

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SAFE OBSERVATIONS OF NESTS

INTRODUCTION

Observations of birds during reproduction require proper technique during the recording of events from the nest building through fledgling stage. Generally, birds will be more likely to abandon their nesting attempt early (e.g., during nest building or egg laying) than late (i.e., during nestling stage). This requires careful observations when a nest is found. In addition, predators may cue into actions that you may unknowingly provide when attempting to monitor a nest. This set of instructions is to provide a general guide to safe nest observation to provide information for the Nest Record Program for the Maryland Ornithological Society.

TIPS

Relatively few nests produce the complete compliment of young. Often failure occurs as a result of predatory events. Therefore, it is important that most nests are observed from a distance when at all possible. However, critical information during the egg laying, hatching, and fledgling stages is important. For many species a precise count of eggs or young is required. Open cup nests can often be easily observed using a mirror (such as a side-view mirror of an automobile or a motorcycle) attached to a pole. Young can often be counted from a distance during feeding events from parents. These observations can be most rewarding.

Also important is the realization that birds are most likely to abandon a nest early in their nesting attempt (i.e., during nest construction and egg laying) than later (during the nestling stage). If a failure occurs, the parents may try to rebuild another nest in the same territory. Strive to find out species-specific information regarding re-nesting, length of incubation, and length of the nestling phase to minimize observational disturbance and maximize the value of the observations. More information can be found in the species accounts in the Birds of America Collection (<http://www.birdsofna.org/>) or in the Life Histories Collection compiled by A.C. Bent.

Finding A New Nest

If you are within 10 feet of the nest....

Under Construction: If the nest appears to be under construction (e.g., no mud, no lining, adults in adding to nest, etc.) leave immediately and note the approximate location to check it another day. Try to note approximate height, tree species (if applicable) and any other characteristics that will help in finding it later.

Female on Nest: This may be an indication that the female may be laying eggs. Leave immediately and proceed as above, yet return later in the same day to note contents, if possible.

Female leaves upon discovery: Attempt to determine contents. The use of an adjustable mirror affixed to a pole can be helpful for some nests. Note number of eggs of host and of parasites (i.e., Brown-headed Cowbird eggs) if appropriate.

If you are more than 10 feet from the nest...

DO NOT APPROACH IT IMMEDIATELY. REMAIN OR BACK AWAY TO AT LEAST 40-50 FEET AND OBSERVE. Try to determine whether the nest is under construction or not. Note: Females may sit in nests while under construction. Do not flush and return later.

Checking A Nest

In general, nests should be checked no more than once per day and at least once every three days if possible. Always minimize your time and noise around a nest. Be careful not to disturb any vegetation around a nest, including not to trample the vegetation as to create a trail. If possible, walk past the nest rather than reversing your route. Always use your best judgement to minimize any disturbance to the birds.

Under Construction: During construction nests should only be observed at a distance. In very early stages, nests should not be visited more than every 2-3 days and then at a distance. If a nest is found unoccupied after a female has been seen previously on it, quickly check the contents every other day to determine the onset of egg laying.

Laying: Check contents daily without undue disturbance to determine the onset of laying and the complete clutch size. The determination of exact laying dates may help determine the specific time to hatch and to minimize undue disturbance later. Avoid flushing female and when observing contents and be observant of potential predators (e.g., Blue Jays) as to not indicate nest location. Also record number of Brown-headed Cowbird eggs if applicable.

Incubation: Check contents no more than every 2-3 days. These checks help to determine single egg losses. Daily checks can be from a distance to determine whether the female is on and incubating. If female is not on the nest, check the following day to determine status. Begin daily nest checks when hatching date is near.

Nestlings: After first egg hatches make daily checks to determine dates of complete hatch. Daily checks should then include either noting whether the parents are feeding the young or checking and counting the young. Often the young can be counted from a distance when fed. Patience often pays off when observing from a distance. Note when fledging occurs and make a best determination, from a distance, the time when young leave the nest. If young were present but appear to have fledged recently, listen for chip notes or indications of fledglings nearby.

Complete Nest: After young have fledged, note species of tree or other structure that supports the nest. Note the height of the nest and record any other pertinent information specific to the nest.