

# **Birds and People**

## **Nests as records of our interconnected behaviour**

**Interconnected avian and human behaviour.**

**Douglas G. D. Russell, Senior Curator, Birds' Eggs & Nests.**

**NHM Tring, Hertfordshire. 13 January 2026**

Birds' nests protect eggs and young from the elements, thwart predators and help to provide the optimal environment for breeding success. They are intimate records of a behaviour which has evolved over generations. Each nest is unique to the time and place in which it is built and the actions of the bird (or birds) that built it. Nests are, as the 19th century biologist James Rennie put it, "the business of their lives".

Curators arguably have more time to study the objects they care for than most. My role has gifted me the exceptional opportunity to study the nests of thousands of species from all over the world. Over the last 25 years I have had the chance to hold a Brazilian hummingbird nest collected as Captain Cook's Endeavour sailed towards Tahiti; and the tattered remnants of a nest built by an African Lark at the threshold of extinction.

We are just beginning to understand how birds think, learn, remember and problem solve. How and why birds choose certain materials and architectures is slowly being revealed. Nests have extraordinary power to communicate something meaningful to us about the world in which they were built and the birds that made them. Artists have long played a role in depicting and sharing this knowledge with diverse audiences and Lillias' work is no exception.

A recent global review of nearly 11,000 nests built by 25 species showed that anthropogenic materials were found in 31% of nests examined. This is perhaps unsurprising given the same article states that every day, three million tons of waste are discarded worldwide. Much of the recent focus has been on plastic contamination as a critical environmental problem. What these historical nests confirm is that birds have been reusing our rubbish for as long as we have been producing it. Neither our or indeed the bird's behaviour has changed per se – what has changed is the nature and longevity of our rubbish. Each of the nests Lillias and I chose, tells a different but interlinked story. A story that spans over a century of conflict and dramatic environmental change; starting in Leeuspruit in South Africa shortly after the end of the Second Boer War (1899-1902) and ending with a nest built using fragments of the drone fibres now horrifically draped across the scarred landscape of Ukraine.

It has been a privilege and a pleasure to work with Lillias. She has expertly recorded and interpreted the nests in her own unique way, and each watercolour serves as a beautiful, poignant reminder of these intimate records of interconnected avian and human behaviour.

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**Joining forces – nests and people.**

**Lillias August RI, member of the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours (RI)**

**Suffolk, UK. 18 January 2026**

I'm lucky enough to have been invited by Douglas G D Russell, Senior Curator of the nest and egg collections at the Natural History Museum in Tring, to collaborate on this project. We both have an interest in nests that include anthropogenic material. They can be found throughout the museum's collection of over 4000 nests, some dating back over 150 years and some current. In bringing Art, Science and History together we hope to pass on our enthusiasm.

Nests cannot fail to be evocative. Many people have written about the wonder and emotions felt when discovering their first nest. The author Helen Macdonald wrote that as a child "nests were like bruises: things I couldn't help but touch... seasonal secrets to be used and abandoned". I too felt a sense of wonder when, for instance, a rook's nest fell from a tree and showed me that, with its delicate inner nest, it was more than just a random heap of sticks. And in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of space* he writes "A nest - and this we can understand right away - is a precious thing, and yet it sets us to daydreaming of security". Like looking at an icon, a nest is humbling and other-worldly.

Sea birds' use of plastics in nests is well-documented as a sad example of today's pollution. I am concentrating on the more plentiful nests from a terrestrial environment which are not so much in the public eye. I am looking at nests both inside the museum and in today's environment – I was recently given one that appears to include the fluorescent fluff from a tennis ball!

The nests that I have studied are highly individual. They are marvels of ingenuity and opportunism. Collected from all over the world, they are often part of fascinating stories that give insight into their place in time, or they can simply be mysteries. How can a wren make a nest of heavy string? Is that a bandage from the Boer war?

Having spent time in the bowels of the NHM collection, I am now collecting my thoughts and starting to paint. I hope that my paintings, when exhibited as a collection, will be evocative in themselves as well as being a reflection on the wonders of birds as architects and opportunists. I have attempted in some way to portray not only what they look like but also the essence of their story.