



BEESTON WILDLIFE GROUP

Spring is coming! Some birds are sat on eggs, even in February

Some species of bird nest very early, they take the risk of raising young while the majority of bird species wait until it is warm and more food become available. As long as there is food and their feathers are in good condition, the birds can keep warm, they trap a layer of air next to their bodies; the feathers keep out the cold and wind. Feathers are superb insulators. When birds are sat on a nest and snow falls on them, it looks disastrous, but the fact that snow lays on the bird, shows that no heat is escaping to melt it, they are snug as toast!

In order for the eggs to hatch, they must be warmed to 37 degrees, which is less than their body temperature of 40 degrees. The sitting bird will lose feathers from its breast enabling bare skin to touch the eggs (brood patch) and exchange heat. The lining of the nest must be a reasonable insulator to stop the heat escaping, so the birds will do all they can to stop the nest getting wet.

Below are some species that brave the elements and start Spring arriving very early!

Mistle Thrush: These are tough birds, in the winter they will defend fruit trees like Ivy, Rowan or Holly, on the continent it's often Mistletoe, to keep a ready supply of food. They can be sat on eggs in February, probably taking advantage of fruits as hard ground won't free up many worms or other invertebrates. The nest is well hidden in the fork of a tree or close to the trunk. They sing early too - and in all weathers - hence their alternate name - Stormcock.

Raven: are huge crows, they are opportunists and very clever. They will eat almost anything from fruits to sheep placentas, which may help them feed their young in March as these birds will be on eggs in February. They also cache food when it is plentiful and have an excellent memory to dig it up in times of need.

Heron: Why these birds lay in February is a bit of a mystery as they rely mainly on food taken from water, which can be impossible in winter. Never the less they are successful and it works from them and they find enough to feed themselves and their young while other water birds wait until the risk of frost has past.

Egyptian Goose: Pairs of this species are extremely noisy in January/February as they set up their territories chasing off other wildfowl. Suddenly it goes quiet as the female slopes off to nest, leaving the male to patrol their patch. Seeing goslings in late March is not unusual, they are very well insulated to survive the bitterly cold water.

Crossbill: nest according to the seasonal production of Spruce seeds. So if the tree sheds its seed in the middle of winter, there is plenty of food which only the Crossbill can access with its unique bill. The seeds will be partly digested and fed to the young as a semi-solid, full of protein. So birds can be sat on eggs while the snow falls, the plentiful food supply will keep them warm even in the harshest of weather.

Wood Pigeon: virtually breed all year round. The vast majority will lay in the warmer months, but some Pigeons that are confident that the food supply is constant can be sat on eggs in February. Pigeons have a crop that can store large amounts of food, so they take advantage of a cache of food, fill their crop and store it on board. They regurgitate to feed their young - called 'pigeon or crop milk', squirting the contents directly into the stomach of their young- there is no wastage. Consequently, they are a highly successful breeder.

So, as we wrap up to keep out the cold, some birds are oblivious and get the breeding season going months before the Swallows arrive. It's an amazing worlds out there.



Mistle Thrush



Raven



Grey Heron



Egyptian Goose



Crossbill



Wood Pigeon