

American Robin Nests in Chicago Yard in December

by Jane C. Pedersen

American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) in my Chicago yard in December are not that unusual, but 13 December 2001, a robin flying into the white spruce tree (*Picea glauca*), which was transplanted from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to my yard in 1977, caught my eye. Already late for work, I watched the tree while finishing my preparations, and what I saw piqued my curiosity. The robin was flying in and out of the tree repeatedly and a pile of grasses was placed near the tree's trunk about 15 feet from the ground. Totally absorbed, I watched as the robin arrived each time with what incredibly appeared to be nesting material. Later that evening, alongside the bright, glowing Christmas tree lights, I saw a fairly significant clump of grasses on the limb. The next morning, two robins were involved in the building, and by late afternoon what eventually materialized was a complete and typical American Robin's nest.

What exactly would trigger a nesting attempt in December? Some consider the winter of 2001/2002 as the winter that did not happen. At the end of February 2002, only 3 percent of the money budgeted for snow removal by Chicago had been utilized. This was only the second winter season in 129 years with the fewest sub-32 degree days; just 44 percent of Chicago's normal winter precipitation had fallen; above-50 degree temperature days were more than two times the normal; only nine other winters in 129 years had no zero degree recordings; only 3 percent of the temperature highs in 2001/2002 had been in the teens, 10 to 20 degrees F (Skilling 2002). In addition, three goslings with two watchful parents were reported by two Chicago Police detectives 22 January near 26th and California Avenue in Chicago. Fortunately, one of the detectives is a local birder, and when others in the birding community told him it could not be true, he and his partner returned 29 January and confirmed that a family of five Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) were residing in the retention pond behind the women's prison on the west side of the complex (pers. comm. Munoz and Whalen). Lastly, several American Woodcocks had been reported displaying in the southern part of the state (Bennett 2002).

In spite of the unusual climate patterns, I thought that nesting birds were probably more attuned to the cycle of light and dark than to weather and temperature. Even though some owls, occasionally Mourning Doves, and



The American Robin remains in Illinois during winter when food supply is plentiful. Eric Walters took this photo of a robin at Evanston's Northwestern University, Cook County 14 November 1998.

some species of finches will begin nesting in winter, an American Robin breeding in Illinois in December seemed quite rare. The Peterson Field Guide to Birds' Nests (Harrison 1975) reports two records of winter nesting attempts by American Robin: Ellwood City, Pennsylvania in January 1965 in which there were eggs; and Columbus, Ohio in December 1965, in which there were young. Neither attempts produced young that grew to adulthood.

Quickly sharing this odd avian behavior over IBET (Illinois birders' Internet listserve), Leslie Borns, a Chicago birder, offered helpful counsel and predicted that if indeed the robins were serious about nesting, they would probably disappear for a while following the nest completion. This turned out to be the case, as the robins appeared to even abandon their daily visit to the backyard bird bath. Then, to the delight of my family, the female arrived on Christmas Day to commence her "big sit."

For the next nine days, we never observed the female leaving the nest, nor did we observe the male feeding her. We kept a careful eye on the female robin from the warmth of our living room, because the nest was about five feet from the picture window. The male robin, however, could generally be found somewhere nearby, acting as sentinel. Could she really be sitting on eggs? It seemed impossible but by day 10, when the female began to leave the nest for brief periods, we felt