Photo Documentation by Ron and Anne Kruse of Black-billed Magpie Nest Cycle in Hall County

Wayne J. Mollhoff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebbirdrev

Part of the Ornithology Commons, Poultry or Avian Science Commons, and the Zoology Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebbirdrev/1319

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nebraska Bird Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Photo Documentation by Ron and Anne Kruse of Black-billed Magpie Nest Cycle in Hall County

Wayne J. Mollhoff
Ashland, NE
wmollhoff@netscape.net

Every once in a while a fortunate birder has a chance to witness the sequence of events that make up a breeding season. In May of 2004, NOU members Ron and Anne Kruse of Grand Island had that opportunity and made the most of it. While checking Eastern Bluebird nest boxes on the south side of the northernmost channel of the Platte River east of Locust St. in the City of Grand Island Wellfield property, they found a Black-billed Magpie nest. They returned with a camera and ladder and photographed the nest at two-day intervals for the next three weeks. Their photos show the chicks' rapid development, a speedy process likely to amaze anyone who has not had the opportunity to see it firsthand.

Using a 12-ft stepladder to view the nest, they found that although most magpie nest cups are solidly roofed over by sticks, this one was open enough on top that they were able to see into the nest. They took photos one-handed, reaching through the canopy of sticks and taking care not to damage the structure assembled by the adult
The nest was about 13 feet high in a mostly-dead mulberry tree and about 25 feet from the nearest bluebird box. The area is between the braided channels of the Platte River, with dense stands of trees interspersed with open grassy meadows. On two occasions, the chicks opened their mouths in response to the noise or motion made when the photographs were taken, but at no time did an adult magpie approach the nest while Anne and Ron were present.

Close examination of the following magpie nesting sequence photos will show nestling developmental characteristics seldom seen either by bird lovers or scientists.

Editor’s Note: Readers are reminded that all native birds and their nests are protected by state and/or federal law. Individuals handling adult birds, nestlings or eggs are required to obtain both state and federal permits. All individuals are encouraged to avoid unnecessarily disturbing or harassing birds, particularly during the breeding season.

Thanks to Joel Jorgensen, Nongame Bird Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, for the above comments on migratory bird laws.

Day 3 (May 4, 2004) 6 young have hatched. Note unhatched egg in center.

Day 5 (May 6, 2004) Young are growing. Note feather tracts on back; wings begin to darken.

Day 9 (May 10, 2004) Feathers on head begin to erupt. Note pin feathers on back and wings.

Day 11 (May 12, 2004) Feathers continue to develop. Note late hatched chick at top of photo.
Day 11 (May 12, 2004) Pinfeathers growing; eyes are open. Open mouths are bright red.

Day 13 (May 14, 2004) Chicks react to photographer with open mouths, seen through branches placed over the top of the nest by the adult birds.

Day 19 (May 20, 2004)
Contour feathers and wing coverts nearly emerged.

May, 2004. Anne Kruse checks the magpie nest, located in a mulberry tree, from a 12-ft. ladder.

Day 23 (May 24, 2004)
Growing rapidly and nearly fledged. Note rictal bristles developing at base of beak.