

TaHome Nature Education: Spring Babies

Grades K-2



Reading: Nests, Eggs, and Babies



Springtime is when many animals are preparing places to lay eggs or birth their babies. Birds in Tahoe usually nest and lay eggs in the late spring when more food becomes available. Many wait until summer, especially at higher elevations or in years with long winters. Other birds who don't rely on the warm weather to bring lots of insects for food, may lay eggs and raise their babies in winter, such as Great Horned Owls or Red Crossbills.

American Black Bears in Tahoe will have their cubs while still in **dormancy** in January or February. However, spring is when you might start to see those cubs walking around with their mothers.

When birds are getting ready to lay their eggs, they build or find nests. Most nests are not a year-round home, but are more like a cradle or nursery for eggs and baby birds. Birds can use many different materials like sticks, mud, fur, moss, grass, leaves, bark, lichen, spider webs, and even their own saliva and feathers to build a nest for their eggs.

Different kinds of birds build different kinds of nests in different places. Female American Robins build cup-shaped nests of mud, twigs, and grass that are just big enough to hold a baseball. Sometimes their male **mates** will bring them materials to help in their nest building. They build their nests in bushes, trees, or in protected corners of buildings. In these nests a mother robin will lay four small, blue eggs.



Sometimes birds will rebuild and reuse an old nest, like Red-tailed Hawks. For this reason, you should leave nests alone, even if you find them empty. Red-tailed Hawks build platform nests at the top of tall trees or on cliff edges. Their large nests are made of tall piles of sticks, up to six feet high and three feet wide. On top of that platform is an inner nest lined with bark and both fresh and dried **vegetation**. They will lay 2-3 white eggs with speckles of brown or purple.

Watch your step for nests when walking through vegetation in the spring and summer months! Mother Mallards build their nests on the ground in a covered area near water. They start by creating a little hole to sit in, where they will then pull vegetation in around them and leave some of their feathers to create the nest. She can lay as many as 15 large, white eggs in her foot-wide nest. The mother bird doesn't always build the nest herself. Male Pileated Woodpeckers do a lot of the work to create nests for their mate's eggs in oval-shaped holes of dead trees, called cavities. The Woodpecker creates this hole and lines it with leftover woodchips from its excavation. The female will then lay about four small, white eggs in the nest.



Male birds often have bright, beautiful colors and patterns on their feathers. They use these bright colors to attract their mates. Their bright colors come from the food they eat. For example, male Western Tanagers eat insects with a special color in them. The more of this color that the bird eats, the redder its head becomes. A male with a red head makes a good mate because it can catch and eat a lot of food, demonstrating good health, abilities, and a good territory. On the other hand, female birds are duller colored so they can **camouflage** by blending in with the vegetation around them. This helps hide their nest from predators who like to eat eggs, such as snakes, larger birds, raccoons, or squirrels.



After nests are made and eggs have been incubated, baby birds hatch from the eggs. Many birds are born without any feathers to keep them warm and rely on their parents to warm the nest as they grow feathers and muscles. The mother and father birds also bring food to their young. Baby birds eat the same things as their parents from the start. This is different from mammals, like bears and humans, who drink milk when they are born and change their diet as they age.

Different species of birds will leave their nests after different times. Bald Eagle chicks will spend 10-12 weeks in the nest, while American Robin chicks leave after only 13 days. Baby geese, ducks, quail, and grouse leave the nest within a day or two of hatching! The time spent in the nest varies by species, much like their nests, eggs, and behaviors.

Can you find any of these birds, nests, or eggs near your home this Spring?



Green-tailed Towhee chicks



Canada Goose chicks

Activities for Grades 3-5

Build a Nest

Build a cup nest by following these instructions:

1. Look around your backyard or neighborhood for materials that a bird might use to build a nest, especially long grass or pine needles that are already on the ground. If one material doesn't work well, try another. As you will see, building nests is challenging!
2. Grab a thick bundle of these grasses or pine needles and twist them into a circle. Ask someone to help you tie the nest together to keep the shape of the circle. You can also try building your nest inside a bowl from your kitchen to help you get the right shape and hold your pieces together.
3. With long grasses, create a second circle that is slightly smaller than the first. Insert this circle into the first circle to create the bottom of the nest.
4. Try to find two different colored materials to decorate your nest with, such as green moss, brown grass, and red bark. Work these into your nest.
5. To test your nest, ask an adult to help you use an egg from your kitchen, or a small ball like a golf ball or ping-pong ball. Place the egg or ball in your nest to make sure it is sturdy enough to hold the egg.



Hide and Seek Nest

Imagine you are a mother bird who has to hide your nest from predators. Where would you build your nest? Where will it camouflage best?

1. Use the nest you made to play nest hide and seek with a family member or friend.
2. Take turns hiding the nest outside your home in spots where you think it is well camouflaged. You can partially cover the nest with materials around you, but do not cover the whole thing. Leave a bit of the nest visible.
3. Time the seeker to see how long it takes them to find the hidden nest. Whoever finds the nest quickest wins.



Dissect an Egg



Learn about the eggs from which baby birds grow. Ask an adult if you can have an egg to dissect. Make sure to use clean hands and reuse this egg in your next meal to avoid wasting food!

Gather these materials:

- One egg
- One bowl
- One spoon
- One towel for spills

First, observe the outside of the egg by drawing it and discussing these questions with a family member:

1. What color is it?
2. What shape is it?
3. Use two words to describe how the shell feels.

Crack your egg into the bowl. Don't throw away your shell, you will look at that next. Use your spoon to move the egg around and feel different parts of the egg. Be careful not to break the yolk. Draw what the cracked egg looks like and discuss these questions with a family member:

1. What colors do you see?
2. Are some parts softer than others?



Now look at your broken egg shell.

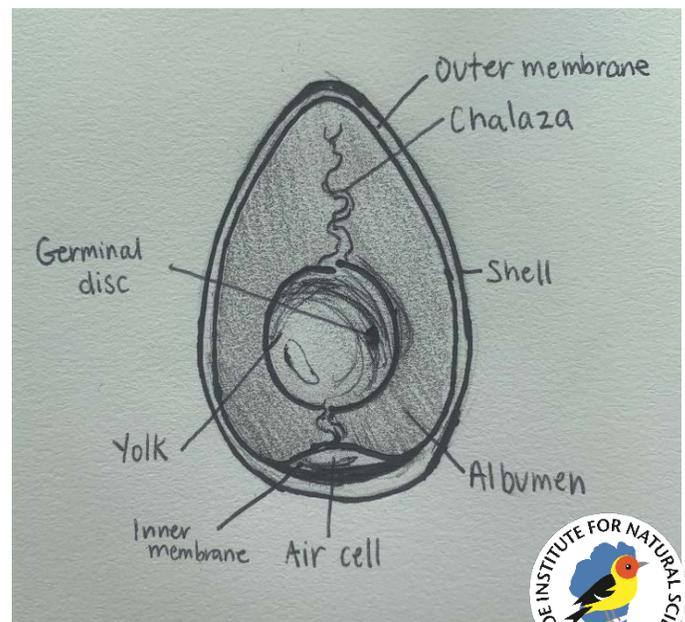
Answer these questions:

1. What color is the inside of your shell? Is it the same or different from the outside?

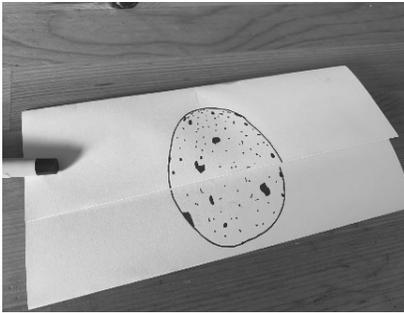
What does the inside of the shell feel like? Is it the same or different from the outside?

Next, look at the egg diagram and the names of egg parts.

Can you see any of these parts in your egg? Which parts?



Hatching Egg



What is your favorite bird? Do an internet search of what this birds' eggs and babies look like. Use what art supplies you have to paint, sculpt, draw, or build this bird hatching from an egg. To paint or draw, find a piece of paper and fold it into thirds. On the outside folded part of this paper, draw the egg. On the inside, unfolded piece of paper, draw the baby bird. When the paper is opened, the egg hatches and out comes the bird.

TINS wants to see your art! Have your parent post a photo of your art project to Facebook and tag [Tahoe Institute for Natural Science](#). You could also email the photo to us at kendal@tinsweb.org.

Nest Walk

Early spring is a good time to search for old and new nests because the leaves on many trees and bushes do not block your view of the nests hidden within. Go for a walk around your neighborhood to look for nests. You can also listen for woodpeckers and nuthatches pecking out cavities. These are some places you might look:

- Hidden in tree branches
- On the ground underneath bushes and trees
- Holes in tree trunks
- In corners of buildings

After searching for nests, call a family member who is far away and tell them your answers to these questions:

1. Did you see any nests? Where did you see them?
2. Is there a lot of noise in your neighborhood? What makes this noise? Do you think birds like the noise?
3. Did you see any nest predators around, such as a squirrel?

Bonus: If you find a nest, take a photo or draw a picture of it. Send this photo or drawing to the family member who you called to tell about your walk.



Words to Know

Dormancy: a time in an animal's life when physical activity stops to conserve energy, such as hibernation or torpor

Mate: One of a pair of animals who breed together

Vegetation: The plants found in an area

Camouflage: An animal's natural coloring that helps it to blend in with its surroundings

Palabras para conocer

Inactividad: Un tiempo de falta de actividad para animales, como hibernación

Pareja: Un compañero animal. Juntos los dos se reproducen

Vegetación: Las plantas en una zona o lugar

Camuflaje: Los colores de un animal que quede disimulados con el terreno

Further Learning

[Watch](#) birds on their nests.

[Find](#) lots of bird activities for K-8 students.

[Learn](#) how to make the shell of an egg disappear.

[Watch](#) a Red-tailed Hawk chick hatch from its egg.

Use scrap wood to [build your own bird box.](#)



For more Tahoe at home, hands-on nature learning visit tinsweb.org/education-outreach/tahomenature

