

Transcription, February 2015:

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‘The Philosophy of Birds’ Nests.’

To the Editor of *The Echo*. Sir,—There is no paper to which I so gladly look for instruction and information as to *The Echo*, and I generally find what I seek. Your views, however, on the above subject, or rather the views of Mr. Wallace, are so entirely opposed to those derived from my own experience and observation, and appear to me so calculated to spread erroneous views on the subject of natural history, that I venture to request permission to comment on, perhaps controvert them. On his astounding proposition that “man does *not* construct his dwelling by reason,” I offer no comment, your readers will form their own conclusions, but on that which affirms “that birds do *not* build their nests by instinct,” but “change and improve them according to circumstances,” I do take issue. I will take Mr. Wallace’s assertions and illustrations *seriatim*,” and I appeal to the material knowledge of every birds’-nesting school-boy, and to the testimony of every observant naturalist, to say whether there is a single one that will bear the test of examination, or can be sustained by proof.

The first axiom laid down is that “birds build with the materials readiest at hand,” thus “the kingfisher uses the fish bones which are the remnants of its feast.” This is absolutely contrary to fact. Birds *invariably* seek the materials of their nests *at a distance*, and I have often wondered at the apparently purposeless trouble taken to bring such from afar, when equally eligible ones lay in quantities close around them. The rook flies to trees far remote from its nesting place, and pecks off, or collects, the twigs from them, never from the tree on which the nest is built. The “little grebe” will dive alone, and bring up from the bottom of the river, or the pool, every particle of the weed which forms its nest, though the same is floating about in quantities close at hand. The “water ouzel” has a fancy for dry oak leaves as an inner lining for its nest, and will seek and bring them home from incredible distances. As for the kingfisher, the selected example, *she makes no nest at all*, as is well known to naturalists. Her eggs are laid on the bare ground, at the extremity of a hole excavated for the purpose, and the so-called nest is merely a collection of “castings” and moss, which the filthy bird deposits around her, as she sits, and which grows and increases as incubation proceeds. A very offensive mass is the so-called nest. The crow is as much “field-haunting” as the rook, and the materials of both nests are equally ready to the hand of either; but the former, a carrion-feeding bird, affects the hair (not *fur*) of cows or deer, the wool of sheep, and the green moss as a lining, while the rook prefers fibres and dry grass stems. Neither bird ever fails to find what it requires. This is not casually but invariably the case; and if Mr. Wallace had climbed to as many of these birds’-nests as I have, he would have known that it is not in material only that the two differ. The “blotting paper, &c.,” recorded as having been used by the chaffinch, I venture to assert, and I do so from my faith in the unerring instinct which directs the bird, was used on the *outside* only of the nest, and was mixed with the ordinary material. The lining, the essential part, I will guarantee was hair. Many birds, more especially semi-domesticated ones, like the sparrow, readily pick up and appropriate extraneous substances of an apparently similar nature to that which instinct teaches them to use. The “bits of card and the paper” were taken by the chaffinches for moss or lichens. Did Mr. Wallace ever hear of a chaffinch using sticks for building, or a magpie using moss? Can he or anyone else adduce an instance of birds that use feathers as a lining, like the tits, the wrens, or the sparrows, taking hair or moss instead? Did the song-

thrush ever lay her eggs on aught but the cement formed of clay and cow-dung, and rotten wood—the accustomed flooring of her nest? Did the blackbird ever omit to line hers with fibres, or the mistle-thrush with wool?

Again, “the tools, as well as the material, determine the architecture of the bird. The delicately-woven nest of the wren is associated with long legs and a slender beak.” Why this is obvious nonsense—“delicately woven!” There is not a rougher nest externally than the wren’s. I watched these pleasant little birds, while in the act of building, by the hour together. They bring in great mouthfuls of moss, nearly as big as themselves, shovel it on, as a labourer would unload a haycart, and pile the feathers inside in the most careless and unmethodical manner possible. “Long legs and slender beak!” Are the robin’s, or the nightingale’s, or the willow warbler’s nests “delicately woven?” Yet their legs are long and their beaks slender—at least, as much so as the wren’s. The pigeon, again, “heavy of body and weak of foot and bill, contents itself with arranging a few sticks on a branch.” Would that space allowed me to criticise the falsity of this deduction! The pheasant is strong enough in foot and bill surely, and so is the bustard and the curlew, and the whole tribe of plovers; yet they lay on the ground, and build no nest at all. The long-tailed-tit is small and weak, but builds an enormous nest, as compared with its size. The garden and black-cap warblers are strong and active birds, but they build the lightest, flimsiest structures possible. Why should the fern owl, “perforce,” lay her eggs on the ground? Are not the hollow trees open to her as to the owls proper?

I dare not trespass further on your space, but I must animadvert on the crowning absurdity to Mr. Wallace’s theory. “A natural law correlates the mode of nest-building with the colour of the female bird; when the nest conceals the bird, both sexes are adorned with gay colours; when the female is obscure, the nest is open,” &c., &c. Is the hen redbreast obscure? has the hen goldfinch no colour? the whitethroat and the redstart are sufficiently conspicuous, yet their nests are open, while those of the wren, the willow-wren, and the dipper are closed. That “from the nests of the birds, materials may be gathered for the inductions of the philosopher,” I fully and freely admit; but let the philosopher read the great book of nature in simplicity and with open eyes, and refrain from putting forward vain imaginings as ascertained truths.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.