

# BIRDS *and their* NESTS



*Olive L. Earle*

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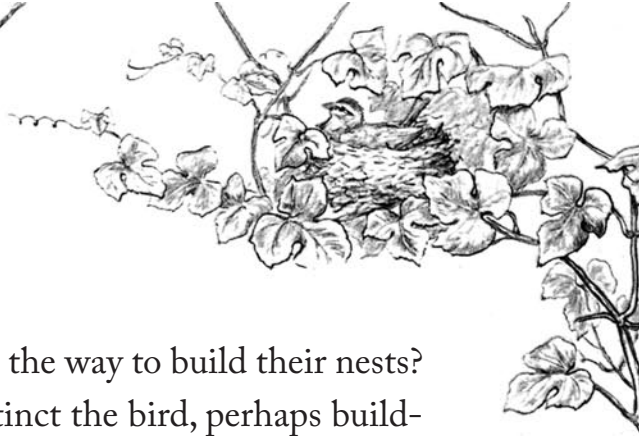
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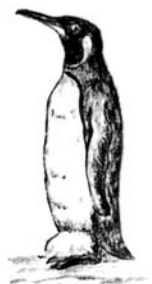
Ruby-throated Hummingbird cover illustration by Edwin Sheppard, 1882

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How do birds know the way to build their nests? Nobody knows. By instinct the bird, perhaps building a nest for the first time, makes a nest similar in plan to the ones built by its ancestors. The typical plan is followed, even though the typical materials are sometimes replaced by others more easily found near the nesting site. Nest-building plans fall, more or less, into groups. There are nests that are open at the top and are built in trees, bushes, vines, or on the ground. There are some that have a roof and some that hang from a tree branch. There are birds that choose a hole in a tree and others that prefer a hole in the ground. Some birds make no nest at all. A nest may be built in the region that is the bird's year-round home or, in the case of a migrating bird, it may be built after a long journey. The general nesting areas given in this book are not always the entire range. Because birds do not recognize geographical boundaries, their nesting site may extend outside these areas.







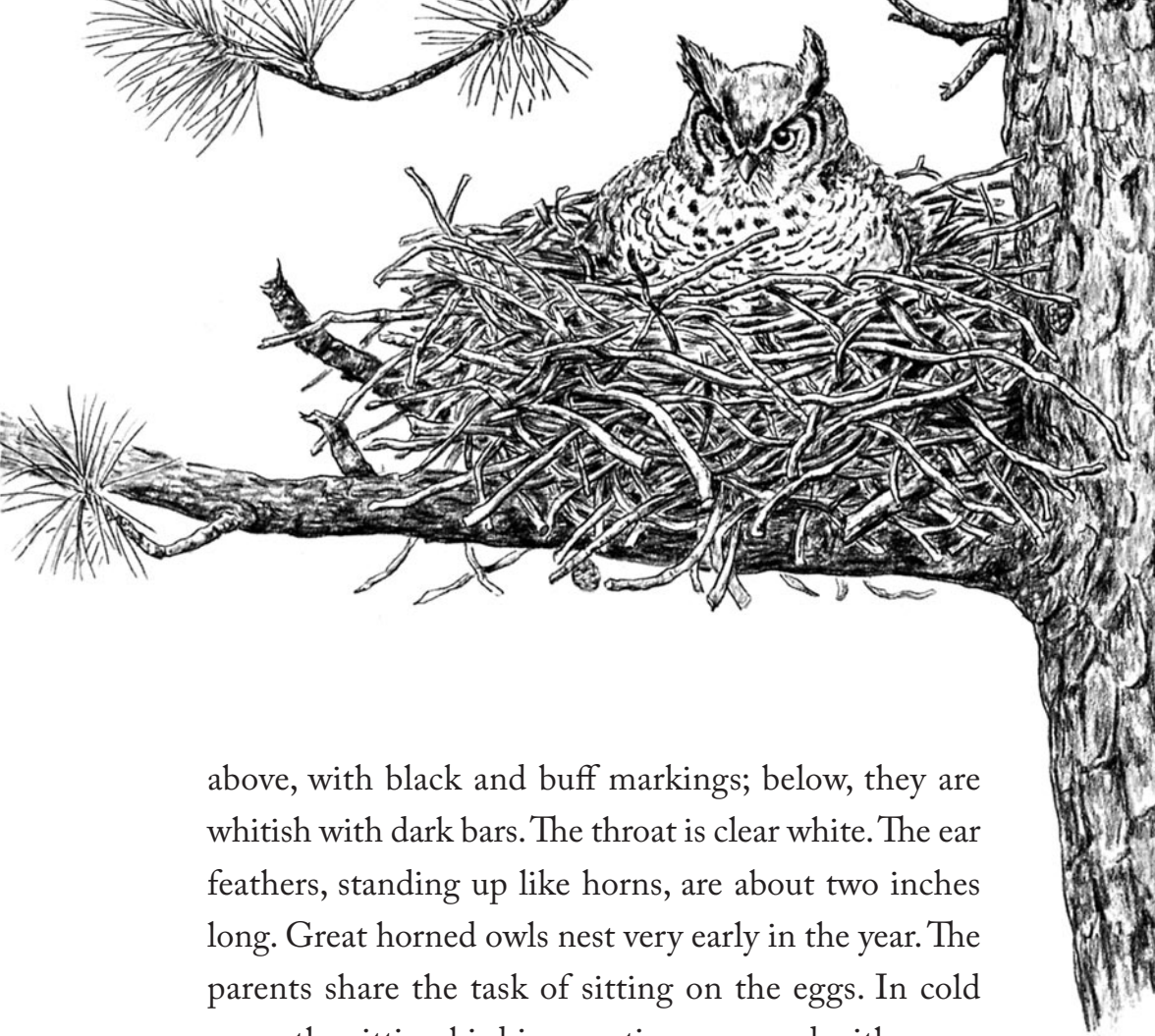
A pair of BALD EAGLES uses the same nest, open to the sky, year after year. Occasionally built on an inaccessible cliff, it is more often in a high treetop. Every year the nest is repaired with fresh sticks and other coarse material until it may grow to be twenty feet deep and nine feet across. It is lined with grass and roots. Two, or rarely three, rough dull white eggs are laid, about five weeks later the downy, whitish birds are hatched. At the end of three weeks the real feathers begin to show. At first the young birds' feathers are mainly black, though white below the surface. Later the plumage is grayer, and by the end of the third year the dark-brown adult plumage and white, "bald" head and tail appear. Young birds stay in the nest for three months or more; then they are able to fly. Until the nestlings can feed themselves, their parents tear in pieces the fish or small animals they bring to the nest. Though bald eagles sometimes fish for themselves, they often steal fish caught by ospreys or pick up dead fish from the water's edge. Strangely enough, the young birds are, for a time, larger than their parents. The female eagle, larger than the male, may be forty-three inches long.

NESTING AREA: most of the continental US and Canada. During the mid-twentieth century Bald Eagles became rare; after successful conservation efforts they were removed from the Endangered Species list in 2007.



The open nest of the GREAT HORNED OWL is usually a ready-made one, high in a tree—the deserted nest of a crow, hawk, or squirrel. Large and untidy, it is made of sticks, roots, twigs, and weed stalks. The owl repairs it and adds a few breast feathers as a lining. Sometimes the female lays her two or three nearly round white eggs in a hollow tree or on a ledge in a cace, where the nest is nothing but a few bones and bits of fur or the feathers of her victims. These fiercest of all owls swoop silently through the night, killing the birds and animals that are their food. Sometimes they catch chickens and young turkeys; but they do good, too, for they kill rabbits, rats, mice, and other crop-destroying animals. They capture their prey with their feet, which are equipped with strong, sharp claws. The legs and feet are feathered. The outer toe of each foot, like that of the ospreys, is reversible so that the bird can grasp a branch firmly, with two toes in front and two behind while tearing the meal to pieces. Indigestible parts are thrown up in the form of pellets. This great terror of the woods has a wing spread of almost five feet and two feet or more in length. The soft, fluffy feathers are grayish brown





above, with black and buff markings; below, they are whitish with dark bars. The throat is clear white. The ear feathers, standing up like horns, are about two inches long. Great horned owls nest very early in the year. The parents share the task of sitting on the eggs. In cold areas, the sitting bird is sometimes covered with snow. The baby birds are covered with down at first. They stay in the nest for two months, and by that time their flight feathers have grown.

NESTING AREA: across North America up to the northern tree lines.



The OSPREY, or fish hawk, builds a huge open nest. Very often an old nest will be used year after year. The structure, continuously rebuilt, gets more and more bulky until the tree may break with the weight, tumbling the nest to the ground. Occasionally the birds use the fallen mass for a nursery. Ospreys like to build on the top of a dead pine or some other leafless tree. Sometimes they choose a telephone pole or a chimney. Lined with seaweed or a few feathers, the nest is made of sticks, weed stalks, and all sorts of rubbish. Usually three eggs are laid. Osprey's eggs vary in color and markings; often they are heavily blotched. When hatched, the young birds are covered with down. Ospreys live entirely on fish, which they get by plunging into shallow water for them. In order to be near their food supply, groups of these birds nest near large rivers or along the seashore. A wriggling, slippery fish is caught in the birds' large feet, which have rough spiny scales on the soles. The fish is held head foremost. Reversible outer toes help the bird to hold the fish securely. Besides, the claws are much curved and act as pincers. Circling above their nests, these birds call with a thin, high-pitched whistle.

Ospreys are blackish-brown above and white below, and they are about twenty-four inches long.

NESTING AREA: most states and Canada, plus

Ospreys are one of the few birds with worldwide distribution.





In the East, purple grackles often build their homes  
in the outer walls of the ospreys' huge nests.

