

FIELD CRAFT

How to find nests

Toby Spall is an avid nest recorder and has spent years of his life watching birds throughout the seasons. In this article he explains, using his own experiences to illustrate, how to start looking for nests.

Bruce Campbell wrote in 1953 that there are two main ways in which you can find a nest: by searching for it yourself, or by getting the birds to show it to you. This is as true today as it was back then.

BLACKBIRD

Most people seem to start their nest-finding by searching for Blackbirds. As the nests are relatively bulky affairs, they are often easily located by looking through the branches of suitable hedgerows against low early-morning sunshine. Never ignore a ditch alongside or below a hedge; they offer a perfect opportunity for this method of searching. Once found, nests can be easily relocated from the outside of the hedge by leaving a marking pole sticking through the hedge. Later in the season this system also works for marking warbler and finch nests located from tunnels within the dead parts of thick bramble clumps, before examining them by carefully working through the almost impenetrable canopy of the bush. My marking pole is strong enough at its base to help me climb out of ditches and is

marked at 30 cm intervals to gauge the height of nests. Whilst on this subject, the well-dressed nester will be suitably clothed for the morning. The term 'soft underbelly' in no way describes the litter below a well-established bramble and thorn clump! I crawl along wearing a fully-brimmed no-snag hat, industrial gloves and trousers with kneepad pockets importantly overlapping my wellington boots to stop the dreaded 'snail puree' effect around the ankles.

Carefully watching females with nesting material, and both sexes with food, will help you locate better hidden nests

▶ Chiffchaffs build impressive domes, often in brambles and other well-hidden spots.



◀ Blackbird nests are usually a large cup of plant material, with pale blue, speckled eggs.

The downside of cold-searching like this is that it generally locates the more obvious nests, which are potentially more vulnerable to predation by species such as corvids, using exactly the same methods as the nest recorder. Failure rates tend to be higher, particularly earlier in the season, but this still provides valuable data on laying dates, although it can be somewhat disheartening. Carefully watching females with nesting material, and both sexes with food, will help you locate better hidden nests, especially as the season progresses. Checking any vegetation from which a Blackbird (or any other species) flushes without the usual scolding call is surprisingly often rewarded by the discovery of a well-hidden nest.

CHIFFCHAFF

In mid-April, start to look out and listen for Chiffchaffs. Damp and drizzly mornings seem to be best as this makes the dry materials more pliable. Only





◀ Blackcaps weave a neat cup, with finer materials like spider webs around the rim.

the female builds whilst the male sings from a perch above her. The male will stop singing if you are close to a nest and start to 'huit' instead, as a warning to the female. Keeping the area in view, retire until the male recommences singing; the female will appear with material. The nest is often in low bramble or tough matted sedges or *Phalaris* clumps just above ground (or sometimes water level) and often conveniently located near the edge of the cover. From the outside it looks like a cluster of dead leaves, which will be cosily lined with feathers and grasses. If she is carrying large leaves do not attempt to locate the nest; birds are most sensitive to disturbance before they have invested much in the attempt, so just mark the spot where she disappeared and come back a week or so later when the clutch should have been started. You can mark nests with a stem of recognisably different and taller vegetation, such as Mugwort or Willowherb, with a small flag of electrician's tape attached if needed. In my early days I used biodegradable coloured wool but often returned to find that it had been painstakingly removed and incorporated into the nests!

Once incubation has started, you can locate the nest by following the female's 'huit' contact call which she makes incessantly when off the clutch, only stopping when she returns. After about 15 minutes or so, quietly approach the area – the male bird will give an alarm call if the site is still occupied – and gently tap across the surface of the vegetation. If the bird is incubating, it will fly, quietly and low, from the nest which you can now carefully find and examine. The entrance to the spherical nest is usually wide enough to enable an accurate count of the eggs. Should the bird not emerge, return an hour or so later and repeat the process.

Nesting will improve your general birdwatching and observation skills and therefore your enjoyment of birding

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS

This article concentrates on only two species, but they are an easy and early start to the nesting season and involve skills which are transferable to many small open-nesting passerines such as finches and warblers.

Observing the behaviour and learning the calls are essential clues, and the

'tapping' method is applicable to most species like finches and warblers, though there are differences to learn with each. For example, sitting Blackcaps are more likely to drop from the nest to the ground below, so use your ears as much as your eyes when gently tapping! You will soon get a feel for the right vegetation types – almost all birds need a structure of dead vegetation to hold and support their nests, and tapping bramble or nettle areas which have been trimmed to the ground the previous winter will almost certainly prove non-productive. Leaving these areas uncut in winter will be important to birds come spring.

Nesting will improve your general birdwatching and observation skills and therefore your enjoyment of birding. It has fascinated me for over fifty years and I still get a real thrill from it every year. Luck plays a part, but the more you practice the luckier you will become! ■

How you can get involved

The BTO Nest Record Scheme (NRS) gathers vital information on the breeding success of Britain's birds by volunteers finding and following the progress of individual nests. Anyone can be a nest recorder. Some people watch a single nest box in their back garden while others find and monitor nests of a whole range of species. Find out more about the scheme at www.bto.org/nrs. And if you're interested in building your own nest box and watching a pair of birds raise a successful brood, the newly published book *Nestboxes: your complete guide* provides all you need to know to get started. You can buy the book at www.bto.org/nestbox-guide.

