

Birds change nesting routines as new species arrive in Tahoe

By Cheryl Millham

Living in Lake Tahoe gives us the opportunity to witness the changing bird habitats and to take part in helping the Steller's Jays, the most dominant songbird in the Sierra.



A gentleman called, totally confused, so I am going to share his story with you.

He and his wife keep their garage door open for most of the day. Two jays decided to build a nest in their garage. Well, if you have ever witnessed Steller's Jays building a nest, they make a big mess before any twigs start to adhere together. The couple kept cleaning up the mess. He finally called Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care to talk about his problem with his jays.

He didn't mind if the birds nested in his garage. However, they close the garage door every night and were afraid the birds wouldn't be able to feed their babies.

I explained to him that birds sleep at night (with a few exceptions). If they opened the garage door each morning and closed it each night, the birds would be fine.



Steller's Jays are changing their nesting habits to guard against ravens.
Photo/LTWC

Then I explained to him why the jays were building a nest in his garage.

Twenty years ago there were very few – if no – ravens in Tahoe. But with many years of drought and mild winters, the ravens have moved here.

What do the Ravens eat and feed their babies?

You guessed it – newly hatched baby birds. If they are flying over some trees and see a nest with chicks in it, they would swoop down and grab the just hatched babies, then fly off to feed their own babies.

The gentleman on the phone then told me he witnessed this behavior. He told me there are a lot of ravens by his house and he saw a raven fly down and pull a baby robin right out of the nest, even while the mom was screaming.

But there was nothing she could do.

That is why you will see jays making nests where they have never made nests before. It is no longer unusual to see nests under eaves or in garages to hide their nest from the hungry ravens.

I hope the robins also learn to change their nesting habits.

Be patient with nesting birds. They are just trying to raise their babies safely.

But, remember this, in just 23 days after their eggs have hatched, the (songbird) babies will be too big for ravens to eat and will have left the nest.

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