

Hidden on the tips of branches high in the forest canopy is an engineering masterpiece—a woven, pendulous pouch crafted with care by visiting summer residents.



Male and female Baltimore orioles share in the nest-building process. The male oriole (pictured) has brilliant, showy orange-and-black plumage, while the female has a more obscure yellowish-orange and gray color to help camouflage her while nesting.

Baltimore Orioles

Story By Jeff Walk
Photo By Adele Hodde

Well-concealed in the leafy branch tips, birds set about the serious business of raising their young.

Despite males with bold orange-and-black plumage and a loud, rich song, one common summertime bird throughout Illinois in yards, open woodlands and along streams is an uncommon sight for most people. Baltimore orioles spend most of their time high in trees, searching leafy branch tips for caterpillars and fruit.

Females and males work together to collect plant fibers, string and hair that are tightly woven into a purse-like pendant nest. While oriole nests look very delicate, hanging by the rim to small branches, they are surprisingly tough and

rarely fall from trees. Most people notice oriole nests in winter, holding on months after leaves have fallen to the ground.

Females incubate four or five eggs for about two weeks, swaying in the summer breeze while the males serenade them. Once the young hatch, parents are both busy feeding the youngsters for another two weeks until they leave the nest.

Orioles have a reputation for being good parents. Their nests, hanging on branch tips, high in trees, are out of the reach of predators such as raccoons and cats. Orioles will vigorously counter-attack any squirrel, hawk or snake that tries to raid their nest.

Orioles also are vigilant against brown-headed cowbirds, brood parasites that lay eggs in other species of birds' nests to avoid parenting altogether. If a cowbird does manage to sneak an egg into an oriole nest, the orioles recognize the foreign egg and eject it.

Some people have success luring Baltimore orioles down to eye level for comfortable viewing. Orioles will accept berries, raisins, oranges, mealworms or even jelly offered in a platform feeder.

Another trick to help locate the orioles nesting in your yard is to make pieces of orange yarn available for nest construction, stuffing them in a mesh onion sack and hanging it from a tree branch or other perch.

Best of all, landscape with fruiting plants, such as cherries, grapes, serviceberries, dogwoods and raspberries—so long as you don't mind sharing the harvest with orioles, waxwings and other birds.



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