

From Building to Hatching

Books about Nests

by Jacqueline Davies

Preschool through elementary school

Part home, part cradle, part fortress—birds' nests are objects of never-ending fascination. Every spring and summer, the world's nearly 9,000 species of birds offer careful observers front-row seats to their nest-building activities. Many children delight in watching the birds' progress and learning all they can about the many types of nests that birds build. Whether an urban dweller or a country kid, it is the rare child who has never come across a bird's nest, either active or abandoned. And who doesn't feel a thrill upon discovering eggs or hatchlings inside a nest?

Nests are a perfect subject matter for young naturalists—they are both familiar and mysterious, nonthreatening and exciting, stationary and full of life. Studying birds' nests can be an effective entry to the world of journaling. Even students who are stumped by what to write in a classroom journal are often bursting with ideas when offered the chance to write and draw about what they see out-of-doors.

The following books offer young readers a wide variety of approaches to studying nests. Some focus on the act of building, others on the excitement of soon-to-hatch eggs. Some are fantastical, while others are scientific. Group several together for a surefire way to get students excited about seeking nests in the world around them.

Picture Books and Fiction

Atkins, Jeannine. *Robin's Home*. Illus. by Candace Whitman. 2001. 32p. Farrar, \$16 (0-374-36337-4).

Preschool–Gr. 1. Robin wonders if he's the first bird who can't fly. His brother and sister call from the air,

provide a fuzzy feeling that complements this gentle tale.

Braun, Trudi. *My Goose Betsy*. Illus. by John Bendall-Brunello. 1998. 32p. Candlewick, paper, \$5.99 (0-7636-1714-8).

Preschool–Gr. 1. Braun has raised geese for a dozen years, and her familiarity and fondness for the subject shows. Betsy the goose builds her nest, lays her eggs, and hatches her goslings, taking time



Albert inspects the nest a pair of cardinals has built on his hand in *Albert* by Donna Jo Napoli, illustrated by Jim LaMarche.

out from her duties for a quick splash in the bath, a peck at the feeder, and a “lovely slow stretch . . . like a ballerina.” A final page in the book includes interesting facts on the life cycle of geese.

Davies, Jacqueline. *The Boy Who Drew Birds: A Story of John James Audubon*. Illus. by Melissa Sweet. 2004. 32p. Houghton, \$15 (0-618-24343-7).

K–Gr. 3. Even as a boy, John James Audubon loved birds. When he discovers a nest of Phoebe birds in a

encouraging him to try, and his parents recount their meticulous efforts in building a “home that feels like a hug,” gently reassuring Robin until he's ready to spread his wings. The torn-paper and watercolor collages

Kristine O'Connell George on Writing *Hummingbird Nest*

The idea for *Hummingbird Nest: A Journal of Poems* arrived in a furious blur of pixie-sized wings early one Sunday morning: an angry little hummingbird was repeatedly dive-bombing my family as we tried to eat breakfast on the patio! Our immediate question was, Why was that stubborn little bird trying to drive us away?

We soon discovered that the hummingbird had designated a small potted ficus as her nesting site; we were no longer welcome on our back patio. I'd heard stories (and felt somewhat jealous) of families who had had a hummingbird build a nest close to their home, giving them a front-row seat to see the private lives of hummingbirds. Now *this* bird had chosen us!

I knew immediately that I'd want to remember everything about this experience. Photographs were out of the question for fear of disturbing the mother hummingbird, possibly causing her to abandon the nest. So I decided to keep a daily journal, initially writing a straight narrative supplemented by a few inept pencil sketches. However, I soon found myself writing poetry.

Poetry released me from the constraints of third-person prose, forced me to think deeply, and also offered me a wealth of poetic "tools." For example, mask (or persona) poems allowed me the fun of "interviewing" the family cat and dog and reporting their disgruntled reactions to the feathered interloper ("The Dog

Complains" and "The Cat Remarks"). Apostrophe poems gave me license to "speak" directly to the birds ("Nestlings" and "Congratulations").

Struggling to find the best form for each of the 26 poems involved experimenting with traditional rhymed forms such as tercets and quatrains as well as with unrhymed forms such as cinquains and tankas. The discipline and distillation poetry requires gave me a framework to capture the intensity of my experience more precisely, and with far fewer words, than in my original prose entries. The final poems themselves may be short, but they were the result of pages and months of writing and rewriting.

While I was observing the mother hummingbird and her nestlings, I was also researching hummingbirds and comparing the scientific writings to what I was seeing in "real life." I wove some of what I learned into the poems and wrote an author's note and compiled a list of interesting hummingbird facts, thereby extending the boundaries of the book beyond that of a traditional poetry collection. I've included some of my ideas on incorporating *Hummingbird Nest: A Journal of Poems* into writing and science curricula on my Web site at <http://www.kristinegeorge.com>.

Having a hummingbird nest on my back patio was most likely a once-in-a-lifetime event. However, I'm still fascinated by the possibilities poetry offers us in observing the life process. That explains why I'm now raising silkworms and incubating a chicken egg. Next spring: tadpoles! —Kristine O'Connell George



cave outside his home, he wonders if the same birds will return to the same nest the following spring. He designs a clever experiment and proves that his bird friends do indeed return each year. This story of the famous naturalist and painter as a young boy is accompanied by watercolor and collage paintings. For more on Audubon, see Jennifer Armstrong's picture-book biography *Audubon* (Abrams, 2003).

Lerner, Harriet, and Susan Goldhor. *Franny B. Kranny, There's a Bird in Your Hair!* Illus. by Helen Oxenbury. 2001. 40p. HarperCollins, \$15.95 (0-06-024683-9); HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (0-06-051785-9).

Preschool–Gr. 2. Little Franny has

wild orange hair that lands her in the hairdresser's chair, where she receives an up-do in which a passing bird settles. Careful not to disturb her tenant, Franny attends a party with the bird still in place, and ultimately cuts off her hair, giving the clippings to the bird for a proper tree nest. Oxenbury's illustrations add to the fun.

Lodge, Bernard. *Tanglebird*. 1997. 32p. Houghton/Walter Lorraine, \$14.95 (0-395-84543-2).

Preschool–Gr. 1. *Tanglebird's* dissatisfaction with his knotty mess of a nest causes him to fly into the city in search of new materials. There, he befriends Gina, who teaches him how to weave fabric and tie bows. When

he returns to the woods, he creates one of the neatest (and prettiest) nests around. Both children and adults will respond to Lodge's woodcuts printed with lots of pinks, blues, and greens.

Napoli, Donna Jo. *Albert*. Illus. by Jim LaMarche. 2001. 32p. Harcourt, \$16 (0-15-201572-8).

K–Gr. 2. The colored-pencil drawings bring alive this story of a gentle man who is afraid to go outside. Every day, Albert sticks his hand out the window to test the weather, and every day he concludes that the weather is not good for walking, until one day a pair of cardinals builds a nest on his outstretched hand, and Albert no longer has the option of retreating into the

safety of his apartment. Gentle, joyful, and hopeful, this book will encourage children to take risks in a positive way. For a similar story, see Tohby Riddle's *The Singing Hat* (Farrar, 2000), in which a man accommodates birds who have built a nest in his hat.

Paterson, Katherine. *Marvin's Best Christmas Present Ever*. Illus. by Jane Clark Brown. 1997. 48p. Harper-Trophy, paper, \$3.99 (0-06-444265-9).

K–Gr. 3. In this I Can Read book, Marvin despairs of ever making a Christmas gift as wonderful as his sister's creations. But when he creates a wreath to hang on the family's trailer, he thinks it's the best Christmas present ever. The wreath is kept up through Valentine's Day, Easter, and into the first warm days of spring—when Marvin discovers that a mother bird and her babies think his wreath is the best Christmas present ever, too.

Rockwell, Anne. *Two Blue Jays*. Illus. by Megan Halsey. 2003. 32p. Walker, \$15.95 (0-8027-8840-8).

Preschool–Gr. 2. When two blue jays land in a tree outside their classroom window, the kids in Miss Dana's class become avid bird-watchers. Over the course of just a few weeks, the birds build a nest, hatch baby birds, and fly away. The children, meanwhile, become naturalists, recording the varieties of food eaten by the birds, drawing the eggs they lay, and marking the days of their arrival and departure. Cut-paper and paint collage artwork brings the birds to life.

Informational Books

Boring, Mel. *Birds, Nests, and Eggs*. Illus. by Linda Garrow. 1998. 48p. NorthWord, paper, \$7.95 (1-55971-624-X).

Gr. 3–6. Young naturalists will enjoy the projects described in this book: how to make a shower-bath, how to build a bird blind, and how to make a hang-down suet feeder. Interspersed are descriptions of 14

species of birds, their eggs, and their nests. For information on bird life in cities, see Barbara Bash's *Urban Roosts* (Little, Brown, 1990).

Frost, Helen. *Bird Nests*. 1999. 24p. Capstone, \$11.95 (0-7368-0225-8).

Preschool–K. From the smallest nest (the hummingbird's) to the largest (the bald eagle's), nests hold and protect eggs and baby birds. This entry in the Birds series features riveting photographs that focus on the building materials used by various birds. For more on bird families and how they roost, see Frost's *Bird Families* (Capstone, 1999), also in the Birds series.

Maslowksi, Steve. *Birds in Spring*. 2002. 24p. Smart Apple Media, \$16.95 (1-58340-056-7).

Gr. 1–3. Stunning photographs show close-ups of the nests of a variety of birds, including vireos, flycatchers, orioles, bluebirds, robins, yellow warblers, and screech owls. Interesting facts about nest-building behavior are highlighted in sidebars throughout.

Robinson, W. Wright. *How Birds Build Their Amazing Homes*. 1999. 64p. Blackbirch, \$24.95 (1-5671-1376-1).

Gr. 3–6. There are many different kinds of nests: sewn nests, floating nests, hanging nests, tunnel nests, haystack nests—even edible nests! This entry in the Animal Architects series is written for the older reader, but the wealth of photographs and drawings make the information accessible to readers in the primary grades.

Spaulding, Dean T. *Housing Our Feathered Friends*. 1997. 56p. Lerner, \$19.93 (0-8225-3176-3).

Gr. 3–6. You probably know that many birds use sticks, straw, grass, feathers, and mud to build their nests. But did you know that some birds use spiderwebs, snakeskin, rocks, and fungus? This book includes a wealth of information about how birds build their nests. It also describes a variety

Listed below are articles from past issues of *Book Links* about types of birds. For information on how to obtain back issues, see p.3.

- "The Puffins Are Back! by Gail Gibbons," July 1994, p.57
- "Dabbling in Duck Books," November 2003, p.23

For Web Sites that relate to birds and nests, see the "Web Connections" page of *Book Links* Web site, at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks>.

of birdhouse-building projects, ranging in level from easy to challenging.

Poetry

George, Kristine O'Connell. *Hummingbird Nest: A Journal of Poems*. Illus. by Barry Moser. 2004. 48p. Harcourt, \$16 (0-15-202325-9).

K–Gr. 4. As deftly as a hummingbird weaves its home out of bits and scraps, the author weaves snippets of words to create a vibrant picture of the nesting process. The actions of a mother hummingbird are portrayed in rich watercolors, from the day she chooses a nesting site until the day she leaves once her offspring have grown and are on their own.

Winer, Yvonne. *Birds Build Nests*. Illus. by Tony Oliver. 2002. 32p. Charlesbridge, \$16.95 (1-57091-500-8); paper, \$6.95 (1-57091-501-6).

K–Gr. 3. In gentle, rhyming quatrains, this book explains where, how, when, and why birds build nests. A nest identification guide at the end provides additional facts about the 15 species included in the book.

Jacqueline Davies is the author of *The Boy Who Drew Birds*, noted above, and *Where the Ground Meets the Sky* (Marshall Cavendish, 2002). She lives in Needham, Massachusetts, where she watches robins, chickadees, and blue jays from her kitchen window.