

Life at the Nursery - The Business of Birds

By Wendi Epps

The nursery is teeming with life year-round, especially in the spring and summer. In addition to all of the lovely plants, flowers, shrubs and trees, a variety of species of wildlife thrive on the 450 acres of land that Johnson Nursery, The Garden Center and The Gardens of Southeastern North Carolina encompass. I recently had the chance to observe the lives of three different bird species on the property and am still filled with wonder at the different ways birds go about building nests, laying eggs, protecting their young, and engaging in all kinds of bird business.

One day while walking in the back door of our office building, a bird swooped down close to my head and chirped loudly. I looked up and saw a large nest made of mud and sticks clinging to the side of the wall up near the roof. Two swallows were swooping about, trying to scare people off to protect their babies. The nest was so high up that I had to stand on my tiptoes to take a photo and saw that there were four babies tucked inside who had already hatched. The tiny birds peeked out over the top of their nest, looking like shy, hungry muppets. I began looking forward to their angry greetings but one day, there were no birds swooping at my head as I approached the area. Worried something had happened to the nest, I looked up to see several fuzzy little heads pop up while chirping away. I learned that a couple of days before, someone had found what was left of one of the parents on the ground, likely eaten by a cat or other nighttime predator. The babies are doing great, growing quickly, and their remaining parent has been taking good care of them. And then one day, the nest was empty and the birds were nowhere to be seen. I'm looking forward to meeting the family that moves into this nest next year!



The second nest I came upon was out in the fields. After doing some research, I found out that it was a killdeer nest. The eggs were so pretty, a cream color with dark gray, brown and black speckles. The nest was flat, made up of small rocks and pieces of mulch that mostly covered the area but looked like it provided almost no protection. I heard a loud squawking noise to my right and saw a killdeer crouching down to the ground with its wings spread wide. It began swirling its feathers around while making an impressive amount of noise. This defense mechanism distracts

predators from their nests by creating the illusion of easy prey - an injured bird. Once the predator gets close to the bird, it flies away, having accomplished its goal of drawing the predator away from their nest and eggs. I visited the nest a few days later and found that while there were 3 eggs at first,

only two remained. No shell parts, so possibly a snake. There were a few birds flying around but none that seemed focused on me or the nest. I've been checking up on them in the weeks after and the eggs still haven't hatched. I suspect the nest has been abandoned and wonder if the eggs are still viable.



Killdeer



Killdeer Eggs



Killdeer Eggs

The third nest was found in a tree that's for sale in our landscaping lot. Two tan eggs with brown spots were nestled inside of a sturdy nest. The nest was mostly made of pine straw, leaves and sticks, but there were also some pieces of plastic and fabric. There were a lot of birds hanging around, landing next to me

and squawking loudly. After asking around I found out that they are mockingbirds, and being the first I'd ever mindfully observed, they definitely lived up to their namesake! The whole flock was working to keep the eggs in the nest safe, which made me proud for them and happy for their babies. A visit about a week later revealed 3 hungry babies, even though I only saw 2 eggs in



Mockingbird



Mockingbird Eggs

the nest. A visit a few weeks later showed an empty nest. I hope they are out there somewhere living their best lives!

The journey of wildlife is an amazing thing to witness! As we have all learned in our own lives, nature isn't always nice, fair, or peaceful. While it was sad to learn that one of the swallow parents had been killed and one of the killdeer eggs disappeared, cats and snakes need to eat too. I'm excited to see what kinds of business other animals are conducting around the nursery. I'll keep you posted!

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Center and The Gardens of Southeastern North Carolina encompass. I recently had the chance to observe the lives of three different bird species on the property and am still filled with wonder at the different ways birds go about building nests, laying eggs, protecting their young, and engaging in all kinds of bird business.” Follow the journey of a family of swallows, a killdeer nest, and a community of mockingbirds by visiting our blog at <https://johnson-nursery.com/blog-1/>.