

There's magic in nest building of the avian world

Loyal reader Fritz Hopfinger of Brooklin emailed me recently about his loyal German shepherd, which has been surrendering fur to a tufted titmouse. The bird visits the dog daily, plucking fur and carrying it to her nest hole. Fritz conveyed that the bird isn't timid, and the dog doesn't mind. Would I like to see pictures? Sensing a chance to win that elusive Pulitzer Prize for birding journalism, I naturally said yes.

A few days later, the photographic evidence arrived. Somewhere, in a tree cavity nearby, there are some baby titmice snuggling warmly in a fur-lined nest.

Nest building is one of the wonders of the avian world. Not only are they a home for chicks, but nests often are used as social signals. A male marsh wren builds several dummy nests just to prove his worthiness. Eventually, the female chooses

the nest — and the male — she desires and finishes the job. She may even keep the male — but build her own nest.

Pileated woodpeckers stay in faithful pairs year-round. Nonetheless, spring is a time for the male to prove himself, and he tends to go a little nuts, whacking square demonstration holes into numerous trees before the pair settles on a new home.

Some nests scarcely deserve the title. Common and arctic terns merely scrape the soil before laying their eggs. Puffins dig burrows in rocky crevices, but their cousins, the razorbills and murrelets, just lay their eggs on a bare ledge. The eggs are oblong, so if they roll, they roll in a circle instead of off the cliff. Peregrine falcons just scrape a spot on a precipice. Woe to the nestling that sleepwalks.

Meanwhile, eagles, ospreys and herons make enormous stick nests meant to be used year after year. Some are so large that they threaten the support they are built upon.

Some birds surprise you. One doesn't think of gulls and shorebirds as tree nesters, but in Canada, the di-



BDN FILE
Cormorants nest on the cliffs of Jordan's Delight, an island off the coast of Maine near Narraguagus Bay in 2012.

minutive Bonaparte's gull nests in spruces near fresh water, and solitary sandpipers are tree nesters. The marbled murrelet is in the same family with puffins, but it nests in the 200-foot treetops of old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest.

Then there's the belted kingfisher. It nests in a burrow dug into a sand pit, sometimes distant from the water where it forages. Wood ducks and hooded mergansers nest in tree cavities. It's always odd to see a duck standing high on a tree limb.

Swallows use every nest-building strategy there is. Tree swallows nest in cavities. Bank swallows nest in burrows. Rough-winged

swallows do both. Cliff swallows attach self-supporting mud huts under eaves and bridges. Barn swallows build nests under structures, often in the same places as cliff swallows. They also use mud to help bind the nest together, but their nests need support under the floor.

Nest weaving is an art. Robins appreciate string and twine left in the backyard. A useful length is 3 to 8 inches. Blue-headed vireos often use strips of birch bark. Many species use sticky cobwebs to bind nests together. One day in May, many years ago, I was sitting on a porch, reading a book. I must have been pretty still, because a female black-throated green war-

bler landed on my chair and hopped up onto my shoulder to reach the cobweb behind me. She carried it off, apparently unaware she had just perched on a human.

Baltimore orioles take the art of nest building to a new level. Their hanging nests resemble large socks. First, the female weaves long fibers over the branches. Then, she pokes the mass of fibers with her bill until it's sufficiently tangled to simulate knots. Springy fibers are added to reinforce the bowl. Eventually, down and feathers line the inside. It takes a week or more to build each one.

Nest lining is another art. Like the titmouse, the closely related chickadee likes to line its nest with animal fur. Pet hair left in the yard is a boon. Even your own hair clippings are valued. Cattail fluff, moss, lichens, pine

needles, grass clippings and shredded paper often end up lining a nest.

Waterfowl frequently pluck their own down to line a nest. Common eiders are legendary for the insulating properties of their feathers. Until modern synthetics came along, eider down was considered the lightest, warmest stuffing for winter clothing and sleeping bags.

I could learn a lot from this experience. May I be as bold as the titmouse, and as mellow as the shepherd.

Bob Duchesne serves as vice president of Maine Audubon's Penobscot Valley Chapter. He developed the Maine Birding Trail, with information at mainebirding-trail.com. He can be reached at duchesne@midmaine.com.

Things to Do Outdoors

AUBURN — Androscoggin Land Trust Great Falls Boats 'n' Brews River Race, 9:30 a.m. Saturday, June 25, Auburn Public Boat Launch behind Festival Plaza. \$30, \$15 children 12 and under. androscogginlandtrust.org, info@androscogginlandtrust.org or 782-2302.

BANGOR — Bangor Land Trust first day of summer tree ID walk with tree expert Steve Sader of the UMaine School of Forest Resources, 6:30-8 p.m. Monday, June 20, kiosk, Tamarack Trail cul-de-sac, Walden-Parke Preserve. Walk may cover more than a mile. Handout sheet listing most of trees, shrubs and common ground plants found there provided. Bring binoculars, wear walking or hiking shoes. 942-1010 or info@bangorlandtrust.org.

BENTON — Guided paddle on the Sebasticook with Sebasticook Regional Land Trust members and friends, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday, June 18. Learn about dam removal efforts along the river. Start in Benton and end at Fort Halifax. Guest speakers biologist Nate Gray of Maine Department of Marine Resources, author Kerry Hardy and bird expert Tom Aversa. Bagged lunches of locally produced food provided at Fort Halifax. Participants asked to indicate if they are willing to share space in boats with those who do not have their own. Reservations, 948-3766 or jennifer@sebasticookrft.org.

DEDHAM — Tyke hikes with farm and sanctuary steward Gail VanWart, 10-11 a.m. Saturdays, June, July and August, Peaked Mountain Farm, 6 Ellerys Lane. Children must be accompanied by adult. Experience nature, do a craft, hear a story. Indoor activities if inclement weather. \$3, free to children.

DEDHAM — Nature photography workshop with Matt Adams, 10 a.m.-noon Sundays, June 19 and 26, Peaked Mountain Farm, 6 Ellerys Lane. Participants will have the best of their photographs featured in 2017 Peaked Mountain Farm and Pollinator Sanctuary published in September. \$80, includes copy of 2017 calendar. Registration required. 249-5002 or peakedmtfarm@aol.com.

ELLSWORTH — The Magic of Fireflies program led by naturalist Lynn Havsall, 7:30-8:30 p.m. Wednesday, June 22, Woodlawn Museum. Children under 12 must be accompanied by

adult. Free but donations appreciated. woodlawn-museum.org.

GREENVILLE — Friends of Wilson Pond Area photo contest in celebration of its 25th anniversary as a land trust. Rules and information at fowpa.org. Prizes include dinner for two at West Branch Pond Camps, tickets for two for a Katahdin Rock and Roll Cruise, and Indian Hill Trading Post \$50 gift certificate. Deadline for photo submissions Sept. 1.

HOLDEN — Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife biologist Danielle D'Auria and students and staff of Haworth Academy outlining new local heron monitoring project in Orrington, 1-2 p.m. Saturday, June 18, Fields Pond Audubon Center, 216 Fields Pond Road. \$5 to benefit Heron Observation Network. 989-2591 or fieldspond@maineaudubon.org.

MILFORD — Paddle up Sunkhaze Stream with Maine wildlife biologist Danielle D'Auria and Gudrun Keszocze, naturalist and program director at Hirundo Wildlife Refuge, 8 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Saturday, June 18. Meet at Milford On the Run to drive to gated entrance. Bring canoe or kayak, PFD, paddles, water, light snack and bug protection. Dress for the weather. Register with Danielle at dauria@maine.gov or 485-8386. Free. sunkhaze.org.

ORLAND — Summer solstice full-moon paddle of Orland's Dead River, 8 p.m. Monday, June 20. Meet at Alamoosook Lake boat landing, Craig Brook National Fish Hatchery. Bring boat, paddle and life jackets. Paddle at your own speed up the lake and Dead River. Distance is 4-6 miles roundtrip. Jennifer, jrieffler@mdirss.org

or 469-2045. No rain date.

For a complete listing of calendar items or to submit your event, visit www.bangordailynews.com.

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