



ACTIVITY 2

Red-winged Blackbird: At Home in the Cattails

Background Information:



When you take a walk out in nature, coming across a pond, stream or marsh is a very special discovery. The wet places on the Earth are actually very few and far between, so they are very special places for plants and animals as well. Plants that need wet soil to survive can be found there. Many animal species will live their entire lives in a stream, or marsh, or come there from time to time to drink, eat, hide, or nest.

Consider the Red-winged blackbird. On any given spring or summer day, if there are red-winged blackbirds in your local wetland, you will know it. Their bright red and yellow patches on their wings and gurgling songs are unmistakable. Sometimes hundreds of them can be found in one marsh or large pond. If you have a moment, just sit quietly along the wetland's edge and watch these beautiful birds busily build their nests, patrol their territories, or feed their young.

This small wetland species weaves together cattails and sedges and creates a cup-like structure in which it builds its nest. It lines its nest with smaller grasses and the cottony seeds of cattails. It takes about 3-6 days to complete the nest. The pale bluish-green eggs, marked with dark spots, are laid securely in the cup, so that blowing winds will unlikely fall from the nest. If a young bird does fall from the nest, they can actually swim for safety. The cup nest is also well hidden in the marsh, so that predators cannot easily find the colored eggs, or the young.

By building its nest over water, the red-winged blackbird is protected from ground predators such as foxes and cats. But building a nest in a wetland also provides the blackbird with a ready source of food for itself and its young. Adult red-winged blackbirds eat a variety of seeds, as well as some insects and spiders, but their young eat almost entirely insects. Wetlands are great places to find many insects and other small animals. Often the wetland does not provide enough food, so the red-winged blackbird will be found foraging in open fields near the wetland.

Challenge: Building a home without nails

The red-winged blackbird builds its woven nest in the cattails and reeds without any special nails or glue, yet the cup-shaped nest must not only support 3-4 eggs at a time, but the parent as well. How is this possible? Imagine your home being built with nails. The red-winged blackbird, like most nest-building birds, weave together pieces of plant material in such a way that the resultant nest is very sturdy. Now it is your turn to build a sturdy nest, only using strips of construction paper, rather than reeds.

What You Need:



- About 12 strips of construction paper, about 12 inches (30 cm) long
- Some cotton balls, or tissue paper
- About a small apple-sized ball of modeling clay
- Some examples of bird nests, and woven baskets

What To Do:



Begin by coming up with a plan as to how you are going to complete your nest. Take a look at some examples of bird nests and woven baskets to get some ideas. One suggestion is to lay out 4 strips of paper in a star pattern, much like the spokes in a bicycle wheel. You may need to cheat a little by gluing these strips together in the middle to get started. Next, weave strips of paper in and out around the center of the star, beginning in the middle. With each new strip of paper, make sure to start weaving in a different place around the center than the strip below it (this will make the nest stronger). Fold over the ends of the paper to anchor each strip in place. As you go, form the nest into a cup shape. Once the cup nest is complete, you can line your nest with cotton or strips of tissue paper.

Now it's time to test the sturdiness of your nest. Prepare about 4 balls of clay, each about 1 inch (2.5 cm) in diameter—about the diameter of a walnut. These will represent the eggs of a red-winged blackbird nest. Now try and carefully lift the nest. Success? Of course, red-winged blackbirds have had a bit more practice than you have in building nests.

Take It A Bit Further:



Idea One:

Try to find photographs and drawings of different bird nests in books or the Internet. How are these nests different?



Idea Two:

Look for examples of weaving by people, including fabrics and baskets. Many Native Americans were excellent basket weavers. Do you think they got their inspiration by watching nest-building birds?