

WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

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Photo credit: Tim Carney

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Distinct. Frequent. Stentorian. These are all adjectives we applied to a song with which you should be acquainted.

FROM THE FIELD

Katherine P. talks about the joy that atlasing has brought her, and Robert L. shares some photos of his backyard owl family.

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TIPS AND TRICKS

There's a new resource in town, and you need to know about it. Download the Breeding Timeline today.

Have a story or a picture for the newsletter? We'd love to hear about it!

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On June 6, 2020, Samuel Miller, Jonathan and Daniel Irons, and Jack Hutchinson located Maryland's first White Ibis nest! Suspicions of White Ibis nests within the state have existed for several years, but they were never Confirmed. The pair were nesting within a colony of Glossy Ibises, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons on an island within Martin National Wildlife Refuge, Somerset County. The nest itself was located about 15 ft high in a thick tangle of blackberry and honeysuckle shrubs, and held three chicks. Congratulations on an exceptional find!



Photo credit: Sam Miller

"We are at the cusp of a turning point that embraces human diversity as joyfully as the diversity of feathered creatures. To get there, white people must value Black lives and hear our voices—and lean into uncomfortable conversations about racism and privilege that follow. The birding community must show that it is not neutral. Neutrality is dangerous, and this is our protest."

- Corina Newsome in "[It's Time to Build a Truly Inclusive Outdoors](#)"

UPCOMING EVENTS

I would strongly encourage you to explore our compilation of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) resources at <http://bit.ly/EDIResourcesList>.

(thanks to Jordan Rutter for compiling the resources).

From the Coordinator

Bird wellbeing first, then data collection.



Bird behavior is, in my opinion, completely, endlessly fascinating. And the ability and capacity we now have to use the collective observations of thousands of eager observers to contribute towards the conservation of these animated, feathered beings that we find so intriguing is beyond exciting.

But in making observations and collecting data, we must remember that our presence and actions have an impact on bird behavior, which ultimately can affect their nest success. The impacts vary from species to species; some birds, like

robins or doves, appear to care very little about the presence of a human, while other birds, like goshawks or woodcocks, may completely abandon a nesting attempt if disturbed.

When atlasing, an effortless way to detect a species can be to use playback (using a recording of a bird's song to elicit a response). Breeding males are territorial and will respond rapidly to a supposed invader. Surprisingly, there isn't a lot of research quantifying the impacts of playback on birds, but given the aggressive response that is often triggered by playback it is reasonable

to assume that playback generates at least some stress for the bird. Since the well-being and nest success of the bird is always our first priority, the use of playback to detect songbirds for the Atlas is discouraged (however, the trade-off between increased detection and the stress generated by playback is considered sufficient that playback should be used for nocturnal atlasing).

Nesting colonies are also particularly sensitive, and disturbance to those sites must be avoided. A substantial portion of a population's nesting effort takes place at a single colony site, and any disturbance can affect the nest success of the entire population. When you find a colony, count the nests as best you can and collect Confirmations, but if the adults are agitated you are too close and should back away.

Participating in the Atlas provides some extraordinary opportunities to learn about the natural history of birds and to contribute to their conservation, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with stopping to snap a picture or quickly peek into a nest, but there is also the potential to cause unintended harm. Always consider the bird's welfare, prioritize that welfare above data collection, and avoid unduly stressing breeding birds. Oh, and enjoy the exceptional opportunity to watch and learn about our birds!

--Gabriel



Keith uses a "nestie stick" to simultaneously check the contents of a nest and get pictures, all while putting the bird's welfare first. Photo credit: Keith Eric Costley

bird of the month:

OVENBIRD



Photo credit: Mark R. Johnson

Oven birds are the most abundant bird worldwide, with nearly 24 billion chickens alone currently in existence. Likewise, Ovenbirds—the *Seiurus aurocapilla* variety, not the *Gallus gallus domesticus* kind—are quite possibly the most abundant breeding warbler in Maryland and DC. Only Common Yellowthroats provide any real competition to the title.

Ovenbirds are well distributed across Maryland and DC, with a noticeable absence in the heavily agricultural Hagerstown and Frederick valleys. On the Eastern Shore, they are most abundant in the Pocomoke State Forest. They select mature deciduous or mixed forests that have a canopy between 50 and 75 ft high and is 60–90% closed, but the size of that forest patch is important as well. While they will use smaller forest fragments, both their density and their nest success

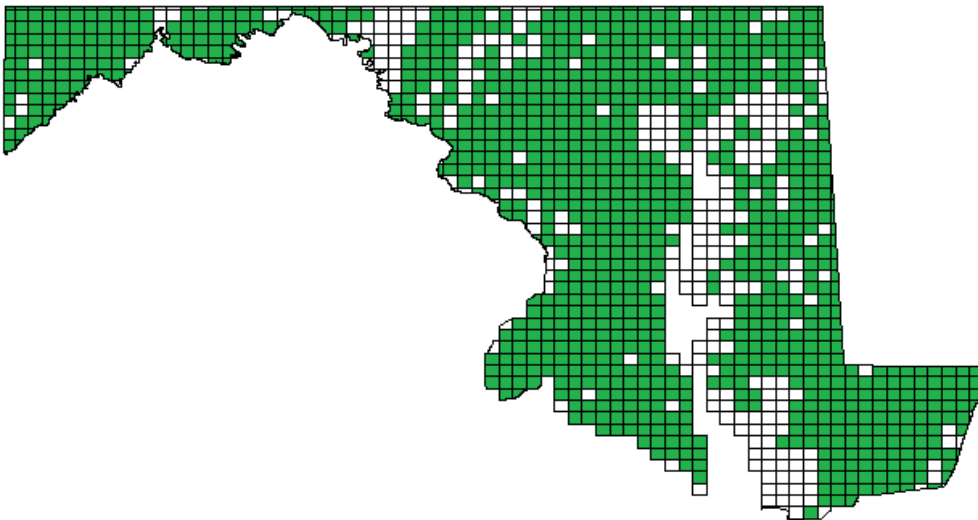
increase as forest patch size increases.

Ovenbirds that use smaller forest fragments are frequent hosts to Brown-headed Cowbirds, but it is predation, not parasitism, that causes most nests to fail. In small patches of forest, the chance of successfully fledging chicks can be as low as 15%, while it can be as high as 70% in contiguous forest. Unexpectedly, chipmunks can be a major predator—in one radio telemetry study, half of the dead fledglings were recovered from inside chipmunk burrows. In contiguous forests, cowbirds parasitize a mere 2% of Ovenbird nests, but in fragmented forests that jumps to about a third of their nests. It doesn't affect incubation though, and, since Ovenbird parents feed each of the chicks evenly, both cowbird and Ovenbird chicks grow at the same rate. In fact, cowbirds fledge from Ovenbird nests about 20% smaller

GOLDEN-CROWNED THRUSH

Audubon's Ovenbird plate in Birds of America bears an unfamiliar moniker.

The Ovenbird is the only member of its genus *Seiurus*, a Greek word that means “tail wagging”. You might think that would apply better to the birds we call wagtails, but the wagtail genus received the Latin synonym *Moticilla*, which means “moving tail”. Ovenbirds and waterthrushes were combined in the genus *Seiurus* until 2010, when waterthrushes were moved into the genus *Parkesia* (an eponym referring to ornithologist Dr. Kenneth Parkes). The second half of the Ovenbird's Latin name (the ‘specific epithet’), *aurocapilla*, translates to “golden crowned”, a reference to its orange-striped head. Due to their thrush-like appearance, Ovenbirds were initially placed in the *Turdus* genus. The name *Turdus aurocapillus* (the different ending—‘a’ vs. ‘us’—is related to language gendering) lent the caption to Audubon's painting, Golden-crowned Thrush.



Ovenbird distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

than cowbirds from other songbird nests.

Males establish their territories 1–2 weeks before females arrive and are easily detected by their distinct, stentorian song. After pair formation, their frequency of vocalization drops in half, but the song remains a regular part of the forest soundscape until after their chicks fledge. In the previous atlas, half of breeding codes were males on territory—a reflection of the frequency, volume, and distinctiveness of their song and the difficulty of finding Confirmation evidence.



Photo credit: George Jett

The female builds the nest, incubates, and broods the chicks by herself. In fact, the male rarely approaches the nest at all until the chicks hatch and he begins to help feed them. Building the domed nest takes her five days; grasses, woody stems, and fibrous bark are woven together, often underneath overhanging vegetation such as a fern. The nest is normally in an area with sparse undergrowth and a small opening in the canopy. Construction is done from the inside, until dead leaves—an important component of the finished nest—and sticks are incorporated into the 6.5–9-inch exterior. An oblong opening to the nest, combined with the domed appearance, looks surprisingly like an old clay oven, and it is from this resemblance that they received their common name.

Ovenbirds are large, for a warbler. Other warblers nesting in Maryland are only 11 grams on average—about the same as a AAA battery. Conversely, Ovenbirds

are a whopping 21 g (about the same as two tablespoons of butter); only the two waterthrushes and Swainson's Warbler approach this mass. Ovenbirds pump their tail regularly (unlike the bobbing motion of waterthrushes). And unlike most other warblers, Ovenbirds walk rather than hop when on the ground. There are no plumage differences between Ovenbird sexes, but only males are known to sing. Ovenbirds are socially monogamous, but it's not unheard of for a female to have multiple male partners (polyandry), and vice versa (polygyny).

The female lays 3–6 white eggs with speckled-brown bases from early May to mid-July, although the nesting peak is early to mid-June. If the first attempt fails, she may renege, perhaps with the same partner or perhaps a new mate, but otherwise this will be her only nesting attempt for the year. The evening before the final egg is laid, she begins the twelve-day incubation period. Once the chicks hatch, the adults only ever walk into the nest—which, at the peak of feeding, can be nearly 70 trips per chick per day! Fecal sacs are eaten until late into the nestling stage, when the adults begin to carry them away. The nestlings fledge in 8–10 days, before they are capable of flight, and are distributed between the parents who will each care independently for half of the brood. The male remains in his territory with his half of the brood, but the female often leads her fledglings unpestered into neighboring territories. Although each nest fledges an average of three chicks, only half of those chicks



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Photo credit: George Jett



Photo credit: Mark R. Johnson

will ultimately survive to independence. Four weeks later, the chicks disperse and form loose groups with other unrelated juveniles, often in early successional patches of forest.

In subsequent years, Ovenbirds often return to the same forest they nested in previously, and may even pair with the same mate as the previous year. USGS Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that Ovenbirds are increasing across their entire range, and there was a 7% increase in distribution between BBA1 and BBA2. However, their local abundance decreases with the development and fragmentation of forests.

If you are not already, become familiar with the Ovenbird's song. If you are in a mature forest in Maryland during early summer, chances are you will hear the bird who, as poet Robert Frost said, "makes the solid tree trunks sound again".

Author: Gabriel Foley

References

Porneluzi, P., M.A. Van Horn, and T.M. Donovan. (2020). Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapilla*), version 1.0. In Birds of the World (A.F. Poole, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.ovenbi1.01>

Frost, R. (1916). *Mountain Interval*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

The Oven Bird

By Robert Frost

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says that early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.
The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.



Photo credit: Keith Eric Costley

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Scott Clark is a 15-year-old home-schooled soccer player who likes to bird in southern St. Mary's County.



How did you become interested in birds?

I visited a local nature park for Global Big Day in 3rd grade, then I started trying to identify birds in my backyard. After that, I went on several bird walks and it took off from there.

What bird do you particularly like?

My favorite bird is definitely the American Kestrel. I love raptors and especially falcons. Not only is the kestrel one of the more common falcons in my area, but it is also the best looking (in my opinion).

What bird do you think reflects your personality best?

Sanderling! They're very active and don't like to be still. They can be found together or alone. Sanderlings also travel a lot. I like to bird in places I've never been. I think I would fit in with a flock of Sanderlings.

Where is your favorite place to atlas?

I like atlasing in the fields around southern St. Mary's County.

If you went atlasing and could only bring binoculars, a field guide, and one other item, what would you bring?

I would bring a camera. I love taking pictures of birds, even if the pictures don't turn out that great.

If you could pick anyone to go atlasing with for a day, who would it be?

Gene Groshon, a Calvert County Naturalist and raptor enthusiast that helped me get into birding. And Josephine Kalbfleisch, a fellow YMOS member that I met while looking for the Burrowing Owl in St. Mary's County.

Have you been involved with any other atlases?

Last summer, I attended a camp called Mountains to Sea Birding for Teens at Hog Island in Maine, which was in the third year of its atlas. During the camp, I did a lot of atlasing.



What do you think is the best thing about atlasing?

I really like that the Atlas has given me the chance to slow down and actually watch birds and admire them instead of seeing a bird, adding it to the list, and moving on.

What do you think the biggest issue in conservation is today?

Habitat loss. Humans need to become more efficient with the space they have.

The **Cornell** Lab 
NestWatch

Want to submit more information about the nests you find?

Check out [Nestwatch.org](https://www.nestwatch.org)



Photo credit: Scott Clark

BLOCK PARTY



Finksburg CW, Carroll County

Carroll County is considered one of Maryland's rural counties, though it abuts populous Baltimore County to the east and Howard County to the south. Land use in the northern half of the county is still predominantly agricultural outside of the few scattered towns. There are still several Atlas blocks that remain unadopted within this agricultural portion of the county, but these blocks have few publicly accessible lands and had relatively meager species totals (mostly 60s and 70s) during the previous two atlases. While the southern half of the county generally has more sprawling development, it is also characterized by several state- or county-protected lands along larger streams, rivers, and reservoirs. The Finksburg CW block lies within this area of the county, being situated in the southeastern corner just north of the town of Eldersburg.

Finksburg CW does have its share of development—mostly residential neighborhoods—but it was one of the county's more species-rich blocks during each of the previous atlases, sporting 83 and 86 species respectively. The northeastern corner of the block is comprised of protected forest within the Morgan Run Natural Environmental Area and Liberty Reservoir. Numerous public hiking trails meander along Morgan Run and Liberty Reservoir, including where London Bridge Rd crosses Morgan Run. On the east side of London Bridge Rd, there is a widened parking area, and at the bridge trails lead both upstream and downstream along Morgan Run. Most of the habitat in this area is comprised of mature deciduous forest, but just upstream of the bridge there is a broad transmission line right-of-way. This right-of-way contains low-growing

vegetation favored by shrub-nesting specialists, including White-eyed Vireo and Yellow-breasted Chat. Both of these species were documented during the previous two atlases and have recently been recorded singing on territory. Hiking trails also lead through stands of pine and deciduous forest along Morgan Run and Liberty Reservoir, accessed from the southern ends of Poole Rd, Poudier Rd, and Hodges Rd. Forest interior birds were well represented in this block during the previous atlas, including locally-sensitive Kentucky, Worm-eating, Black-and-white, and Hooded Warblers.

In addition to forest birds, the block also has open farmland, particularly along Cherry Tree Ln. Vesper and Grasshopper Sparrows were documented as Probable during the second atlas and Eastern Meadowlark was Probable in the first atlas. The challenge will be to find these grassland specialists again within the block's limited agricultural land.

Whether you are looking for a centrally-located Atlas block with a nice mix of accessible habitats to adopt or are just working on your Carroll County species list, Finksburg CW might be for you.

Author: David R. Smith



Photo credit: David R. Smith

TIPS AND TRICKS

The concept of safe dates can be confusing. They are essentially only associated with breeding bird atlases, so, understandably, many observers are unfamiliar with them. But safe dates do serve a useful function by showing when the migratory or dispersal period for each species is likely to be complete (as a quick refresher, migration is the regular movement of a population between places, and dispersal is the movement of individuals, especially juveniles, into a new area).

There is a period of time for many species—often quite a substantial period of time—when their nesting period and their migratory or dispersal period overlap. Safe dates indicate the migratory and dispersal period, but you have to look elsewhere to learn about the nesting period. This provides an opportunity to create a new resource that shows both the nesting period and the migratory/dispersal period in a palatable way—and I think we have managed to do that with the [Breeding Timeline](#).

The Breeding Timeline merges nesting information found in the Yellowbook and migration and dispersal information indicated by the safe dates, and provides a visual representation of the overlap between those two life history segments. To accomplish this, we updated the egg dates found in the 1996 Yellowbook, then added the incubation and nestling period for each species to come up with the total nesting period (it's worth mentioning that first and last egg dates are often atypically early or late, respectively, so the peak nesting period is shorter than what is displayed in the Timeline).

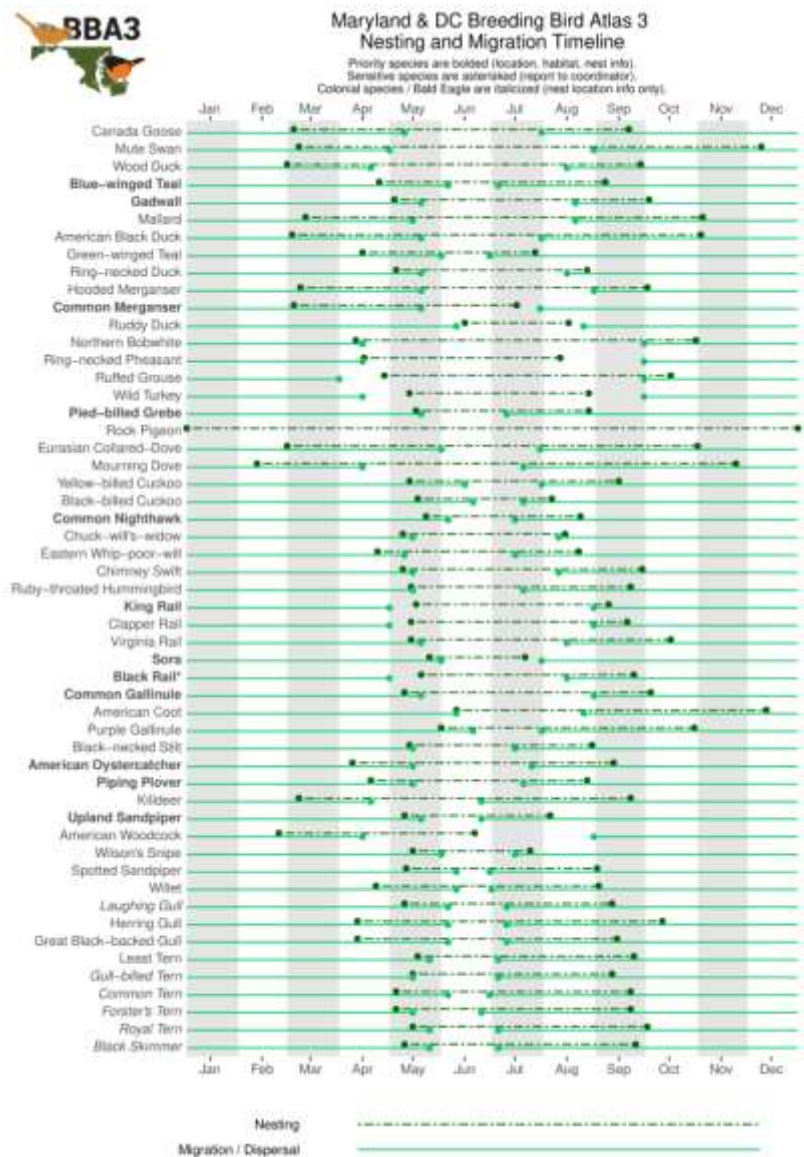
A user can find the applicable species on the Timeline and simultaneously see when it nests in Maryland and when it migrates or disperses. For example, no goldfinch eggs have ever been found in Maryland before July, so a

spring record of a goldfinch nest is virtually impossible. On the other hand, Pine Warblers wrap up their nesting efforts by mid-June, so nesting records from late summer are unlikely. Meanwhile, most swallows have brief windows between when migration is complete and when juvenile dispersal begins.

Downloading the Breeding Timeline, becoming familiar with it, and referencing it regularly will reduce data collection errors associated with timing, and I cannot encourage these actions enough. There is still plenty of other useful information in the [Yellowbook](#), including information about where species are expected to nest, but that is a conversation for another time.

Author: Gabriel Foley

Visit <https://ebird.org/atlasmdcc/about/handbooks> to download the Timeline.



FROM THE FIELD



Robert Lukinic shared these photos of a family of Eastern Screech-Owls. Screech-owls have nested in the box in his yard nearly every year for at least 25 years.

As Robert said, "I believe this is what we are looking for". Indeed—there's no better Confirmation than finding fuzzy chicks peering out of the nest!



FROM THE FIELD

I am sure you are all aware that these last few months have been out of the ordinary. We are restricted from venturing outside for long periods of time, we can't atlas with our fellow birders (unless we social distance ourselves, but even then it is not the same) and it seems like toilet paper has become an extinct species in grocery stores. However, this does not mean that we must stop birding; it means that like the cardinals, warblers, and raptors that we all admire, we have to adapt. For me and I am sure for others as well, I have delved into getting to know my bird neighbors during this pandemic.

Over the past few weeks, I have witnessed the arrival of several spring migrants, including a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Chipping Sparrows. Even now as I am writing this article in mid-May, I am watching a Gray Catbird pick up a twig and fly away with it (hopefully to build its nest). I have also gotten to know some of my local feeder birds. In the morning, I am usually greeted by the singing of cardinals, and the drumming of a Red-bellied Woodpecker on the roof. On World Migratory Bird Day, I was out gardening (and keeping an eBird checklist, obviously!), when a robin landed three feet in front of me. I was curious at the boldness of this bird and wondered why it had decided to venture so close. It quickly became clear that the robin was looking for a snack in the stirred-up dirt. It eventually flew off with a beakful of grubs. I have also noticed

how the House Finches never seem to share spots on the feeders, and how the Mourning Doves calmly forage during the late afternoon.

Hopefully, we will back to a more normal way of life in the near future. In the meantime, use being stuck at home to get to know your bird neighbors (if you haven't already). You might be surprised at what you can learn from just watching one bird.

Author: Katherine Pauer



Do you have a story or photo you would like to see in What's Hatching? We'd love to hear it! Send your submissions to the editor at mddcbba3@mdbirds.org.



Photo credit: Katherine Pauer

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Notes on an Ovenbird Nest

Beasley, R.J. 1945. Notes on an Ovenbird Nest. *Maryland Birdlife* 1(2):7.



Photo credit: Keith Eric Costley

On April 29th, 1945, about four o'clock in the afternoon, while walking through the grounds of the Mariners' Museum, near Newport News, Virginia, I was slightly startled when an Ovenbird flushed almost beneath my feet. The bird, apparently a female, started fluttering on the ground with both wings spread out as though broken. Realizing that I must have closely approached a nest I followed for about 25 or 30 feet to a spot where I could easily see every foot of the ground I had just passed, and awaited developments. By this time the bird had flown into some nearby low branches, twittering all the while, and flitting into one branch after another until she returned to about 10 or 15 feet from where I had first raised her. Another Ovenbird alighted in a taller tree some distance away. This bird, evidently the male of the pair, seemed to be keeping

watch over the proceedings, and at least once while I was watching, chased away two other Ovenbirds that had been attracted by the disturbance. In the meantime, several Carolina Chickadees rushed to the scene, offering their assistance and sympathy.

Suddenly the disturbed Ovenbird stopped twittering, and seemingly satisfied that all danger was past, dropped quietly to the ground and

disappeared. I immediately went to the spot where she had alighted, and presently found only a step or two away the characteristic Ovenbird nest, loosely constructed on the ground with a sort of thatched roof composed of dried weed stalks, grasses and leaves, completely covering the nest's occupants. Only the beady eyes and bill of the mother bird were visible through the entrance on one side.

On approaching the nest the mother bird again flew off exposing to view four naked babies, only a few days old. The mother had evidently been disturbed while feeding the young as only one of the four opened its mouth for feed, the others appearing content to be left alone.

Author: Ray J. Beasley

Editor's note: this description of an encounter with an Ovenbird nest was the first nest to be described in Maryland Birdlife.



Photo credit: Bill Hubick