

Who's eating my eggs?

It can be really tough being a small bird living in our suburbs. They have to deal with other birds, cats, dogs, people, cars and many other threats. Breeding time is extra challenging. Not only do they need to find a suitable place to build their nest and good construction materials, but they need to protect their eggs and then their babies from predators. Different birds do this in different ways. Many small birds like Red-browed Finches hide their nests in dense shrubs, other birds like Willie Wagtails nest out on open branches. Masked Lapwings (also called Spur-winged Plovers) take this to the next level – they barely bother with a nest, just lay their eggs on the grass.

Try building your own cup-shaped nests, make some eggs and then put them outside your house to see what predators might be around your neighbourhood.

Be a part of a scientific experiment – send us your results and we will collect everyone's findings and publish them on the Birds in Backyards website (www.birdsinbackyards.net).

Materials

- Tennis ball cut in half
- PVC glue
- Natural materials and man-made materials
- Modeling clay/plasticine



Activity Instructions

Pretend you are a bird. Search the tables here for natural materials like grass, twigs, moss and leaves and also man-made materials like wool, lint, fake spiders web and string that you can use to build your nest. Coconut fibre makes a great base for a nest to then add other materials to.



Put a small amount of glue on the outside of the halved tennis ball or small container. Add your nest materials to the outside and shape around your nest. Add some glue and materials to the inside of the nest as well (baby birds need a nice soft bed), but not too much as you need to have room for your eggs.

Want an extra challenge? Pretend all you have to use is your bird beak – use chopsticks or even toothpicks to pick up your nesting material and stick it to your nests. Think about how difficult it is for birds – who also don't have glue, to weave their nests!

Once your nest has taken shape, take 2 small lumps of clay and shape them into 2 eggs for each nest you are building (so 4 eggs in total). Gently place them in your nests.

Take your 2 nests home – put one in a dense shrub/tree (somewhere hidden) and another in an open spot – on an exposed branch or on your clothesline (but somewhere you can safely check on them). If something tries to attack your eggs (mistaking them for the real thing), tell-tale marks will be left behind in the soft clay eggs. In some cases, your eggs, and sometimes your whole nest, might go missing!



Check on your nests every day and when you see evidence of nest predation (or if any of your eggs disappear), bring the nest inside for a closer look (leave the other one outside) and see if you can work out what attacked them. Finish your experiment one whole week after you started (unless both your nests are attacked before then).

Typical predators and their evidence:

- Birds – leave triangle marks in the egg – big birds (like Pied Currawongs and Ravens) will leave big triangles, small birds will leave small marks.
- Rats/mice – will leave 4 (2 top and 2 bottom) teeth marks. They will also often completely chew eggs till they fall apart.
- Cats – generally they will slice at an egg with their paw.
- Lizards – lots of little dots arranged in a mouth-shape.



Think about:

- What predators are around in your neighbourhood?
- Why some birds might nest in dense shrubs? Why does this help them?
- Why do some birds nest in the open? What might they do differently to birds that nest in dense shrubs?
- What can you do to make your garden safe for birds to build a nest?

Fill out the form below to let us know what happened. Don't forget to let us know even if your nests didn't get attacked – that is just as important as findings out what ones did get attacked.

Everyone who sends in their results goes into a monthly prize draw. Fill out and return the information below to: Nest Experiment, BirdLife Discovery Centre, Newington Armory, 1 Jamieson St, Sydney Olympic Park, NSW 2127.



Name: _____

Age: _____

Suburb: _____

Parent's contact number/email address: _____

Dense shrubs nest: attacked not attacked

What day did you notice your nest was attacked?

Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday

Nest predator

Bird Rat/mouse Cat Lizard Unknown Other _____

Open nest: attacked not attacked

What day did you notice your nest was attacked?

Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday

Nest predator

Bird Rat/mouse Cat Lizard Unknown Other _____