

Time to learn about nests

By ART BRIGGS-JUDE

Now that the branches of tree and hedge are silhouetted against a wintry landscape, it's an opportune time to go nest hunting.

And while some folk of yesteryear pursued this pastime to enlarge their birds' egg collection, today's nest-hunter has other motives in mind. He may, for example, want to make a photographic record of the different birds' nests, or an actual nest collection itself.

That's quite alright at this season for the feathered builders seldom use the same nest the following spring.

On the other hand, an outdoor observer might want to study the make-up and construction of the various nests he encounters.

To be sure, the variety of materials used and the various loca-

tions in which they are found make for an interesting field study. From the bottle-cap-sized cradle of the hummingbird to the huge branched platform of the osprey an observer has much to learn.

Other nest-hunters go out at this time of year merely to check on the various birds that frequent their area during the summer months.

Often by matching the strange calls that were heard against the particular nests that are now found, an unusual breeding bird may be discovered. At any rate, a walk around your backyard, woodlot, or parkland today will certainly provide you with a number of pleasant surprises.

Why right there, for example, in the centre limbs of that small cra-

bapple is the mud nursery your old worm-eating robin built. And it's hard to believe the chipping sparrows with their rusty crowns nested in that clump of hedge so close to the house.

Actually besides furnishing clues to the different bird species occurring in an area, nests often provide interesting tales in the lives of the weavers themselves.

A closer examination of that chipping sparrow's nest will reveal the customary hair lining that in days gone by was invariably horsehair.

The same nest these days will in all likelihood contain the hair of humans, livestock, or wild animals and we can only speculate on where these small birds procured this material. On the other hand, the bulky kingbird's cradle fastened to the mid upper branches

of a medium-sized pine may contain the skeletal remains of a young bird.

A clue to the juvenile's death may be found in the evidence of some small bean-sized particles showing through the nesting material. In this case, the screw worm nest fly larvae had claimed another victim.

In a nearby shrub, the small compact cup of milkweed fibres, plant down and fine grasses resting there belongs to our common summer resident, the yellow warbler. Frequently found at eye level this nest reveals it had a second layer on top.

Again, a closer look reveals the added structure has been built on top of one or more eggs of the parasitic cowbird. Usually this procedure to combat the cowbird

occurs only once, but there have been nests found with as many as six superstructures added, each containing a parasitic cowbird egg.

Further into the woods and often within reaching distance we notice a small rather deep cup constructed of fine grass, bark strips, rootlets and laced to the supporting twigs with fine vine tendrils and spider webbing.

While the nest of the red-eyed vireo is most conspicuous at this season it's almost invisible among the summer foliage. Bird nests found in cavities also have stories to tell but for today let's be content to examine the woven creations that are more noticeable as we take the kinks out of our legs on a neighborhood ramble.

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