluejay and the egg-stealing red squirrel. This necessitates a very close and careful watch on the part of the
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owners. At times it may appear that the birds are not in sight and that the eggs are deserted, but let the observer approach too near and almost invariably one or both old birds will apprise him of their presence by voicing their resentment, and hurling broadcast their cries of distress.

A wide variety of material is used by birds that build open nests. Cotton and feathers enter largely into the construction of the shrike’s nest. The mocking-bird shows a decided preference for the withered stems and leaves of the life-everlasting, better known in the South as the plant which produces rabbit tobacco. The nest of the scarlet tanager is often made almost entirely of grass, the outer half being green, fresh plucked blades which produce a strong contrast to the brown inner layer with which the nest is lined. Many of the thrushes make use of large flat leaves besides pieces of rags and paper. The most exquisitely dainty home built by the bill and feet of birds is that of the ruby-throated humming-bird. When completed, it is scarcely larger than an English walnut and is usually saddled on a small horizontal limb of a tree or shrub frequently many feet from the ground. It is composed almost entirely of soft plant fibers, fragments of spider’s webs sometimes being used to hold them in shape. The sides are thickly studded with bits of lichen, and practised indeed is the eye of the man who can distinguish it from a knot on a limb. Although the humming-bird’s nest is exceedingly frail, there appears to be nothing on record to show that any great numbers of them come to grief during the summer rains. It is, however, not called upon for a long tenure of occupancy. Within three weeks after the two little white eggs are laid the young have departed on their tiny pinions. Young birds which require a longer period of growth before leaving the nest are furnished with a more substantial abiding place. In the case of the bald eagle, whose young do not fly until about three months of age, the most stupendous domicile is provided.

It was on the twentieth of January, a number of years ago, that a bald eagle’s nest first burst on the delighted vision of the writer. It was situated in an enormous pine growing in a swamp in central Florida. Being ambitious to examine its contents, I essayed to climb to the great eyrie, where it reposed in the top crotch of the tree one hundred and thirty-one feet above the earth. By means of climbing irons and a rope, which passed around the tree as well as my body, I slowly ascended, nailing cleats for support as I advanced. After two hours of toil, the nest was reached but another half hour’s time was required to tear aside enough of the under structure of the nest to permit climbing up one of the side limbs on which it rested. In doing
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do not lay their eggs in hollow trees—they deposit them in cavities which they themselves excavate for the purpose. The bird student soon learns just where to look for the nest of each species. Thus you may find the nesting cavity of the red-headed woodpecker or the flicker in a dead tree or tall stump, and most frequently the wood selected is not in an advanced state of decay. Telephone poles are often used for this purpose. On the plains, where trees are scarce, the telegraph poles provide convenient nesting sites for woodpeckers. Some time ago, while traveling on a slow train in Texas, I counted one hundred and fifty telegraph poles in succession, thirty-nine of which contained woodpecker holes. Probably I did not see all of them, for not over two-thirds of the surface of each pole was visible from the car window. In traveling through the pine barrens of Florida and southern Georgia one frequently finds, grouped about the negro cabins and plantation houses, the popular chinaberry or Pride of India tree. These are the places to look for the nest of the hairy woodpecker—in fact I have never found a nest of this bird except in the dead, slanting limbs of the chinatree.

The member of this family which displays most originality in its nest-building is the red cockaded woodpecker. It is a southern bird and the home for its young is always chiseled from a living pitch-pine tree. This, in itself, is very unusual for any of our eastern woodpeckers. The bird however, has still a stranger habit. For two or three feet above the entrance hole and for five or six feet below it, all around the tree, innumerable small openings are dug through to the inner bark. From these little wells pour streams of soft resin which completely cover the bark and cause the trunk to present a white, glistening aspect which may be seen for a quarter of a mile. Just why the birds do this has never been explained. It is surely the case, however,
that the sticky resin prevents ants and flying squirrels from reaching
the nest, both of which are known to be troublesome at times to eggs
and young birds.

The student of ornithology who takes up the subject of bird-nest
architecture will surely, sooner or later, be impressed not only
with the wide assortment of substances used, but also with the
wonderful variety of locations chosen. The grebe or water witch
builds a floating nest—the buoyant part of which is usually the green
stems of water plants not bent over, but severed from their roots and
piled across each other. On this platform is collected a mass, gathered
from the bottom of the pond, of decaying vegetation. Herein the
eggs are deposited and, as they are laid one after another, are carefully
covered with more decaying vegetation when the bird is absent from
the nest.

If, perchance, the grebe’s nest we have been examining is situated
in a southern fresh water pond we may notice, as we wade ashore, an
unsuspicious-looking cluster of gray Spanish moss caught in the top of
a swaying buttonwood bush. Let us not pass this too hastily for, in all
probability, here is the nest of the fierce little kingbird. Near the
shore the least bittern may flutter upward from the frail platform she
has built among the rushes where three pale blue eggs await our
inspection. The great crested flycatcher may be called a superstitious
bird, else why should it always have a cast-off snake skin conspicu-
ously displayed near the opening of the hollow tree where its treasures
are hidden. Some birds seem to have an abnormal fondness for nest-
building. In the salt marshes along our coast the marsh wren is in
many places one of the most abundant birds. Its nest is a little globu-
lar affair, which sways to the wind in the tall clumps of grass. The
entrance hole is at the side. When the female enters this and begins
the incubation of her eggs, the male busies himself with alternately
singing and building additional nests. Sometimes as many as four or
five of these “male nests” are constructed but evidently never occu-
pied, unless perchance as a roosting place by the proud architect.

Heretofore mention only has been made of the nests of birds built
with much labor and usually constructed in trees or bushes. A very
large number, however, lay their eggs on the ground with but little or
no attempt to gather around or beneath them any special nesting
material. The kildeer’s eggs are simply deposited in a slight hole
scratched in the ground, usually in an open field or on a rocky hillside.
To protect them from enemies the bird must depend upon the peculiar
marking of the eggs, which closely resemble the ground on which they
lie. This fact, together with the habit of the bird in feigning a broken
wing upon the near approach of an alarming creature, makes sufficient safeguard for the eggs and offspring of the species.

On the sandy islands of our south coast country, the skimmer and many species of terns make nests by simply burrowing a slight depression among the sand and shells when turning their bodies around. Some of the sea birds of the far north, as for example the guillemots and auks, often lay their eggs on the shells of cliffs exposed to the sweep of the ocean gales. These eggs are shaped in a manner as if designed by nature to prevent them from rolling off the rocks. They are very large at one end and at the other taper sharply down to a point. When the wind blows they simply swing round in circles.

Although we sometimes speak of the bird’s nest as its home, such is really not the case for the nest of the wild bird is simply the cradle for the young. When the little ones have flown it is rare that either they or the parents ever return to its shelter.

THE VALUE OF SINCERITY

"There is nothing in the world which needs so little decoration or which can so well afford to spurn it altogether as the absolutely genuine. Imitations are likely to be exposed unless carefully ornamented. Too much embellishment generally covers a blemish in the construction. It therefore happens that the first rate invariably rejects adornment and the second rate invariably puts it on. The difference in the two can be discovered at short range, and safety from exposure lies only in imperfect examination. If the vision is clear and the inspection careful, there is no chance for the sham ever to be taken for the genuine; and that is why it happens that among all the forms of activity in this very active age, no struggle is more sharp than that of the first rate to be found out and of the second not to be. It is easier to conceal what a thing is than to prove it to be what it is not. One requires only concealment, the other demonstration. Sooner or later the truth will appear. Some time the decorations will fall off, and then the blemish will appear greater because of the surprise at finding it."

From Governor Frank S. Black’s Speech on Lincoln, Delivered at a Dinner of the Republican Club.