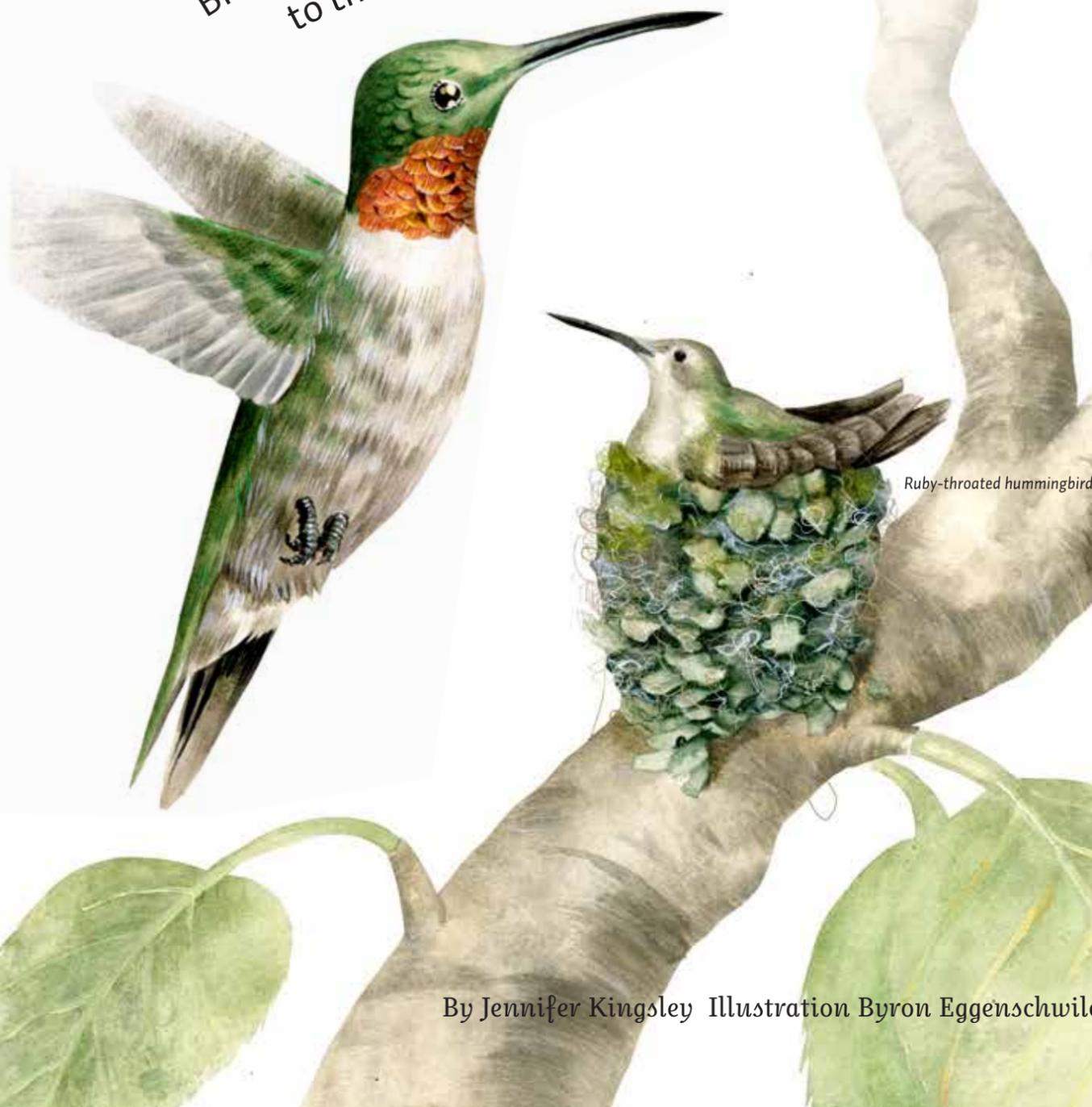


# HOW the nest was DONE

Birds use everything from sticks to animal fur to their own feathers to build their dream homes



Ruby-throated hummingbird

When our cottage neighbours decide to build something new—a designer cabin, a straw bale bunkie, or some extra rooms for friends and family—we usually know about it. But we may not be aware of the avian real estate development that happens every spring. If you have ever seen a bird fly by with a twig in its mouth, you have witnessed a small part of a big undertaking.

Birds need to keep their eggs at the right temperature, and they must protect their chicks. Some birds, like whippoorwills, do this without any nest at all, laying their eggs on the forest floor. Others, like the brown-headed cowbird, lay eggs in other birds' nests. However, most birds build some kind of seasonal dwelling. Whether it's a picture-perfect cup nest, a tunnelled burrow, or a sprawling colony, nests are as varied and individual as cottages.

While classic materials like grass, twigs, branches, and moss are always in fashion, many birds are into recycling and repurposing. Robins will use shreds of plastic tarp to make wispy blue nests, and ospreys decorate their treetop homes with garbage, including paper and plastic bags. Great crested flycatchers fancy snake-skins, and Baltimore orioles can weave hanging nests out of fishing line. At least one pigeon built her nest entirely out of nails (the chicks grew up and fledged just fine).

The bottom line is that birds are ingenious builders, just like us. Nests are fun to find and observe—from a distance that doesn't disturb—and their building styles might remind you of a cottage you know.

## Ruby-throated hummingbird

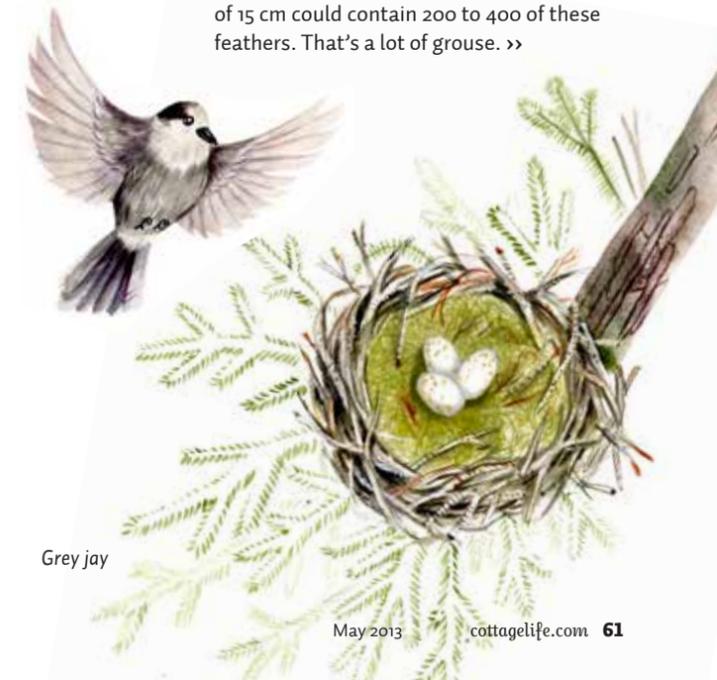
[ *Archilochus colubris* ]

Ruby-throated hummingbirds are known for their speed, agility, and grace, but they should also be recognized for their superb taste in design. The female builds a tiny cup nest out of plant down from thistles and dandelions. Once she flattens the bottom with her feet, she builds up the sides and weaves everything together with her bill, using spiders' silk that she has collected. The outside is clad with bud scales and lichen and reinforced with more silk, making it waterproof and very tough. (Spiders' silk has more tensile strength than steel.) The finished nest is the diameter of a toonie, with room for two eggs. From below, it looks like a knot on the branch. These birds may be perfectionists, but they aren't too particular about location—they can weave a little home onto a loop of chain or an extension cord.

## Grey jay

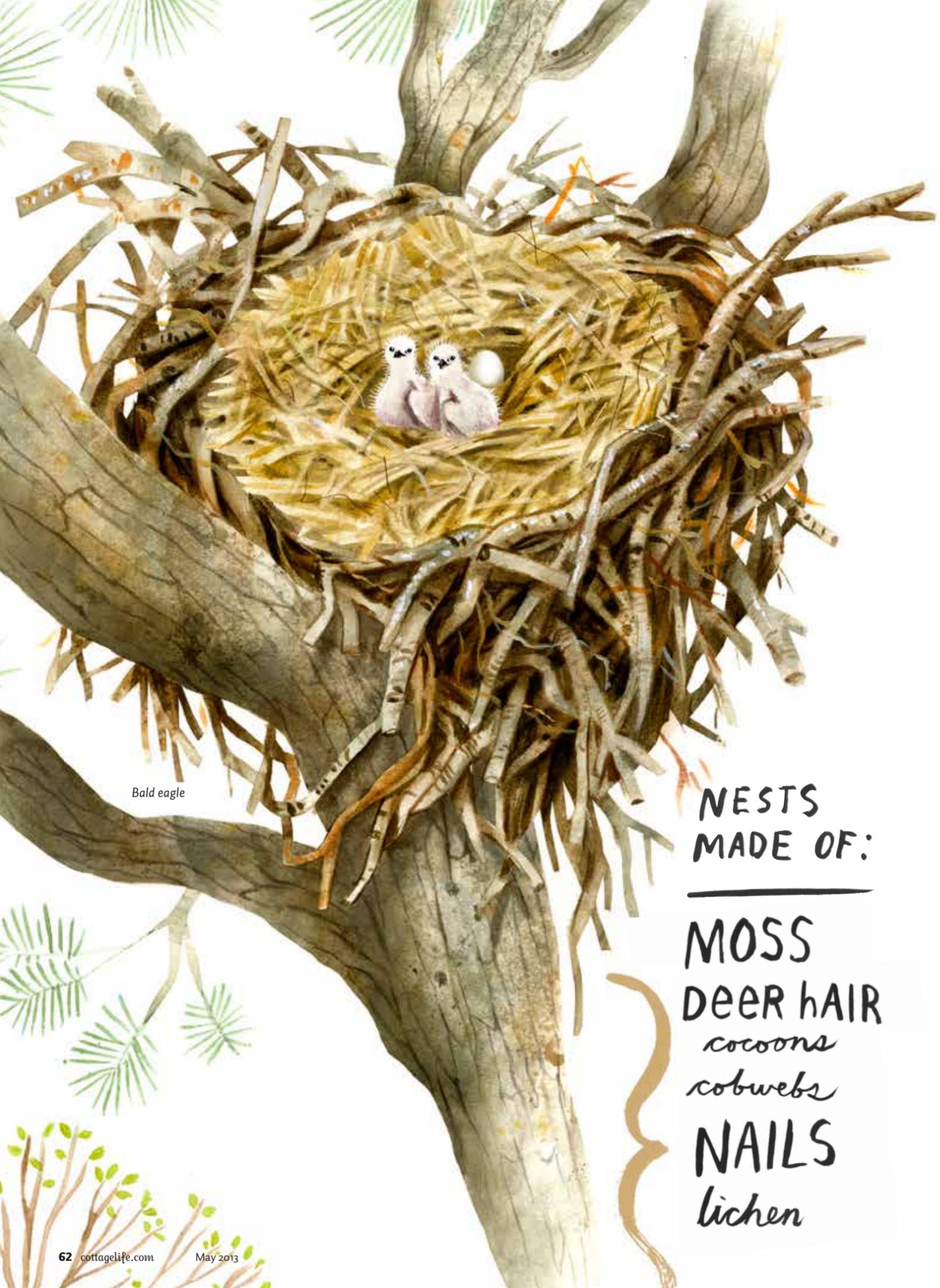
[ *Perisoreus canadensis* ]

These birds are true Canucks. They don't migrate, they don't mind winter, and they get an impressive head start each breeding season. They begin nest building in February, and their young have often fledged before most other birds are back from the south. To make the nest's outer shell, grey jays pull twigs from conifers. They combine these with caterpillar cocoons that they excavate from under tree bark. Then, insulation begins. As anyone who has winterized a cottage knows, you have to fill those walls to stay warm. While grey jays will use moose and deer hair, their favourite insulation is ruffed grouse feathers. A single nest with an outer diameter of 15 cm could contain 200 to 400 of these feathers. That's a lot of grouse. >>



Grey jay

By Jennifer Kingsley Illustration Byron Eggenschwiler



Bald eagle

## NESTS MADE OF:

**MOSS**  
**DEER HAIR**  
*cocoons*  
*cobwebs*  
**NAILS**  
*lichen*

### Great blue heron

[ *Ardea herodias* ]

You have probably seen them standing all alone in the water, waiting for a fish. They seem so serene...until you find a colony. At night, great blue herons fly from their quiet hunting grounds to colonies of up to 500 nests (and, in one case in Virginia, 1,000 nests). Each nest is built from hefty sticks, and the colonies are used over and over. Herons like wetlands, which discourage predators such as raccoons. The downside of high-density development is that some other predators, including eagles, have an easy time hunting the nestlings in one place.

### Bald eagle

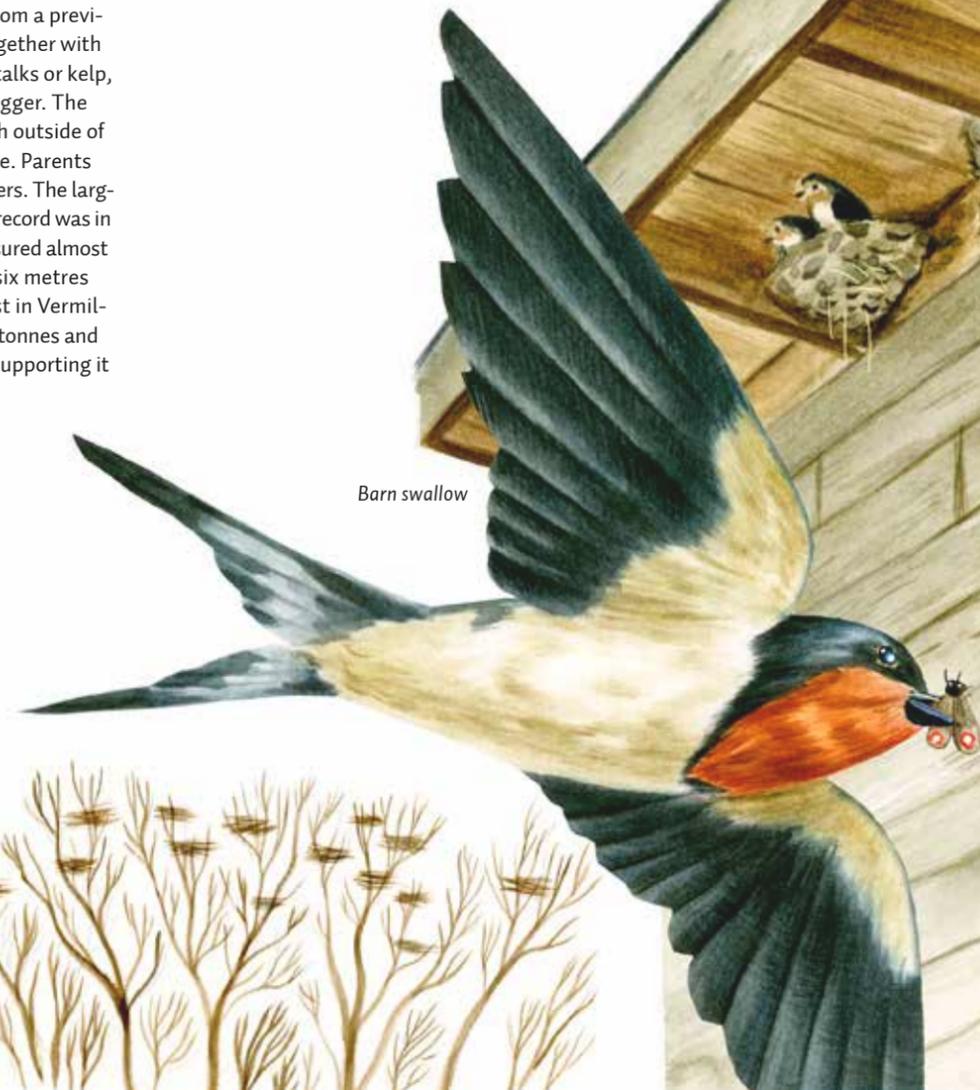
[ *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* ]

Some people are collectors, and so are some birds. Years' worth of artifacts can accumulate until the cottage—or nest—is brimming with memorabilia. In the case of bald eagles, the results can be gigantic. These white-headed birds return to the same area each year, and since they may have only a few suitable nest sites to choose from, they tend to build on top of a structure from a previous year. They weave sticks together with other materials, such as cornstalks or kelp, to build the nest bigger and bigger. The large sticks that form the rough outside of the nest hide a soft lining inside. Parents sometimes use their own feathers. The largest bald eagle nest, or aerie, on record was in St. Petersburg, Fla., and it measured almost three metres in diameter and six metres in height. Another famous nest in Vermilion, Ohio, weighed almost two tonnes and lasted 34 years, until the tree supporting it blew down. Look out below!

### Barn swallow

[ *Hirundo rustica* ]

Barn swallows make pellets out of mud and straw, and shape them into cup nests fastened to beams and roof ledges. Once the superstructure and grass lining are in place, they scout for feathers to pad the walls. Their sculpted earth homes are akin to cottages made of cob or straw bales. Historically, barn swallows lived in caves and on cliffs, but they have transitioned to a more urban life. These days, they nest almost exclusively in buildings (e.g., barns!) and on bridges. A mating pair of barn swallows will accept help at the nest from younger birds, and they are known for one other striking fact: Some have started nesting and breeding in South America during our winter. While many birds migrate south, nesting and breeding during that winter season is very unusual. The birds are energetic and cute, but can be messy. Be patient with them; their numbers are dropping quickly in Ontario's cottage country. >>



Barn swallow

Great blue heron





Herring gull

### Herring gull [ *Larus argentatus* ]

Large white gulls in cottage country are likely herring gulls, the most widespread of their kind in North America. Some are loners, but most nest in groups. Once again, there is safety—and courage—in numbers. While a noisy colony of birds in simple, grassy nests on the ground draws attention to itself, cooperative nesting means your neighbour can watch your kids while you zip off to dive bomb the latest intruder. Most gulls embrace the KISS principle (keep it simple, stupid) when building nests. Why fuss? Herring gulls make a simple scrape with their feet and then fill it with vegetation, or not, if the nest is built in sand. *Voilà*, all moved in. Life is for enjoying, so why get bogged down in home improvement (or cleaning, for that matter)?

### Ovenbird [ *Seiurus aurocapillus* ]

For all of the birds with conspicuous behaviour during the breeding season, we must not forget the shy ones. If you walk along the open, leaf-covered floor of a deciduous and mixed forest in spring, you will probably never see an ovenbird, let alone its nest. Though ovenbirds call frequently, they are well camouflaged against the forest floor and their nests are downright invisible. Each nest is made of grass, leaves, moss, and needles, and has a roof. The adults come and go through a small opening at the side of the nest, but the key to their success is secrecy. The domed roof keeps eggs and young hidden, but if predators find them, the occupants don't have much hope. Adults will only fly from the nest when danger is imminent, so if you see a little bird explode from the leaves underfoot, watch your step!



Ovenbird

# THE hole in the wall GANG

### Downy woodpecker [ *Picoides pubescens* ]

Meet a master carpenter and unlikely real estate developer: the downy woodpecker. Like other woodpeckers (hairy or pileated, for instance), this black-and-white bird has a sharp bill, a thick skull, and a padded cranium that allow it to whack holes into trees. Some of those holes turn into homes. Using an opening of just three to four centimetres, the little downy climbs in and lays a clutch of three to eight eggs on a small pile of wood chips. Once the birds have moved out, other critters move in. Chickadees and mice, for example, may use these empty nesting cavities for shelter, while flying squirrels, northern saw-whet owls, and boreal owls may move into the bigger holes left by larger woodpeckers.

### Belted kingfisher [ *Ceryle alcyon* ]

Welcome to the bunker. Belted kingfishers build for security. Their nests are at the end of burrows and are usually found near water. By digging into the bank with their bills and dragging the dirt and sand out with their feet, a kingfisher couple works together to build an upward-slanting tunnel. It may be as short as half a metre, or it may stretch two and a half metres back into the bank. These tunnels make it challenging for any predator to get in and find their clutch of half a dozen eggs. Sometimes, the birds lose out. Black bears have been known to dig all the way to the end for a snack. Human activity in cottage country and beyond has created some new kingfisher habitat in the form of sand and gravel piles from road building and construction. Want to know if the nest is occupied? Look for tracks at the opening of the tunnel.