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Great Blue Herons with four young in the nest. photo © Meade Cadot

Have you seen the construction boom in our community? You can't miss it.

Monadnock Region real estate is prime, from fixer-uppers and redos to new construction and housing developments. This building craze is one for the birds, though! The wild bird chorus announces it. Male birds have been defining and defending their territories, enticing females of the same species with song and showy splendor. Mating is on their mind, and once complete, nests will follow.

Nests are nurseries for the young, not permanent housing for birds. They come in all shapes and sizes and can be as elaborate as the woven sock-like nest of the Baltimore oriole or as simple as the

scratched-out shallow ditch of a wild turkey. Some build new every year, like the cavity-nesting pileated woodpecker, while others reuse nests from previous years. Some even use other birds' nests. The great horned owl, for example, who often sits on eggs as early as February, takes advantage of good real estate and empty nests. These owls don't spend much energy constructing their own nest. Instead, they are squatters, using crow, great blue heron, raven and hawk nests, which are unoccupied at that time of the year.

When the original builder is ready to use it, the great horned owl has staked its claim, and as Harris Center Director of Bird Conservation Phil Brown says, "Whooo will challenge a great horned owl?"

Many of us see nesting as a shared endeavor between male and female birds. Robins exemplify this, with both birds building the nest and raising the young together. But in many cases, it is the female who does most of the construction. From the small field-loving chipping sparrow with its animal fur-lined nest to the iconic bluebird, where the male attracts a female with displays of nest-building prowess but then leaves the actual construction entirely to the female.

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Think of the petite ruby-throated hummingbird, not much bigger than a very large queen bumblebee. To capture her attention, the male performs a series of flashy flying displays, where he swoops down in a U-shaped dive, sometimes 50 feet or more. After mating, the pair separates, with the male playing no additional role in nesting or rearing the young. The female returns to her territory to choose the nest site, gather materials and build a small tidy nest, no bigger than a thimble. She collects bud scales, lichen and moss for the exterior and fuzzy plant down for a cozy nest lining. After stitching it together with spider silk, she smooths out the edge of the nest by pressing it between her neck and chest and stiffens the base of the nest by stamping on it.

All this work takes between six and 10 days, and when the nest is ready, she will lay between one and three tiny white eggs, weighing no more than a half a gram or one-fifth an ounce. The female ruby-throated hummingbird then feeds and rears her young on her own. It is not surprising then that hummingbirds, like some other birds, often reuse a nest from year to year. With each use, they refurbish the nest, removing soiled lining and repairing any structural damage.

Lend a Helping Hand

Consider helping birds during the nesting season by providing nest boxes, cultivating suitable nesting habitat and offering them nesting materials for use. Many cavity-nesting birds will use simple birdhouses, from bluebirds and chickadees to tree swallows and a few raptors, including barred owls, saw-whet owls and American kestrels. If you are handy with a hammer, find out how to make your

own nest boxes by checking out The Cornell Lab's [All About Birds website](#). You will find out how to make specific nest boxes for different types of birds and the best locations to place them in.

You can also learn how to make your neighborhood an oasis for wild birds. One simple idea to try right away is to offer birds a variety of safe and natural nesting materials by filling your suet feeder or hanging a basket from the clothesline with plant fluff, dried grass clippings, hay, straw, feathers, pine needles and bark strips. During nesting season, you might get a glimpse of a pair of robins raising their young or spy the fairy-like teacup nest of a hummingbird.

Even sitting at a red light in downtown Peterborough, by the GFA, I've watched a starling with a mouth full of twigs fly into a perfect hole in the bar that holds the traffic light. What a good reminder that life goes on, and it happens all around us. We just need to look for it. 🐾



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