OUR FEATHERED CRAFTSMEN OF THE AIR:
BY FLORENCE BOYCE DAVIS

FRIENDLY chipping sparrow began it by building in the woodbine, and taking threads from my workbasket to weave into her foundation; then robin redbreast staked a claim at the other end of the portico, and into the walls of her mud-plastered dwelling worked a lace cuff and a scrap of a letter. After this, who could help prying into the secrets of the craft?

Coming home in late autumn, bearing the birds’ nests we have secured on our walk, we are met on the street by a New England housewife who raises her hands and her voice:

“Mercy on us! what are you going to do with all that trash? Birds’ nests? Catbird’s nest? Redwing—I never knew there was any difference. A bird’s nest is a bird’s nest to me. But what are you going to do with them?”

When we tell her that some of these very nests we have watched since the builder placed the first stick; that we have been back repeatedly during the nesting season to keep run of the household, and record it in our notebook; that now that the birds have moved out, the nests are to grace an alcove given over to a bird-nest collection in our front hall, she looks at us, and the expression in her eyes is as suggestive as if she had tapped her forehead and shaken her head. But we go on home with our treasures, the scent of damp leaf mold and the sound of a little brook back in the woods still with us.

When we began collecting birds’ nests we made a few simple rules which we have kept to the letter: no eggs were to be removed from nests; no nests taken until abandoned by the rightful owners; no bird made to feel we were its enemy. We would be decent collectors, not thieves.

Among many things that we have learned about the feathered craftsmen, one is that almost every little builder shows individuality in constructing its nest. Families adhere to family rules so far as
size, shape, and placing of the nest go, but each builder works into her house characteristics peculiar to herself, far more than do you and I who depend on a hired architect for ideas. Few male birds assist in building the nest, though some of them, I feel sure, insist on being "boss."

A pair of bluebirds have, for several seasons, occupied a box in our portico, and I have never seen the master do anything more important in constructing the nest than to go into the box now and then, look things over, and bring out a small root or a feather and drop it on the ground. His pomposity is quite amusing, though I don't believe he has the least idea how a nest should be built. Each fall we clean out the box, and one spring we put in straws and cotton wool, thinking it would help the work along to find building material on the spot. No, indeed! Mrs. Blue did not like our timber, and cleaned out every scrap we had put in before she set about real nest-making.

An artistic temperament was evident in a bustling chebec who saddled her nest on a limb in our neighbor's orchard. She
took twine that we had put out for the birds, frayed out each piece with her beak, and decorated the outside of her nest with it, so that it looked like a ball of white fringe caught up in the apple-tree.

This catering to appearances seems to be strong with the vireos. Their nests—always hung on wishbone-shaped branches—show great variety in manner of decoration; some are embellished with birch-bark, some neatly covered with lichens or skeleton leaves, and one which we had the good fortune to see just after it was completed, was extravagantly draped with pale spiders’ webs.

Three pairs of robins nested on our premises last season. The three females looked as if they might have been sisters, when they came to build a slattern, and one a thief. The artist set a neat cup in the woodbine, worked a bit of lace into her foundation, plastered the inside smoothly and then lined it with soft grasses. The slattern put coarse materials together up in the elm, plastered it carelessly, and laid her blue eggs on a bare floor where she had not even spread a grass rug or a feather. The thief built in the maple, and came to grief; something broke her eggs and discouraged her so that she aban-

A REDWING’S NEST LIGHTLY POISED IN A PICTURESQUE BRUSH OF CATTAIL GONE TO SEED.

the family resemblance was strong, but nests we found they differed in character. One was an artist, one

A SONG SPARROW’S NEST IN A NETWORK OF THORNS.
A CHEBEC'S NEST WHICH LOOKS LIKE A BALL OF WHITE FRINGE.

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don the situation. When we took down the nest an odd little bunch of roots, much finer than the rest of the foundation, attracted our attention. We found it to be a chipping sparrow's nest which the builder had set her house upon.

Red-winged blackbirds are such a clannish lot that they seem to have but one plan for building—one key will unlock all doors in their neighborhood. During a drought we went through the swamp and found many old homes among the cattails, all of reeds and grasses, built about a foot above the ground, and all looking alike. Occasionally a cattail that had gone to seed made the situation picturesque.

It is quite likely that birds do not choose locations with a view to their artistic features, but sometimes we wonder how a nest came to be situated so charmingly. An ovenbird's nest which we found in late autumn was set on the ground under clumps of marginal and spinulose shield-ferns, and a prettier spot could not have been found.

We stumbled upon the nest quite by chance, after searching for it all spring and summer and being cajoled over the woods by the male's insistent, "Teacher, teacher, teacher." I know now the little rogue was leading us away from his hidden treasure, and I doubt not the mistress

A KINGBIRD'S NEST FASHIONED BY AN EXPERT CRAFTSMAN.
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sat in her “oven” and laughed over our stupidity. The nest looked like a small mound of dead leaves; it was six inches high, eight inches wide, with an oval opening at the side three inches across. The lining was of fine roots; some dry leaves were woven in, but more were piled loosely on top so that its concealment was perfect. Since it had served its purpose, we gladly carried it home in our basket.

Two other chosen locations which would make one almost believe there are birds with an eye for beauty, were those of a veery and a kingbird. The veery’s home was in the base of a great ostrich fern that grew near the river. The fern had fifteen green sterile fronds that stood five feet high, and eleven fertile fronds two feet high, the whole spreading outward, shuttlecock fashion, and making a receptacle for the pretty nest which was made of fine roots and grasses, with a foundation of dead leaves six inches deep. When fall came and the veeries were gone, though frost had killed the sterile fronds, the brown fertile ones stood erect, and we took up the fern, nest and all, without deranging its architecture.

The kingbird’s nest was in an old apple tree up in the pasture. The tree’s branches were gnarled and twisted by many years of rough weather until it was an ideal of rustic beauty. On one limb, Mother Kingbird had fastened one of the trimmest nests I have ever seen, built of roots and twine, and set off with tufts of cotton wool which seemed to have been added more for ornament than for use. One long white twine was left loose—for a latchstring.

Farther up in the pasture, thorn bushes—which are favorite nesting sites with song sparrows—were cut down during the nesting season. One little brown matron whose home was destroyed, immediately set about building another in a thorn bush that lay on its side. We wondered how she could fly in and out without impaling herself on the thorns.

None of our nests shows greater bird wisdom than that of the Baltimore oriole who built in our neighbor’s elm. We had noticed the pair when they arrived, and began house-building in great haste. A branch of our maple was first chosen and several strings were carried up there, but evidently something about it did not suit Mistress Oriole, for she removed the strings to the elm where she finally built. I was standing on the back portico when she came into the yard, looked up at me, and jabbered inquiringly. I interpreted her talk as a plea for strings, so I hung several pieces of twine, each about four feet long, over the pulley clothesline, and ran it out four or five feet from where I stood. She saw it at once but hesitated. Finally she flew up on the barn roof, then dropped down onto the clothesline
AN ARCH OF LIGHT AND GRACEFUL DESIGN THAT GIVES A STRONG SUPPORT TO THE RAMBLER AND PARADISE ROSES AND CASTS OVER ITS SURROUNDINGS SUMMER'S SUBTLE AND ALLURING SPELL.
AN EXTREMELY WELL-BUILT ARCHITECTURAL ARBOR IN A NEW ENGLAND GARDEN: A SENSE OF SECLUSION IS GIVEN BY THE LATTICE WORK AT THE SIDES AND AT THE END; VINES TRAILING OVER THE LATTICE AND OVER THE ARCHED TOP COMPLETE THE CHARM AND INTIMACY; SUCH AN ARBOR AS THIS HAS A DISTINCT ARCHITECTURAL VALUE IN A GARDEN, CONNECTING THE HOUSE WITH NATURE IN A FORMAL, YET FRIENDLY MANNER.
NO MORE FRIENDLY APPROACH TO THE HOUSE CAN BE DEVISED THAN THE ARCHITECTURAL ARBOR: IN THE WINTER EVEN WITHOUT VINES IT IS GRACEFUL AND APPROPRIATE, WHILE IN THE SUMMER TIME WITH ROSES BLOOMING ABOUT IT AND FLOWERING VINES CASTING TO THE WIND STREAMERS OF FRAGRANCE IT IS AN INVITATION TO THE HOME BEYOND, MORE ENTICING THAN WORDS.
A very well planned architectural arbor and seats combined: at the end of a garden path this is a most attractive plan, giving a sense of architectural beauty as well as a place in which to rest and enjoy the lovely pathway leading to it. An extremely interesting formal covered seat, so simple and so well planned that the effect is quite greek.
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and chattering menacingly at me, hopped and teetered along the line toward the string. She picked up one piece, flew into the apple tree, and stopped to adjust it in her beak; then she was off over the barn. She left the twine on a branch of the elm, and came back for more. When she had several there she began to weave her basket. During the day I put out fifteen pieces of twine, and all but three were up in the elm at nightfall; the three that were rejected were colored twine. She worked several days weaving the twine bag, and then one morning she appeared with horsehair in her beak for the lining. I watched through my bird glass while she poised on the edge of the nest, called softly, “Here, here, here, here,” to her handsome mate who was never far away, and dived into the bag out of sight. It was thirty minutes before she came out to fly away, though in the meantime she had been out twice, perched on the edge of the nest, looked down at her work, and then hopped back in to fasten a loose end.

We kept an eye on the nest all summer; heard querulous calls, that sounded like young goslings teasing to be brooded, when there were babies in the bag; and then after the family grew up and left the neighborhood, we added the nest to our collection. It is a wonderful nest. It measures seven inches in length, the circumference of the bag twelve inches, the diameter of the opening at the top less than two inches. The twine we contributed, which must have measured fifty feet or more, is intricately woven, and so firmly knotted and tied around the branches that the nest was securely braced. One long twine was fastened by one end, but seems not to have been needed. Possibly the oriole, like the kingbird, left it for a latchstring.