

A Guide to Identifying Nests and Eggs Found in Birdhouses

– by Bet Zimmerman, from <http://www.sialis.org/nests.htm>

One of the easiest ways to identify a nest is by the eggs. You can also gain clues by the shape of the nest and materials. There are several guides to nests and eggs. To identify eggs, it is helpful to know where they were found, color, markings, gloss, size, and shape. Be aware there is often considerable variation in the nest, depending on the individual, circumstances, location and available materials. Timetables vary. You can also identify the nester by watching what birds go in and out of the box with nesting material. Other birds will enter a box being used by another species: e.g., House Sparrows and House Wrens for the purposes of attack; or other birds like bluebirds or Tree Swallows out of curiosity.

- **Eastern Bluebird**: Neat, cup shaped, woven nest of 100% fine grass or pine needles. Cup may be in the back of the box. Occasionally bits of fur or a few feathers, or even some hair (e.g., from a horse). Fairly deep, often cylindrical nest cup - usually 3-4" deep, with the cup portion 2.5" in diameter and about 2.25" deep. Eggs are powder blue (no dark spots), sometimes white.
- **House Sparrow**: Loose jumble of odds and ends, including coarse grass (with seed heads), cloth, feathers, twigs and sometimes litter. Mid-summer nests sometimes contain bits of green vegetation (mustards or mints.) Tall nest, often with tunnel like entrance, particularly when built outside of a nestbox. In a nestbox may have more of a cup shape, and may be built up to cover sides of box. Eggs are cream, white, gray or greenish tint, with irregular fine brown speckles, shell is smooth with slight gloss. The background color can vary, the color of the spots can vary, the thickness of spotting can vary, and the size can vary. NOTE: House Sparrows are non-native invasive pests, and are *not* protected by law. They will attack and kill adult bluebirds (sometimes trapping them in the nestbox), and destroy eggs and young. House Sparrow nests, eggs, young, and adults may be legally removed or destroyed. **It is better to have no box at all than to allow House Sparrows to reproduce in one.**
- **Tree Swallow**: Nest of grass or pine needles, usually lined with feathers. Feathers often placed to curl up over eggs. Flatter cup (about 2" diameter, up to 1.5" deep) than bluebirds. Occasionally contain mosses, rootlets, aquatic vegetation, and other plant materials. Some trash possible: cloth, paper, plastic, tinsel, cellophane, rubber bands, birchbark, often white. Eggs are pure white (may appear pinkish when first laid up to 4 days) with a pointy end.
- **Black-capped Chickadee**: Downy nest with moss base, topped with fur and soft plant fibers. Female may cover eggs with moss/fur when leaving the box. Very thin-shelled white/cream eggs with light brown/reddish speckles, little or no gloss, spots may be concentrated more on the wide end of the egg.
- **Tufted Titmouse**: Downy nest of moss, fur, and soft plant fibers. Occasionally primarily crumpled up dried leaves with grass, and a bit of snakeskin, cellophane, bark strips, etc. Cup may be padded with hair, fur, bits of string, or cloth. May have earwigs living under moss. Eggs are white with rose/mauve speckles, little or no gloss, more evenly distributed than chickadee.
- **House Wren**: Messy nest of coarse twigs (often with cottony spider cocoons), lined with fine fibers and downy feathers, usually filling box. Males may build eggless "dummy nests" in nearby boxes to reduce competition. Tiny glossy white eggs, often tinted pink/buff, with numerous pinkish brown/reddish brown/brown specks that generally form a ring on the larger end of the egg.

- **Carolina Wren**: Nest is a bulky, somewhat messy mass of debris like leaves with some coarse hay/grass, twigs, moss, little roots, weed stalks; strips of bark, plastic or even snakeskin; generally domed with tunnel like entrance; and lined with feathers, animal hair, Spanish moss, wool, and fine grasses. Eggs are white/pale pink or rosy tint/light gray (larger than other wren eggs); usually with heavy brown/reddish-brown flecks often concentrated at larger end. Little or no gloss, unlike House Wren.
- **Nuthatches** occasionally use Eastern Bluebird nestboxes. **White-breasted** nest of bark shreds, twigs, grasses, rootlets, fur, cellophane, hair. Shell smooth, very little gloss, white, usually heavily marked with light brown and lavender spots, often denser at larger end. **Red-breasted** nest of bark shreds, grass, moss and feathers. Eggs white, heavily or sparingly spotted and dotted with reddish brown, little or no gloss. Eggs similar to white-breasted nuthatch but smaller. May dab globs of pitch around hole.
- **Purple martin**: Nest of grasses, twigs, bark, paper, leaves, string; nest cup lined with fine grasses, decorated with fresh green leaves. Eggs slightly glossy, pure white, larger than Tree Swallow eggs.
- **House finch**: rare reports of using bluebird nestboxes. Nest of twigs, grasses and debris. Eggs typically oval, smooth shell, slight gloss, pale blueish green with sparing black spots/dots.
- **Mice** may breed or roost in a nestbox. Nest constructed of a variety of materials, such as grass, leaves, hair, feathers, milkweed silk, shredded bark, moss, cotton, or shredded cloth. No nest cup. Rodent droppings are generally evident.
- **Cowbird, Brown-headed**: Cowbirds do not build their own nest - they lay eggs in the nests of other birds, depending on the host to incubate and raise their young. Eggs are oval with variable shape, with a moderately glossy, granulated shell, white or grayish white, evenly dotted with brown or reddish brown, sometimes with heavier markings at the large end. Similar to a House Sparrow Egg. The eggs of the Bronzed cowbird are pale bluish-green and have no markings.

NOTE: It is illegal to disturb a nest with eggs of any bird except House Sparrows, starlings and pigeons, which are not protected. Empty House Wren nests (sticks only, no nest cup) can be removed.

