

ON THE WILD SIDE

Nesting time, despite the snow

Frances Shirley

Six years ago as I sat by the kitchen fireplace I heard a twittering in the chimney. My cousins told me I had a nest of chimney swifts. That fall, when I removed the fireplace board, I found the nest and marveled at the engineering.

Using twigs broken from the ends of branches and their sticky saliva, the swifts had fashioned a four-inch cup that securely fit the square inside corner of the chimney. Spring rains had loosened its hold. The chimney is now capped, and the birds have moved under the roof overhang by the door of a nearby barn. They are protected from rain, avian predators, and fires.

The swift nest was remarkably different from one I remember vividly from my childhood. One summer my grandfather found a hummingbird nest under an oak tree and carefully placed it in my six-year-old hands. It was a tiny cup, two inches across, made largely of spider webs and lichens, with what looked like scales on the outside. Those, I later learned, were parts of buds woven in to give stiffness. We would never have seen it ten feet high if the wind had not broken off the large twig on which it had been built.

I have become increasingly curious about bird nests as wind-blown specimens have come into my hands, and I have used them as teaching tools at the Library. *The Petersen Field Guide to Eastern Birds' Nests* has proven very useful. It describes and gives photographs of nests, and tells where you'll find them.

Actually we shouldn't collect nests, because most species use the same one year after year, and in some places, having nests is illegal. But branches do blow off trees, bringing nests with them, and once in a while, house repairs reveal a barn swallow nest.

Occasionally the nest structure itself fails. Baltimore (Northern) orioles seem to know that their hanging nests aren't strong enough to survive winds, season after season. They are one of the few birds to build completely new nests each year. Suzanne Erikson gave me one from her yard on Bay Road. It is an intricately woven hanging cup, with broken strands of plant material that once attached it to a forked branch thirty feet up. The inside is lined with softer grasses, and some milkweed seed fluff.



Northern Oriole nest (left) is built to hang high from a tree branch while the American Robin nest (right) is tucked into a bush or tree.

By contrast, the robins that return yearly have mixed mud with their plant material and made a sturdy home in a bush near my back door. Recently, one of them finished some inkberries then turned and perched for a few minutes, despite the snow on the ground. I wondered if he or she could be thinking ahead! In March, I'll see them bringing in the occasional twig or beakful of mud as they freshen up the nest and prepare to start a family.

Actually, my robins have chosen wisely. That bush has been pruned and is quite dense. When the leaves are out, no one can see the nest and I doubt if a cat would want to climb into it. It spreads enough to provide ground space to grub for worms and other insects and offers protection from hawks. The birds need to go out only to drink from the birdbath or the sprinkler puddles in the nearby driveway. In fact, if the mother did not fly out in alarm when I walk by, no one would know she was nesting there.

Other birds have their special needs. If you have a dead tree on your property and it will not endanger anyone, leave it for the woodpeckers. Put up a bluebird house in hopes of attracting these beautiful birds that are making a comeback in New England. Keep tangles of brush and vines that can harbor warblers. Even piles of topsoil may surprise you: I saw cliff swallows flying around and catching insects for their young sheltered there!

Unfortunately, the exploding deer population in Norton means that a lot of shrubs have been eaten and the woods no longer offer the nest sites for songbirds that they used to. This makes it very important that homeowners take up the slack. With this in mind, the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton is sponsoring The National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) Backyard Habitat program, where individual homeowners can certify that their yards provide food, water, shelter and a place where wildlife can raise their young.

For complete information, visit the LPS website: <http://www.nortonlandpreservation.org> or go to the NWF website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx

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