

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,
Jim Butler

ELABORATE CRADLES

Nests evolved to ensure the survival of the eggs and chicks by providing warmth and safety. Nests are designed to maintain the eggs near the avian body temperature of 40°C. Providing warmth is most acute for small birds whose bodies lose heat much quicker than large birds. In general, small birds build the finest nests; more elaborate and better concealed. Birds are the most remarkable group of animal builders. Building behaviours are largely genetically determined and inflexible. Being such a small segment of their lives, birds do not have anatomical specialisations used exclusively for building. Nest success depends on the quality of the construction and the site of the nest. Better nest building will be selected for in the same way as any bird behaviours.

A Willie Wagtail (right) and a Restless Flycatcher (left) built the two nests in the photos. Nests are

closely related to their builder's habitat which determines the available materials and building sites. Birds can make up to a thousand trips to gather all the necessary materials. Both nests are neat cups made of woven fine grasses and shredded bark bound with spider's webbing which gives the light-grey colour of the outside of the Willie's nest. The outside of the Restless nest is camouflaged with small pieces of lichen. Cup nests of small birds are heavily insulated with a lining of fine grasses, hair or fur. The useful life of these two exquisite constructions is about 28 days: 14 days of incubation of the eggs, plus 14 days of caring for the chicks before they fly the nest. Birds spend a minute proportion of their lives in the nest cradle; the bulk of their lives is spent as homeless nomads.

Bird the builder! — Jim



Image: Two nests by Ed Frazer
at Brookfield

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