



## Appliance of science: How do birds choose where to build their nests?



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It is that time of year again; busy birds flitter around our gardens as they gather material for their nests, writes **Dr Naomi Lavelle**.

But did you ever wonder how birds make these marvels of architecture without any training or plans? Although birds are certainly hard-wired to build their nests, there is also an element of learning involved. Many birds will lose their first brood simply because they choose a poor nest site.

How do birds choose where to build their nests?

There are many elements that determine this.

## **The social side**

Firstly, there are social factors to consider... some birds like to mark a territory for themselves, keeping a good distance between them and their neighbours. They do this to ensure that they have an area with enough food supply to feed their family. The robin, for example, likes to keep its territory free from other robins when it comes to nesting.

Other birds prefer to nest in groups, ensuring greater security from predators. Starlings nest in colonies, only defending the area immediately around their nest. They are happy to feed communally.

## **The physical side**

Then there are the physical factors to consider such as camouflage, shelter, and the length of time the nest will actually be occupied. Some birds, like the little Tern, opt for a very simple approach and a very short stay; their nests are nothing more than an indentation in sand or shingles. Although this makes the hatch-lings very exposed to weather and predators, they leave the nest quickly, moving to areas with more protection after just three days.

Then there are the more elaborate structures, like the beautiful nests built by long tailed tits. These are dome shaped and made with lichen, moss and spiders' webs. The chicks stay in the nest until they are fully fledged.

A Scottish study carried out on Zebra Finches reported that they showed a preference in choosing nest building material for camouflage. When kept in different coloured cages they tended to choose colours that matched the colour of their cage.

## **A bit of extra security**

Some birds will choose their nest site to take advantage of other animals that will add an extra level of security. Alligators make great deterrents and birds, such as herons and storks, will nest above them to reduce the risk of predators. It's a two way thing as the alligators get to feed on any chicks that fall from the nests above.

## **Who chooses where the nest will go?**

This varies from species to species; nests can be built by males, females or both. It is the blue tit male, for example, that chooses the nest site. He then needs to get the approval of the female. It is not uncommon for her to reject many of his chosen sites before she agrees to one she likes. She is then the one that builds the nest.

When it comes to wrens, males are the nest builders. They will often build a number of nests within their territory and wait for females to inspect them. It is their way of attracting a mate.

A male swan will start the nest building but once the female is happy with it, she joins in too.

**Naomi can be found at [sciencewows.ie](http://sciencewows.ie)**

If your child has a question email [drhowsciencewows@gmail.com](mailto:drhowsciencewows@gmail.com)

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