

GET A BEHAVIORAL CLUE!

Hints for searching (and monitoring) on the Mogollon Rim, Arizona

GROUND NESTERS

The female usually builds the nests (except GHJU, both build), only females incubate and only the males sing. The key for locating these nests is to listen for the chirping of the female when she is off the nest. Learn the differences between the chips of the different species.

Finding these nests requires persistence in following the female. Try to follow fairly close to the female when you find her foraging. She is usually actively foraging when laying, incubating or feeding nestlings, but when she is nervous and wants to go back on the nest she often stops foraging and starts displacement (nervous) behaviors (e.g. preening, bill swiping or just sitting still). At this time she will move up and down in the vegetation and will continuously return to the same spot and often look down at the nest. Some birds will get nervous and then attempt to lead you away, foraging farther and farther from the nest site and then making one direct flight back to the nest. Be prepared to move fast! Once you see nervous behavior, back away and try to watch from behind vegetation at a distance, trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible until she edges down to the nest. The whole process can easily take 45 miles or longer.

The ground nests in particular are sensitive to human impact around the nest. Be extremely careful of the vegetation when finding and monitoring these nests. You should make sure you see the exact site that a female moves to and watch for her to get off and then back on the nest again (this make 30 minutes if she is incubating). Return later to check the contents so as to not continue disturbing the female.

Orange-crowned Warbler (OCWA): You can generally stay closer to OCWAs than VIWAs because they are not as skittish. The key to finding the female off the nest is to listen for the chips both nearby and far. Their chipping can actually be heard for quite a distance under the maple canopy. Once you hear the chips, find the female and follow her. If you lose her in the vegetation, listen for the chips and quickly relocate her. Nests are usually in a depression at the base of a small maple.

Virginia's Warbler (VIWA): These birds are very skittish! Stay close to the ground and avert your eyes. It is thought that these warblers are especially sensitive to pairs of eyes looking in their direction. Maintain your distance, watch for a tail bob that may be a displacement behavior, listen for their chips that are quieter than those of an OCWA. Locate where you heard the last chip because often the female will chip once or twice after they settle on the nest. Nests are usually in a depression at the base of a small maple or locust.

Red-faced Warbler (RFWA): These warblers usually at the base of a small fir or maple. They often forage high in conifers or maples. The female chips loudly and persistently even when building and they are moderately easy to follow.

Grey-headed Junco (GHJU): These sparrows nest in grass clumps or under fallen logs or branches, or at the bases of maples. They will often go near the nest when you are around but once you disturb them they will chip at you every time you walk near. Their chip is very distinctive. Females will sit on the nest until you are very close; however, sometimes these nests are found by flushing the female. Both sexes build.

SHRUB NESTERS

Occasionally these nests are low enough to check the contents. Whenever possible use a mirror pole to check the contents. You should also be very careful not to disturb the vegetation around these nests.

The females of both species build and incubate.

Hermit Thrush (HETH): Most abundant shrub nester. These nests are most often found by systematic searches of clumps of young firs (1 to 2 meters high). It is best to follow these birds only when they have material or food in their bill. These nests are usually waist high but are sometimes placed too high to see into. The females make a distinctive call when they are near the nest.

MacGillivray's Warbler (MGWA): No nests have been found since 1998 and only four in 1997.

Green Tailed Towhee (GTTO): These nests are not very abundant. They often nest in small firs or Rubus (raspberry), and usually on ridges or the upper third of drainages. The male usually guards the nest within a few meters and the female will walk through the vegetation to and from the nest. It is often difficult to establish the exact location since the female can be very sneaky when going to the nest. Once their relative location has been established, the nest can sometimes be found by a systematic search. Both male and female will give an ascending cat-like meow that becomes more rapid when they are nervous.

TREE NESTERS

These nests are often too high to check the contents, but use a mirror pole wherever possible. When monitoring these nests you should spend enough time watching the birds so you can accurately determine the nesting stage (how long the bird stays on the nest, food carries, etc.).

The male will go down near the ground to guard the female as she collects material. This is the easiest time to find these nests so pay particular attention to the locations of these tree nesters.

Steller's Jay (STJA): These birds are very noisy around their nest, especially if they know you are there but at their nests they are very quiet. They will collect material from far distances and then can be heard "crashing" through the forest on the way back to their nests. Not many are found each year.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (RCKI): Nests are usually high and require much time to monitor accurately.

American Robin (AMRO): These nests are easy to find during building stage. The female will usually gather mud from the drainage bottom and will often collect repeatedly from the same spot. They will often abandon one nest and then build a new one nearby. The nests have a "messy" appearance.

Warbling Vireo (WAVI): Both the female and the male incubate and sometimes the male will sing from the nest. The nest is often high up in the fork of a branch and is usually made of lichen. Watch for mate switches. The pair gives a characteristic call when predators are in the area of their nest and this will invoke other birds to defend the area. The pair will also chase away other passerines in the vicinity of their nest.

Yellow-Rumped (Audubon's) Warbler (AUWA): Nests are often high up and the female will sometimes collect material from the ground. Be ready to run, she will often collect far from the nesting site. These warblers are foliage gleaners so if they are on the ground they are probably collecting material.

Black-headed Grosbeak (BHGR): Both female and male incubate and often the male will build. The male will also sing from the nest. Watch for mate switches. These nests are easiest to find during building so watch for grosbeaks carrying sticks and other material.

Western Tanager (WETA): These nests are easiest to find during building so look for material in the bill of female tanagers. The male is usually guarding the female as she collects material. The female will fly directly to her nest while the male remains guarding nearby. Their nests can be extremely cryptic so when you see the female disappear into the foliage of a tree look carefully and from different vantage points. Both sexes give a distinctive two-syllable call especially when agitated. These birds are often hesitant to go to the nest if humans are too close.

NICHE NESTER:

Cordilleran Flycatcher (COFL): These nests are located in natural niches in live trees, snags, upturned tree roots or broken rock shelves. The height of the nest varies from very low to very high. They do not nest in old cavities. They are easiest to find during the building stage by looking for material in the bill. Both the female and the male make a two-syllable call.

EXCAVATORS (Primary cavity nesters):

These nests are easily found by systematic searches or by the birds' behaviors but oftentimes you can be tricked into believing the cavity is active when it is not. These birds often visit different cavities for no apparent reason so spend extra time with these nests and watch for specific nesting behavior. By quickly assuming that a cavity is a nest, you can waste much of your time monitoring empty holes. Sometimes the males will excavate in one spot and then abandon the hole for another.

Nests can be found systematically by knocking on the base of the potential trees with a stick. If the adult is in the nest, often it will flush out when you knock. You should then hide and wait for the bird to return in order to establish that it is an active nest. Another key to finding these nests is to look for sawdust at the base of a tree which signifies the presence of a newly excavated hole. New holes are light colored due to unweathered wood. Once again, you should wait for specific nesting behavior.

In all the woodpeckers and sapsuckers, both the female and the male incubate so watch for mate switches. Since they are shared incubators they do not mate feed. Any direct flights to or from a tree may signify an active nest. The woodpeckers can be very shy around their nest and if you are too close they will not go to the nest. You may need to leave and return later. These birds also have long on and off bouts so be patient. During the nestling stage the nestlings are very loud as they get older and are often seen with their heads sticking out of the cavity. While monitoring these nests you should stay long enough to accurately determine the nesting stage (20 minutes may not be long enough).

Acorn Woodpecker (ACWO), Williamson's Sapsucker (WISA), Red-naped Sapsucker (RNSA), Downy Woodpecker (DOWO) and Hairy Woodpecker (HAWO): These birds usually nest in large live aspens. Acorn Woodpeckers store acorns in trees referred to as granaries but they do not nest in these trees.

Red-shafted Flicker (RSFL): The female usually incubates at night and then switches with the male in the morning. These nests require extra time monitoring because there is often little parental activity. During the nestling stage the parents will often be away from the nest for long periods (up to 45 minutes). These woodpeckers carry food in their crop so you will not see them feeding young. When you see a bird enter the cavity you will need to observe how long it stays in the cavity to help you determine the nesting stage. Flickers' cavities are the largest holes of all of the cavity nesters.

A note about nuthatches:

Be aware that Red-breasted nuthatches and Pygmy Nuthatches will often try to steal a woodpecker's excavation by excavating it on and off themselves when the woodpecker is not around. They are also known to check out lots of cavities early in the season.

All nuthatches mate-feed frequently, especially in the mornings. You should check nuthatch cavities at this time since there is more activity. During incubation they will often forage in pairs but the female forages quicker than the male and she will often do long flights back to the cavity. Look for mate-feeds during foraging which signifies the presence of a nest somewhere. Males will often call before entering the cavity.

Red-breasted Nuthatch (RBNU): Only the female incubates. The nests are often located near the top of a fir snag and there is usually bark near the cavity entrance. Their calls become faster when they are near their nest. The male will often sit on top of the nest snag and give a distinctive rapid call. These birds are ventriloquists and can effectively throw their voice which makes them a challenge to locate.

Pygmy Nuthatch (PYNU): Not many nests have been found in recent years, their population at our field site has declined over the last few years. They nest mostly in skinny aspen snags but also in live trees and pine snags. The nest is usually located near the top and close to an area with bark on it still. Generally these nuthatches are vocal near the nest and sometimes they have helpers.

NON-EXCAVATORS (Secondary cavity nesters)

Many of the same suggestions that apply for excavators can be applied to the non-excavators. You should take extra precaution when determining if a cavity is active, especially with House Wrens. Always look for significant nesting behavior and allow yourself enough time to determine the nesting stage when monitoring these nests. Only the females incubate in these species.

White-breasted Nuthatch (WBNU): These birds nest in old holes. They usually have large territories so be prepared to follow them a great distance. Sometimes the male will call in flight as he approaches the nest. See previous note about all the nuthatches.

Mountain Chickadee (MOCH): These birds nest in old holes usually high up in an aspen. They are often vocal around their nest so listen for their call. They can sometimes be shy around their nest.

Brown Creeper (BRCR): These birds nest under loose bark of aspen or conifer snags. Brown Creepers do not seem bothered by humans and will often forage right next to you. Listen for calls to locate the pair as they forage up the trunks of trees. Follow them, keeping track of both individuals until one is seen with food or material. You may not always see them make direct flights to their nest, since they will forage closer and closer to the nest and then seemingly

disappear. Once you have determined that a nest is in the area it is not difficult to locate by strategically searching out trees with the characteristic peeling bark – look for nest material poking out from the bark. Be aware that these birds are prone to abandoning nests during the laying and incubation period, so monitor from a distance.

House Wren (HOWR): These wrens will often start several nests by adding nesting material to several cavities. It is important to distinguish between these “dummy nests” and a real nest. Males build the dummy nests along and both build the real nests. Look for birds with fine nesting material – House Wrens will only line real nests, not dummy nests. House Wrens will also visit other birds’ nests often for no obvious reason. Listen for the male singing and then observe the pair’s behavior closely, do not assume the first hole visited is the nest – continue to follow the female to determine the location of the real nest. There is little activity during the incubation period so you will need to spend more time monitoring these nests during that stage. Nestlings can often be heard as they get older.

Western Bluebird (WEBL): These nests are located in old cavities. Not many nests are found.

Violet-green Swallows (VGSW): These birds fly in and out of any cavity they can. It is really difficult and time consuming to determine which cavity is a nest and which is not. Look for specific nesting behavior. Sometimes the swallows will take over other birds’ nests.

Good luck and have a great season!