

How Nesting Birds Avoid Predators

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Introduction

The diverse ecosystem known as the Eastern Lake Ontario Dunes and Wetlands Area is home to many different plants and animals. Its many species of birds have adapted a variety of ways to blend in or **camouflage** to protect their nests and young.

Nesting birds are often at higher risk for **predation** or being eaten by other animals. This is also true for their eggs and young hatchlings. To reduce the risk of predation, many birds conceal their nests, eggs and young. Killdeer, American Bittern, Yellow Warbler and Wood Duck use different camouflaging techniques to locate, build, and hide their nests, eggs and young from predators. For some species egg color and pattern can further help protect the developing young (eggs) prior to hatching.

Being familiar with a local ecosystem's habitat characteristics, the life cycles of local birds, and the camouflaging techniques used by birds that nest in the area improves your ability and opportunities to see those birds during your visit.



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Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Killdeer are slender, lanky birds with long wings and a long, pointed tail. They are brown and white in color with two black bands around the neck. They can be seen on or close to the ground in areas with few or no tall plants. They are ground nesters. Their nests are simple indentations in the ground called **scrapes**. Killdeer scrape the ground until it is suitable for the female to lay her speckled eggs. Lightly colored materials, such as pebbles, shells and sticks, are added to the nest. The speckled pattern of the eggs among the nesting materials helps to camouflage the nest and eggs from predators. Knowing what to look for may help you spot a Killdeer nest, but avoid getting too close.



This adult Killdeer was seen looking over its hatchlings as they searched for small bugs to eat.
 Photo courtesy of Jerry Acton



Can you find the four camouflaged speckled Killdeer eggs? Photo courtesy of Jerry Acton

Fun Fact:

When the nest is approached by humans or wildlife, adult Killdeer will leave the nest and pretend to have a broken wing to lure potential predators away from the nest.

American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*)

The **American Bittern** is a medium-sized brown and tan bird with vertical brown stripes on its chest. Living in marshes and wetlands, American Bitterns build large, often **concealed**, nests on dry ground above water or mud in areas with thick vegetation. Nests are often built using reeds, sedges and cattails. The nests have separate paths for nest entrance and exit. American Bittern eggs are buffy brown to olive without markings. Adult American Bitterns, their nests and hatchlings are hard to see as they stay camouflaged in the tall plants of their wetland habitat.

Fun Fact:

When approached, the American Bittern uses its concealing coloration to remain hidden from predators by stretching its neck up, pointing its bill skyward, and swaying slowly from side to side, as if imitating waving reeds.



Adult American Bittern.
Photo courtesy of Doug Racine



An American Bittern nest with eggs located among cattail beds.
Photo courtesy of Andrew Sabai

Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*)

Adult male **Yellow Warblers** are a brighter yellow than the females, making them easier to see and helping them to attract females. Males also have a light olive green tinge on their backs and rusty streaks on their chest. Both have large black eyes and a relatively large bill. They are most commonly found along streams or wetlands and are **shrub nesters**. Female Yellow Warblers build nests with grasses, bark and other plant material, and line them with fine material such as feathers or hair. Nests are located two to 12 feet off the ground in shrubs. Yellow Warbler eggs are small grayish or greenish white with dark spots.



From left to right: Yellow Warblers, Yellow Warbler nest and an adult female Yellow Warbler (notice there are no rusty streaks on the chest). All photos courtesy of Doug Racine

Fun Fact:

A Brown-headed Cowbird often lays eggs in a warbler's nest; the warbler builds a new nest directly on top of the parasitized one, sometimes resulting in nests with up to six tiers.

Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*)

The **Wood Duck** is unique with a boxy head and long broad tail. Males have a glossy green head with stripes and chestnut-colored chest and sides, while females are a dark gray-brown color with a white eye patch and are much less colorful. They are **cavity nesters** meaning that they build their feather-lined nests in the cavities of living or decaying trees or manmade nesting boxes. Nests can be found up to one mile from a water body. Nesting cavities can be situated two to 15 feet down inside the tree trunk, and up to 60 feet above the ground. Higher cavities are preferred because height helps hide the nest, eggs and young from predators.

Wood Duck eggs are a creamy white color and are not camouflaged because the eggs are concealed in the nest cavity and hidden from most predators. Hatchlings are born alert and leave the nest, by jumping out, within a day of birth. Their mother calls to them and leads them to water. The hatchlings stay with their mother for more than two months.

Fun Fact:

Wood Duck ducklings remain in their nest for 24 hours and then with their sharp claws climb up to the entrance/exit hole.



Adult male (front) and female (back) Wood Duck. Photo courtesy of Doug Racine



Wood Duck nesting box.
Photo courtesy of Doug Racine

A male Wood Duck takes flight leaving two other male Wood Ducks.
Photo courtesy of Doug Racine



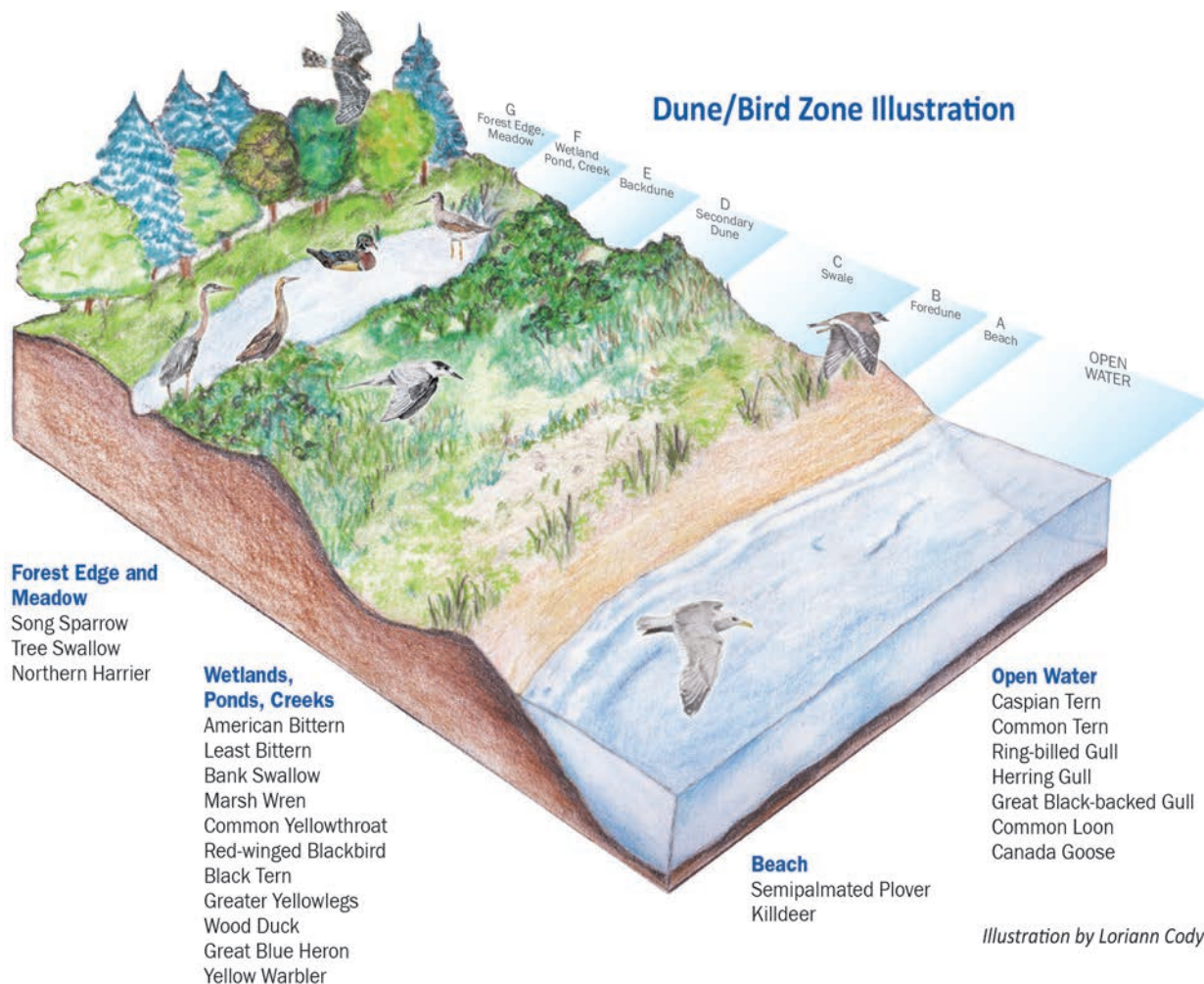
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Viewing Birds along Eastern Lake Ontario

The Eastern Lake Ontario Dunes and Wetlands Area is a birdwatchers' paradise year-round. When you visit, bring your binoculars and camera, but be sure to keep enough distance between yourself and the birds or nests you are viewing to avoid disturbing them. Even the slightest disturbance can negatively impact nesting birds, their eggs and young.

The four species — Killdeer, American Bittern, Yellow Warbler and Wood Duck — featured in this fact sheet can be found among the area's seven main **habitat zones**. Being the only freshwater sand dunes on the New York side of Lake Ontario, the area provides diverse habitat for these species and a variety of other songbirds, shorebirds, and waterfowl that are listed below.

The illustration highlights the profile of the Eastern Lake Ontario Dunes and Wetland Area which is comprised of seven main zones: A - beach; B - foredune; C - trough or swale; D - inland or secondary dune; E - backdune; F - wetland, pond or creek and G - forest edge and meadow.



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Resources: The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, All About Birds website: <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

New York State Ornithological Association website: <http://www.nybirds.org/>