

# Tip of the Month

## March For the Birds

Birds of all stripes spend the spring and summer building nests and hatching their young - many of them right in our back yards! If you enjoy having birds in your back yard, here are some ways you can make sure you're giving them a safe haven to raise their next generation.

### When do birds nest?

While various birds nest at all times of year in California, nesting activity reaches a fever pitch during California's official nesting bird season, which is February 1 through August 31.

### I don't see any nests. Where are they?

Birds go to great lengths to hide their nests from predators, and can get very creative with their chosen spot. Quiet observation can reveal some telltale signs of nesting such as birds carrying bits of nesting material, and returning frequently to a single location. Some species, such as our brash local juncos, will chatter loudly and try to draw you away from an active nest. Others, like swallows, may start to feint and dive-bomb if you get too close to their brood.

**Up High** - Many species avoid predators by tucking their nests off the ground. Hummingbirds, California towhees, mourning doves, bushtit, house finch, black headed grosbeak, Steller's jay, American robin, and black phoebe are among the local birds you might find not only in the branches of shrubs or trees, but under a roof tile, on a wall, on top of a light or gutter, and in any number of other creative locations.



Left to right, Hummingbird (photo by Lauren Salazar), American robin under the eaves of a porch, and Bushtit nest built with spray foam insulation (photos by Nona Chiariello)

**Down Low** - Ground nesting birds are especially vulnerable to both predators and human activity, and can be extremely difficult to spot. One of our most common local ground nesting birds is the dark eyed junco, which might tuck itself beneath a bunchgrass or into a dense patch of lettuce. Other local ground nesting birds include California quail and western meadowlarks.



Left to right: A dark eyed junco underneath California fescue, junco nest with eggs (photo by Dani Christensen)

**In a Hollow** - A number of local species nest in cavities, which could be a pocket of decay in a tree limb, the top of a rotten post, a nest box, or even inside a discarded styrofoam cup. Local cavity nesters include chestnut backed chickadee, oak titmouse, western bluebird, violet green swallow, Bewick's wren, pygmy nuthatch, northern flicker, and acorn woodpeckers.



Left to right, Bewick's wren in a styrofoam cup (photo by Dani Christensen), nest box designed for western bluebirds, and cavity in trellis claimed by chestnut backed chickadees

## **Discourage nesting in problem locations**

When they're just starting to build their nests, birds can be discouraged from choosing problematic locations where they're likely to be predated or disturbed, such as in locations where you're planning to mow or clear brush: visit the area frequently and remove any nesting starts before any eggs are laid. A nest with viable eggs is considered active.

## **Protect active nests**

It is illegal in California to move or disturb an active bird nest. If you see signs of an active songbird nest, give it a 50-foot buffer and wait to do work in that location. If you are lucky enough to have a raptor nesting on your property, give it as wide a berth as possible—typically, the recommended buffer for a raptor nest is 500 feet.

## **Prevent Bird strikes**

Even if a bird disappears or flies away after a moment of shock, flying into a window is often fatal. Most windows are invisible to birds, which may be enticed to fly through them by reflections of vegetation. To reduce strikes, make windows more visible and reduce reflection. For new homes, select low reflectivity windows and consider glass with a bird-safe "fritt" pattern. Choose windows with exterior screens, and minimize the use of corner windows that give the appearance of an opening. For existing homes, locate plants away from windows (the fire marshal will also thank you), draw your blinds during the day, and consider retrofit products such as stick-on window films or acopian bird savers, recommended by the American Bird Conservancy ([abcbirds.org](http://abcbirds.org)).

## **Control Cats**

Outdoor cats are both predators and prey, and nesting bird season is an especially good time to consider keeping cats indoors. If they have to go outside, consider investing in bird safe cat collars that make cats more visible to their prey.

## **Support Habitat**

Watch for more tips from the Conservation Committee on ways to improve your backyard habitat. Already have exceptional habitat? Talk to us about our backyard habitat award!

## **Sources and more information**

[California Migratory Bird Protection Act](#) of 2019

[Fish & Game Code § 3503 \(2018\)](#)

<https://abcbirds.org/products/>

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/>

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/why-birds-hit-windows-and-how-you-can-help-prevent-it/>

<https://www.ebparks.org/parks/nature/songbirds>

<https://www.portolavalley.net/government/town-committees/conservation-committee/backyard-habitat-program>

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