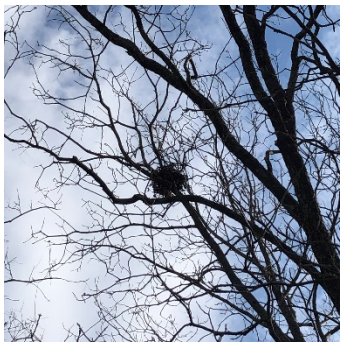
# BIRD NESTS

Winter can be a good time to spot bird nests in bare tree branches that lost their leaves in the fall. Have you ever spotted any bird nests or squirrel dreys in a tree? (Drey is the word for a squirrel nest, and they usually look like a messy ball of sticks and leaves).



A squirrel drey
(not a bird nest!)

## WHAT IS A BIRD'S NEST?

All birds start their life cycle as an egg. Eggs need to be protected from weather and predators. An egg also needs to stay warm from the time it is laid until it hatches. This is called the incubation period. A nest is the shelter most adult birds build to protect their eggs until they hatch and to keep baby birds safe until they are ready to leave the nest.

Nests range in size, shape, location and building materials, and all of these can be clues about the kind of bird that made it. For example, bald eagle nests can be 5-6 feet across, while a cardinal's nest is about 4 inches across. Hummingbird nests can be as small as a thimble when they are built, but they are made with materials that allow the nest to stretch as the baby birds inside it grow.

Nests can be built in many places. Some birds make cavity nests inside something by finding or making an opening inside a tree, a stump or a nest box. Carolina wrens, chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and some owls are a few examples of cavity nesting birds. Some birds build nests on the ground, like ducks, geese, wood thrushes, meadowlarks, whippoorwills and sometimes mourning doves. Shorebirds nest in sand.

Birds like herons make platform nests up in tree tops. Cowbirds skip all the work that goes into building the nest and lay their eggs in the nests of other birds they find. Some birds lay eggs on rock ledges. Cliff swallows make nests out of mud on vertical walls. Many birds build nests on tree branches. There are many ways birds build nests!

Photo by Plant Image Library

**American Robin** nests are often built on branches hidden by dense leaves. The female robin decides where to build the nest. Often, robin nests are built in the lower half of a tree, but sometimes they are built higher up in the treetop. Around houses and buildings, robins might nest in gutters, business signs, or outdoor light fixtures.

Robins build their nest from the inside out, using a wing to press dead grass and twigs into a cup shape. Other materials they commonly use include paper, feathers, grass, roots, twigs or moss. Once they form the inner cup shape, they use mud to make a sturdy and heavy layer on the outside. Then they line the nest with a softer material like dry grass. The finished nest is 6-8 inches across and 3-6 inches high.

**Blue Gray Gnatcatchers** choose a nest site together, usually on a limb in the top half of a tree, and they build the nest together. The cup-shaped nest takes up to two weeks to build. The nest has tall sides that are built in layers. The layers are built out of plant stems, strips of bark, and grasses held together by spider webs or caterpillar silk. The inside layers are softer and can be lined with soft leaves, paper, cocoons, hair, or feathers. The outside of the nest gets decorated with bits of lichen or bark flakes. The nest is attached to the tree branch with spider webs. Blue gray gnatcatchers often build a series of nests during the summer to avoid predators, mite infestations, or cowbirds. When they want to build a new nest, they recycle materials from earlier nests, which helps them complete them more quickly than the first nests they build.

Photo by Don Faulkner

See some of the nests described here in this Facebook live video:

https://www.facebook.com/ecoexplore/videos/147086000228122

## CAN YOU SPOT A NEST?

Next time you head outside, take a look up into the tree branches and see if you can spot any nests. Can you figure out what materials they are made of, or what birds might have made them?

When observing a nest, be careful not to get too close if there are birds nearby, and leave everything as you find it. Sometimes birds reuse their old nests, or take an old one apart to reuse the materials. By giving birds plenty of space, you may be able to observe and learn more about their behaviors.

## BUILD YOUR OWN NEST!

Birds use their beaks and sometimes wings or feet to build their nests. What kind of nest could you build with your hands? Here are a few suggestions for ways you might build a nest:

- Make a nest inside your house that you can fit inside. You could build the outside structure with chairs, pillows or cardboard and then line the inside with soft materials like a sheet or blanket.
- Make a nest out of materials you find outside. Are they things a bird might use? Can you find ways to weave or stick the materials together to form a cup-shaped nest?
- Come up with your own creative ways to build a nest!