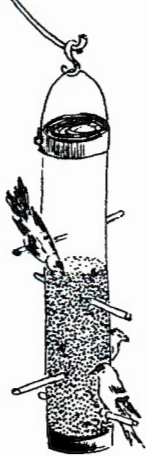


Backyard Nesters

by Sue Friscia



Even before I became obsessed with birds, I enjoyed watching the American Robins that nested in my backyard. I documented their progress with photos, but back then I never realized the interesting activity that went on before a nest was constructed.

For instance, when the temperature stabilizes above freezing and the days are just the right length, a male robin starts defining his territory by singing from every corner and chasing away all competition until he attracts a willing female. You can usually tell when a pair has been formed, because one bird, the female, will be much paler than the other.

The next logical step would be copulation, but I have never witnessed this event. Donald and Lillian Stokes confirmed in "A Guide to Bird Behavior" that robin pair formation displays are rarely seen.

Kit and George Harrison, authors of "America's Favorite Backyard Birds" describe robin courtship. The male sings to let the female know his whereabouts. When it is time, she lands near him, chirps softly, and then becomes "submissive" - not a

word of my choosing—I prefer "receptive." The male then joins her and calls excitedly. Then, copulation might occur.

Nest-making comes next. Look for a robin's nest in the fork of a tree or on a building ledge. Careful observation will show that the nest is held together with mud. The inside has a fine lining of delicate grasses and typically contains four light blue eggs. Don't be surprised if you are attacked while approaching the nest; after all you are trespassing.

In 12 to 14 days, the first egg starts to crack. Then the real work starts when both parents must continuously feed their newly hatched family. A robin is born completely naked, but in a mere five days, it will grow its first pin feathers. Five days after that the bird is completely feathered and ready to test his wings.

The most dangerous time for the youngsters is when they leave home; predation is most prevalent then, especially by well-meaning, but uninformed humans who assume a chick is abandoned just because the parents are nowhere to be seen. It is highly likely they are watching from a distance, waiting for your retreat.

The worst thing you can do is bring the bird into your home. It is against the law to possess a native bird without a special permit. Even picking up feathers is illegal. Also, the odds of survival are slim. Typically when folks realize the bird is not responding to their tender loving

care and attempt to bring it somewhere for help, it's too late.

Once a birding friend, Lisa Granbur, who works for a veterinarian found a baby robin left at her office. She noticed the bird was covered with mites. Something had to be done immediately or it would perish. She called me since I have a state and federal wildlife rehabilitation license. We brought the robin to another rehabilitator who dusted the bird with a powder that deters mites and then told us where we could purchase more. We next picked berries and bought a dozen night crawlers which the robin eagerly accepted from a toothpick.

Since it was getting late and we didn't want to release the bird at night, we placed it on the balcony in a cage and left it a good supply of food and water. The next morning, when my friend's roommate, Colleen O'Neill checked on the robin, she was bombarded by two adult birds who must have been attracted by the youngster's cries. They placed the robin under a tree below the window. The adults, probably the robin's parents, stepped right in and began to care for the young robin. The family remained in the area for several days and as far as we know, the youngster fledged.



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Feeder Station drawing by Denis Kania.