WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

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Photo credit: Matthew Addicks/Macaulay Library

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BIRD OF THE MONTH

Bald Eagles staged a tremendous comeback in the Chesapeake Bay, a globally important site for this species.

TIPS & TRICKS

A quarter of Maryland and DC's breeding birds are 'special interest'. Learn how you can make the most of your sightings.

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Birds sometimes pick inconvenient places to nest. After "some persuasion", this newspaper carrier had to walk an extra block thanks to an inconsiderate flycatcher.

According to the Maryland Nest Record File, the earliest that Yellow-crowned Night-Heron eggs had been reported in Maryland was April 21. While atlasing near Baltimore's Druid Hill Park, Tobias Pessoa Gingerich moved this long-standing record ahead by four days after observing eggs when the brooding parent stood up to preen. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons lay 3–6 oval, bluish-green eggs and spend four weeks incubating the clutch.

Photo credit: Jordan Rutter

High o'er the watery uproar, silent seen,
Sailing sedate, in majesty serene,
Now midst the pillared spray sublimely lost,
And now, emerging, down the rapids tossed.
Glides the Bald Eagle, gazing, calm and slow
O'er all the horrors of the scene below;
Intent alone to sate himself with blood,
From the torn victims of this raging flood.

Alexander Wilson was a Scottish poet who was hugely influential in the field of early American ornithology.

He included this poem in his species account of the Bald Eagle, published in his seminal *American Ornithology*.

UPCOMING EVENTS

January 13, 7:30 PM
Montgomery Bird Club

Atlas Coordinator Gabriel Foley will be presenting an update on the Atlas's progress at the Montgomery Bird Club's monthly virtual meeting. More information can be found at montgomerybirdclub.org.

Pileated Woodpecker. Photo credit: Stephen Davies/Macaulay Library

From the Coordinator

Here's to a 2021 full of breeding birds!

December is often accompanied by reflection upon the past year, but it also brings with it anticipation of the new year. That feeling of anticipation may be especially acute this year for many, and I'm sure I am not alone in eagerly developing atlasing plans for 2021. Personally, I enjoy having some sort of yearly bird-focused goal to aim for. It adds a fun, higher-level theme to my efforts, and provides a sense of accomplishment if the goal is met.

Last year, as a Maryland newcomer, I was anticipating spending 2020 seeing new species, and I had big plans for Confirming those new species. But of course, as we all know, there was an unexpected twist to 2020. My plans shrank accordingly, right down to patch-size. I still had fun with my little suburban patch—115 species, and 34 Confirmations—but even some of my simplest plans weren't achieved, like seeing a Yellow-throated Warbler.

Looking ahead to 2021, prudence advises a goal that does not rely on extensive travelling, but optimism suggests one that provides the opportunity for exploration and discovery. I'd like a goal that celebrates the common birds and encourages learning more about them. Eventually, my partner Jordan and I decided that an effort to photograph breeding behaviors fit those conditions well, so we have set a goal of taking pictures of breeding behaviors from 100 Maryland birds in 2021. I think it will be fun!

We have some species-specific wishes too. This is the year that I will finally see a Yellow-throated Warbler (of course, I said that last year too). And I would absolutely love to find a Brown Creeper nest tucked away behind a slab of bark, or spend a morning watching a group of Saltmarsh Sparrows interacting. Jordan can't wait to watch orioles building their nests again, and the fluffier the chick, the better.

This year has been an exceptional start for the Atlas, and I couldn't be prouder of our community. Together, we learned how to tolerate fogged optics, we became more familiar with our local patches, and we witnessed an incredible finch irruption and an absurd variety of vagrant birds. We also documented a new species breeding in Maryland, we earned a Governor's Citation, and we submitted nearly as many breeding codes as both of the previous atlases combined.

And so, with that, we bid farewell to 2020 and welcome a crisp, new year with outstretched arms. Happy New Year, everyone! Here's to a 2021 full of breeding birds!

--Gabriel

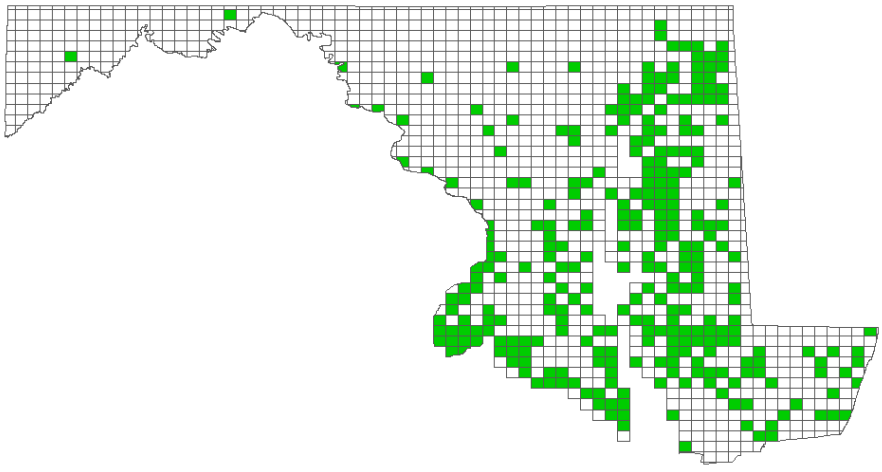
bird of the month:

BALD EAGLE

Photo credit: Joe Wolf/Macaulay Library

The extraordinary productivity of the Chesapeake Bay makes it one of the most important sites for Bald Eagles. Individuals from eastern Canada and the northeastern US overwinter in the Bay, while Floridian birds spend their summers here. The visitors tend to concentrate in a half dozen locations around the Bay, but thousands of resident pairs nest around the Bay's perimeter. The co-occurrence of breeding and non-breeding adult eagles throughout the year can introduce confusion to Atlas mapping efforts, so Maryland has traditionally only used Confirmed codes to represent blocks where eagles are nesting. However, other behaviors, such as courtship or territoriality, can indicate where an undiscovered nest may be, so for BBA3 we are encouraging the collection of Probable codes for Bald Eagles in addition to Confirmed codes.

Eagles breeding in the Chesapeake Bay likely stay in the general area of their nest year-round, but they associate closer to the nest during the breeding season. Bald Eagles appear to mate for life, and extra-pair copulations have never been documented. In Maryland and DC, Bald Eagles generally begin exhibiting courtship behaviors in December. As described by poet Walt Whitman, their famous cartwheel 'dalliance', is tremendously impressive—the pair flies high together, locks talons, and tumbles toward the ground. They release each other at the last moment and fly off, unharmed. Pairs will also engage in a chase display that sometimes involves airborne rolls and interlocked talons, as well as a J-shaped stoop.



Bald Eagle nest distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

"BALD" EAGLE

Early ornithologists wavered on its name.

When Mark Catesby first described the Bald Eagle in 1731, he wrote that, "This bird is called the Bald Eagle, both in Virginia and Carolina, tho' his head is as much feather'd as the other parts of his body." His accompanying French and Latin descriptions translate to white-headed eagle, and both common names, 'bald' and 'white-headed', were used interchangeably by naturalists throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A century after Catesby, Alexander Wilson echoed his remarks on the widespread usage of 'Bald Eagle', writing that "the epithet *bald*, applied to this species, whose head is thickly covered with feathers, is equally improper and absurd". That notwithstanding, the American Ornithological Union's first Check-list in 1886 cemented the use of Bald Eagle as the 'official' common name.

This name is a subtle reminder of the European bias that has been applied to science and natural history; it is white folks, after all, who display the synonymy between being bald and being white-headed.

Pair-bond behaviors coincide with their most intensive nest maintenance efforts, although nest maintenance often begins earlier in the fall and, indeed, can occur at any time of year. In Maryland, most nests are built in loblolly pines. Oaks and sycamores are also frequently used, and transmission towers have become less unusual nest sites. Bryan Watts, of the Center for Conservation Biology (CCB), has reported the extraordinary behavior of five ground-nesting pairs. Traditionally, preferred nesting habitat is mature forest that is undisturbed and within a mile or so of a large waterbody. The nest must be accessible to the eagles and capable of supporting their massive nests. This means that the nest tree is typically the largest tree in the area and extends well above the canopy.

Photo credit: George Jett

Both sexes cooperate to construct their nest near the top of a live tree's trunk along thick, horizontal branches. A typical nest is 5–6 feet across and 2–4 feet high, but because nest material is continually added, nests can become truly gigantic. The largest Bald Eagle nest on record was a Florida nest that was 9.5 feet in diameter and a whopping 20 feet tall. Bald Eagles use sticks found on the ground or broken off of nearby trees, and have been documented carrying nest material for a mile. Grass, moss, fine woody material, and feathers are used to line the nest cup. Depending on the tree shape, the nest may be flat, cup-, or cone-shaped. Across their range, Bald Eagles have an average of 1.5 nests per pair in their territory; if a nest attempt fails, they may switch to an alternate nest the following year. But as local eagle populations continue to grow and competition for nest sites increases, the average is likely to be lower in the Chesapeake.

Bald Eagles nest in every Maryland county and DC, but they are most abundant along the Chesapeake's shoreline. Their territories (the area they defend against other eagles) average 0.4–0.8 mi^2, but their home ranges (the total area they use) are much larger. Home range size can vary wildly, and studies of tagged breeding birds have documented a range of average sizes from 2.7–8.5 mi^2. Both sexes will defend their territory from other eagles, and this aggression can extend to other species such as crows or Ospreys.

Fish are the preferred dietary choice of Bald Eagles, but they'll eat whatever is available, including carrion. Bald Eagles aren't particularly accomplished hunters and regularly resort to stealing from other birds, including Ospreys, herons, and other eagles. This kleptoparasitism occurs year-round, but is less frequent during the breeding season. Some individuals will become skilled at exploiting a particular local food source; one Florida pair learned to cooperatively hunt the Cattle Egrets that formed 85% of their diet, and Audubon reported eagle pairs cooperatively hunting waterfowl. On the Chesapeake Bay though, the


Photo credit: George Jett

most important food source is easily-captured dead fish. The scaly corpses, mostly gizzard shad and catfish, form as much as a quarter to two-thirds of their diet.

The propensity of Bald Eagles to chase other birds that have successfully captured food means that observers must be cautious when applying code T (territorial) or code A (agitated) to the eagles' behavior. Similarly, an eagle carrying food is not necessarily carrying it to a nest site. Small food items may be consumed on the wing, but most prey is carried to a perch before being eaten. When code CF (carrying food) is used for eagles, it should always be accompanied by comments that indicate the food is being carried to the nest.

Incubation begins after the first of two or three oval, white eggs are laid in late January to early March. Both sexes incubate, although the female does most of it, and the chicks hatch asynchronously 35 days after they were laid. Asynchronous hatching, and the accompanying size difference between chicks, is a common strategy among species that have fluctuating food availability, like raptors.


Photo credit: George Jett

In years when prey is abundant, each chick has sufficient food and will likely survive. Conversely, if the parents are unable to provide enough food, the larger chicks will outcompete smaller siblings, who quickly die. This helps ensure the survival of at least one healthy chick, rather than more, weaker chicks—or no offspring at all.

For the first 2–3 weeks after the downy chicks hatch, the female spends 90% of her time at the nest; the male is there about half the time. Both sexes will bring food for


Photo credit: George Jett

the chicks, and after 3–4 weeks their contributions are about equal. The parents tear small pieces off and feed the pieces to the chicks. After five or six weeks, the chicks can feed themselves and the parents begin to roost away from the nest, typically in a nearby tree. In Maryland and DC, chicks normally leave the nest in May or June.

Recently fledged eagles are uniformly dark brown with white underwing coverts and armpits, as well as a dark beak and cere. Bald Eagles do not attain their distinctive adult plumage for 4–5 years; the intervening plumages contain increasingly more white. The parents dutifully respond to their chicks' begging calls, feeding them for up to six weeks. The family will associate with each other for as long as ten weeks before the juveniles disperse. In one Florida study, young eagles stayed within a few hundred yards of the nest throughout the post-fledging period, but like other wide-ranging species, code FL (recently fledged) should be used only when it is likely the young birds were hatched in that block. When code FL is used, comments should be included that indicate why it is an appropriate

choice.

Bald Eagles have rebounded tremendously since their despondently low population numbers of the 70s. The impact of organochlorides like DDT on eagles is well-known, but gratuitous shooting also played a major role in supressing populations. Despite a crude carrying capacity estimate for the Chesapeake Bay of 1,500 nests prior to European colonization, the first local survey of Bald Eagle nests in 1936 estimated only 600–800 in the same region. At the time, the Maryland human population was 1.7 million, indicating that there was likely much more suitable nesting habitat available than there is today, with a statewide human population 3.5 times larger. The Bald Eagle Protection Act (now the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act) wasn't enacted until 1940, but even after that, wanton shooting of eagles was still widespread across the country—a bounty on Bald Eagles even existed in Alaska until 1952. The National Wildlife Health Center autopsied nearly 1,500 Bald Eagles between 1962 and 1984, and found that 22% had been shot.

The population of Bald Eagles breeding in the Chesapeake Bay is now estimated by Bryan Watts at CCB to be over 3,000, of which 1,500 are likely in Maryland. A decade ago, the number of chicks fledged per nest was one of the highest in the country. But as the eagles come up against habitat-imposed limits, Watts says that competition between adults has increased and fewer chicks are fledging.

Historically, remote nest sites have been critical for a successful breeding attempt. In fact, Audubon described eagles as being easily approached by humans—unless that person was carrying a gun. Perhaps not surprisingly for a long-lived species, Bald Eagles learned to associate humans with mortality and to avoid them wherever possible. However, as persecution of eagles has waned it has been conjectured that the eagles' suspicion of humans may be decreasing. This possibility remains to be tested, but if true eagles might be expected to nest in more developed locations, which is certainly now the case.

The longevity of eagle nests, the value of the surrounding habitat to the species, and the role eagles play in monitoring ecosystem health means that reporting the location of each nest as precisely as possible is hugely beneficial. The easiest way to do this for the Atlas is by using the comment box. It's not necessary to report the same nest's location on every checklist, but every nest found should have the location documented.

Now a smashing example of conservation success, Bald Eagles were removed from the federal Endangered Species List in 2007 and from the Maryland list in 2010. Not even fifty years from the establishment of the Endangered Species Act—enacted because the persistence of so many species, including the Bald Eagle, was precariously uncertain—the Chesapeake Bay population of breeding Bald Eagles is at an astonishing ten times the initial recovery goal.

Author: Gabriel Foley

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The Dalliance of the Eagles

Skirting the river road, (my forenoon walk, my rest,)

Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of the eagles,

The rushing amorous contact high in space together,

The clinching, interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating wheel,

Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling,

In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling,

Till o'er the river pois'd, the twain yet one, a moment's lull,

A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons loosing,

Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate diverse flight,

She hers, he his, pursuing.

--Walt Whitman

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Claire Nemes (@cenemes) is a PhD student from Garrett County studying songbird migration ecology and the impacts of free-roaming cats on birds.

What made you interested in birds?

I stumbled across the works of nature writer Edwin Way Teale in a used bookstore and fell in love with his charming descriptions of birds, especially Golden-crowned Kinglets. To learn more, I started volunteering at Brookside Nature Center in Wheaton. I was lucky that several of the naturalists there took me under their wings, so to speak, and encouraged my (eventually fanatical) interest in birds.

What's the best thing about atlasing?

It makes every bird exciting and challenges you to be a better observer! Even a common species that you might not otherwise spend much time watching is important and valuable for the Atlas. There's no wrong way to bird, of course, but I think taking the time to observe subtle behaviors—especially of females that are often overlooked during traditional survey methods like point counts—really helps us be better naturalists and deepens our appreciation of birds.

What bird reflects your personality?

A friend once told me that I reminded them of a House Wren because I won't shut up if I'm excited about something. They weren't wrong! But if I get to be aspirational, maybe something like a Yellow-billed Cuckoo: Kind of weird, spends a lot of time in the woods alone, gets to migrate, fond of caterpillars :)

In addition to binoculars and a field guide, what would you take atlasing?

A pencil. The eBird app is great but I still prefer keeping lists on paper, plus it's easier to make field sketches and scribble notes.

What is today's biggest conservation issue?

Climate change is the greatest conservation challenge of our time and is already having impacts on ecosystem health and human well-being. A major part of the problem is the rise of science denialism. We need better science education and outreach all the way from grade school through college and beyond. We need to increase people's understanding of the scientific method and train them how to evaluate the reliability of information and spot disinformation (challenging in the digital era!). Unfortunately, western science also has a long history of excluding certain groups—people of color, women, first generation students, etc.—and that directly affects the type of research conducted and the way it's communicated. Making science more welcoming, transparent, and accessible to all who are interested will go a long way towards combating science denialism and helping us to tackle these massive conservation issues as a society. Getting people involved in community science initiatives like this one is a great way to start!

What bird do you particularly like?

I've never met a warbler that I didn't like! Pretty much everything about bird migration is mind-bendingly cool, especially for long-distance nocturnal migrants.

Where is your favorite place to atlas?

Carey Run Sanctuary is awesome—it's a beautiful piece of land owned by MOS. I've also really enjoyed getting to know the birds in my yard and the surrounding woods and farms more intimately during the pandemic.

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

Probably Dr. Kamal Islam, who was my advisor for my master's degree studying Cerulean Warblers, and my BFF Silas Fischer - they're both fantastic birders and some of my favorite people.

BLOCK PARTY

Great Fox Island NE, Somerset County

Many of the remaining 'zero effort' blocks are blocks composed largely of water. These blocks do not just have less land for birds to nest on, they also regularly require a boat to access them. The Great Fox Island NE block is one of these, located immediately west of Crisfield in Somerset County. This block is only accessible by water, but because it contains the south end of Janes Island State Park, atlasers who do not own boats can still access it.

The Chesapeake Bay—Tangier Sound, specifically—nudges against the western side of Janes Island. The park's headquarters, cabins, and campsites are on the mainland. For folks who bring their own boat, the park has a launch ($7 for Maryland residents). There is also a shop that rents canoes or kayaks for $50 a day, although the shop only opens at 10 AM and boats are due back by 6 PM. Once you're on the water, you can explore the 30 miles of water trails that crisscross the park. Trails range in length from 1.25 and 12.25 miles, and because they are largely protected from the wind and the current, the conditions are suitable for novice paddlers. If you obtain a permit, there are also three backcountry campsites available on the island.

In the second atlas, there was only one hour of atlasing effort documented for Great Fox Island NE. Four species (all colonial waterbirds) were Observed and three species—Willet, oystercatcher, and Osprey—were Confirmed. During BBA1, there must have been a bit more time spent atlasing in the block. Thirteen species were Observed; these were also all colonial waterbirds. Northern Harrier was the only Possible species, while black duck, Clapper and Virginia Rails, Willet, Green Heron, and Eastern Meadowlark were all documented as Probable. Osprey was the only species Confirmed in both atlases, and BBA1 had an additional nine Confirmations. All of these were passerines, including Seaside and Saltmarsh Sparrows, Marsh Wren, and Boat-tailed Grackle.

Willet. Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

Since water and phones don't mix well, it may be worth considering using the traditional pencil and paper to keep track of your observations. Rite in the Rain notebooks quickly pay for themselves when you're around water, and drawing block boundaries on the trail map sold at the park office will help you keep track of which block you are in.

Janes Island State Park offers an outstanding opportunity to explore the marshes of Chesapeake Bay and document some of Maryland's southernmost breeding birds. Liberal application of bug spray may be advisable, but this is one block party I plan to take part in.

Author: Gabriel Foley

TIPS AND TRICKS

The basics of atlasing—identify a bird, classify its behavior, and report it—are quite simple, and don't require a lot of background knowledge or studying to get right. But if you want to maximize the value of your observations, there are a number of ways to bolster your efforts.

One way is to include more details about the species of special interest that have been identified for the Atlas. These are species that have small local breeding populations, concentrated nesting areas, or are experiencing steep declines. Even though they don't meet those criteria, Bald Eagles are also included because the Chesapeake Bay is one of the most important sites for the species.

There are three groups of species of special interest. Each of these groups requires slightly different details, but fortunately each group is fairly intuitive.

The first group is composed of just one species, the Bald Eagle. The only additional detail needed for eagles is the nest location. If possible, the location should be provided as coordinates rather than a description. If you have cell service, an easy way to find a location's coordinates when you are out in the field is to open up Google Maps. Then, tap on the location of the nest. This will drop a pin with coordinates that can be copied and pasted into the comments field of your eBird checklist. The same process can be done at home on your desktop computer.

The next group are colonial birds, including gulls, terns, herons, and Bank Swallows. When you find a colony, report the coordinates of the colony location and estimate the number of nests in the colony. If it is a mixed species colony, report the number of nests for each species. However, do not enter or disturb colonies to get this additional information. A colony represents a substantial portion of the breeding effort for a region and disrupting that effort will impact the entire population. If you have concerns about the sensitivity of a colony, rather than putting the coordinates in the checklist comments, you can email your County Coordinator with the eBird checklist link and the colony's location.

Laughing Gull. Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

Finally, there are priority species. Priority species are bolded in the Handbook and the Breeding Timeline, but in general, if you find a species that is an unexpected or uncommon breeding bird in your area, you should make a special effort to Confirm it. You should also record details such as how you identified it, what sort of habitat it was in, and details about the nest such as its height above the ground, what type of tree it was in, and the number of chicks or eggs. It's particularly important to avoid disturbing priority species, since many of these are declining in Maryland. If you have concerns about disturbance to the bird, you can report it to your County Coordinator.

The additional details provided for species of special interest will help identify where and when they are nesting in Maryland and DC, and help ensure that these species are around for the next atlas in 2040.

Author: Gabriel Foley

FROM THE FIELD

Contributions from the atlasing community!

Maryland's Bald Eagles are looking for atlasers

Until 2004, Maryland DNR conducted regular aerial surveys of Bald Eagle nests. After the Bald Eagle was delisted in 2007, funding for these surveys was no longer available. In 2016, the Maryland Bird Conservation Partnership began a community science-based monitoring program for Bald Eagles. The initial dataset used for eagle nests was the 2004 DNR aerial survey. As you might imagine, after twelve years many of the 2004 nests no longer existed. Thus began our ongoing quest to find eagle nests.

A Carolina Wren nest inside a tire. Photo credit: Mike Hudson

According to Bryan Watts of the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary, there should be in the neighborhood of 1,500 eagle pairs in Maryland. As of December 2020, the Maryland Bald Eagle Nest Monitoring Program has fewer than 25% of this number in our database. This is where you, an Atlas volunteer, come in. Bald Eagles are looking for you. Are you looking for them? They want to be counted! If you find an eagle nest, please report it to the Maryland Bald Eagle Nest Monitoring Program. Include the coordinates of the nest in the comments of your eBird checklist, count the number of adults on or near the nest, and go to marylandbirds.org/report-bald-eagle-nest.

Based on the first year of Atlas data, you have collectively reported many Bald Eagle nests in places we don't have recorded in our database. As our way of saying thanks, if you report a new nest to the Program we will publish your name in our monthly e-news. Your contribution to the Atlas can be greater than just the Atlas!

Happy atlasing!

Author: Chris Eberly, Executive Director
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A close up of the Carolina Wren tire nest, containing five eggs. Photo credit: Mike Hudson

Do you have a story or photo to share with atlasers?

We'd love to hear about it! Send your submissions to the editor at mddcbba3@mdbirds.org.

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Crested Flycatchers and a Sunpaper Box, Middle River

Haynie, L.L. 1947. Crested Flycatcher at Middle River. *Maryland Birdlife* 3(4):52.

On June 2, while passing a roadside Sunpaper tube on Wilson Point Road, Middle River, I was startled by the flutter of wings, and on turning saw a crested flycatcher [Great Crested Flycatcher] emerge from the tube. On closer examination I discovered the nest and four partially incubated eggs.

I immediately informed the occupants of the house, who in turn notified the Sun carrier to deliver their papers to the front door, which was a good block from the road. After some persuasion on my part, the carrier agreed to deliver the papers to the door and leave the nest undisturbed.

So far so good. My daily visits through the week brought the satisfaction of knowing that incubation was progressing normally and undisturbed, but Saturday, June 7, the rains came and brought with them the downfall of the nest.

It rained all night and was still raining Sunday morning at 8 A.M., when I witnessed a strange sight at the newspaper tube. The Sunday paper was protruding about 3 or 4 inches from the box and the female flycatcher was tearing the wet end to shreds. I flushed her, removed the paper, and left. My next visit to the nest found the entrance closed by a spider web; I removed it only to find one thereagain the next day. I came to the conclusion that the nest had been abandoned, for I never saw the bird around it again. The nest and eggs were later removed and brought to the Ornithological Society meeting for inspection. Now the double duty newspaper tube is back at work serving its original purpose.

Author: Larry L. Haynie

Great Crested Flycatcher carrying nest material. Photo credit: Oliver Patrick/Macaulay Library