

8 Different Kinds of Bird Nests and How to Spot Them



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Home tweet home! Learn about different types of bird nests and where various bird species choose to lay their eggs.

From simple scrapes on the ground to elaborately woven structures, birds' nests are temporary yet meticulously built places to raise young. Because there's such a wide variety of bird species, there's also a wide variety in bird nest architecture. Check out eight different kinds of bird nest styles below and learn where various species choose to set up house.



COURTESY TONYA SHARP Bald eagle nest in Lake George, Colorado

1. Long-Lasting Bird Nests

The grand champion nest-builder is... the bald eagle! In 1963, an eagle's nest near St. Petersburg, Florida, was declared the largest at nearly 10 feet wide, 20 feet deep and over 4,400 pounds. That nest was extreme; most bald eagle nests are 5 to 6 feet in diameter and 2 to 4 feet tall. Nest construction can take three months. Eagles typically use the same nest year after year, adding to it each season. Discover cool [facts about bald eagles](#).



COURTESY NANCY MARSHALL

2. Small and Flexible Bird Nests

It should come as no surprise that hummingbirds, our smallest birds, make the smallest nests. Hummingbirds build on top of tree branches, using plants, soft materials and spider webs. [Ruby-throated hummingbirds](#) decorate theirs with flakes of lichen. [Anna's hummingbirds](#) may lay eggs before a nest is completed, continuing to build the sidewalls during incubation. Most impressive is how these nests stretch. Hummingbirds usually lay a pair of eggs the size of black beans inside a nest about the diameter of a quarter. As the babies grow, the nest expands, keeping things tight and cozy. Learn more about [hummingbird nests](#).



ANTHONY MERCIECA It might take a female Altamira oriole three weeks to build a nest.

3. Oriole Nests

Orioles are the seamstresses of the bird world. Their iconic pendant nests dangle from outermost tree branches. The nests are impossible to miss among the barren winter branches and nearly as impossible to spot, surrounded by leaves, during the breeding season. Orioles use whatever material is available to stitch their bag nests: long grasses, twine, even horsehair. The nests are lined with soft materials such as plant fibers, feathers or animal wool. The Altamira oriole of extreme south Texas and Central America constructs one of the longest dangling nests, which can hang down more than 2 feet. Psst—this is [how to attract orioles](#).



COURTESY RONALD CLARK

4. No-Fuss Nests

It's the exception rather than the rule, but a few species of birds get away with building hardly any nest at all! This doesn't mean they are haphazard in their approach to laying eggs, though. Beach nesting birds (including black skimmers, many species of terns, and piping, Wilson's and other plovers) lay eggs in shallow depressions scraped out in the sand. The remarkable thing about the eggs of these species is their cryptic camouflage coloration. Eggs are often speckled and match the sandy granules of the makeshift nests. Sometimes these birds will line the shallow scrape with shells or sand to add to the camouflage. As beaches get more developed, some of these beach nests have adapted to laying eggs on nearby rooftops. Learn about [mourning dove nests](#).



ROLF NUSSBAUMER Thick-billed murres lay eggs on the narrow ledges of steep cliffs.

5. Precarious Cliffside Nests

Huge colonies of murres and guillemots nest on rocky coastal cliffs. Most lack any structural nests, instead laying eggs that are extra pointy on one end. This shape helps the eggs pivot around the point instead of rolling over the edge. These ledge nesting sites are also more protected from predators. Cliff nesters aren't found only on coasts. Lots of species, including condors, ravens and falcons, use cliffs, but they build stick nests in the crevices. [Learn about swallows' nests and nesting habits.](#)



FRANCIS & JANE BERGQUIST Least grebes build nests in shallow water.

6. Floating Nests

Some waterbirds, including many ducks, nest in upland grasslands far from water. Others, such as loons, grebes, coots and gallinules, nest directly on top of the water. Eggs will sink, so the birds build floating platform nests out of cattails, reeds, other aquatic vegetation, or mud. They anchor the nests to emergent vegetation to conceal them and to keep them from drifting away. Discover interesting [facts about bird nests](#).



COURTESY MARY-ANN INGRAO

7. Underground Nests

Holes in trees and cacti are nest cavities; underground nests are burrows. Burrowing owls in Florida will sometimes dig their own burrow, while the burrowing owls in the west usually rely on spots excavated by prairie dogs, badgers, tortoises or other diggers. Other underground nesters include bank swallows, belted kingfishers and Atlantic puffins. Check out adorable [photos of baby birds](#).



COURTESY R MATASON On osprey nest was taken over by an owl.

8. Early Nesters

It is hard to say officially *who* lays the first eggs each year, but my pick for favorite nest is the great horned owl nest. Sure, many species can begin nesting in January in southern states, but it is still winter in the northern states when great horned owls start incubating their eggs in nests made of sticks, often in trees. It's essential that these owls get an early start on nesting, because the species is slow to hatch and fledge. It is remarkable to think of the owls sitting on eggs as snow piles up during frigid nights.