



# TREE TRIMMING GUIDELINES

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HOW TO PROTECT NESTS WHILE PERFORMING TREE MAINTENANCE

Ventura  Audubon Society

## ABOUT BIRD NESTS

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The largest and smallest may nest at other times (egrets, herons, raptors, and hummingbirds), some nest colonially (swallows, egrets and herons), and some often reuse nests (hawks, owls, crows, and ravens). Although most nests are in trees or other above ground locations, some bird species nest on the ground including in the sand on our beaches.

If an occupied nest is moved or disturbed, the parents will most likely abandon the nest. Permission to move a nest can only be given by qualified authorities and done by qualified persons.

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At least 175 species of birds breed in Ventura County. Most birds build nests to raise their young in hidden sites on the ground and in bushes, trees, cavities, and man-made structures. Parent birds chose a particular nest location due to its preferred habitat, proximity to food or water source, and for protection against predators and weather. Birds are extremely creative when it comes to choosing nesting material, using natural substances such as mud, twigs, spider webs, feathers, leaves, grasses, and other plant fibers. The nests are meant to be strong and warm, protecting eggs from predators and weather.

*Most species of birds nest in spring and summer, between March and August. Climate Change may be responsible for data showing species now breeding up to 31 days earlier than they were in the 1960s. Owls reuse cavities or nests of other birds and may begin sooner. Raptors may begin nest building as early as February, so be on the watch for both.*



PHOTO: ALECIA SMITH



## WHY PROTECT NESTS?

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Birds and their songs enhance our lives and play a role in our culture and heritage. They are often the only connection that people have to natural ecosystems in our urban landscape. Indeed, bird watching is a hobby to millions and a growing sport among nature enthusiasts.

Nesting birds play a beneficial role in our local ecosystems by eating insect pests (helping to avoid the use of toxic pesticides), pollinating plants, and distributing seeds to encourage native plant diversity and re-growth.

They are also protected by several state and federal laws. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) passed in 1918 makes it unlawful “by any means or manner to pursue, hunt, take, capture (or) kill” any migratory birds except as permitted by regulations issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Migratory birds include all native birds in the United States, except those non-migratory species such as quail and turkey that are managed by individual states. California Department of Fish and Game Code 3513 provides protection to the birds listed under the MBTA, essentially all native birds. Other Fish and Game codes provide further protection to certain types of birds such as raptors.



Many bird populations are declining due to habitat modification or loss, disruption of migration routes, domestic and feral cats, and many other human activities.

## BEFORE PERFORMING TREE MAINTENANCE

- The best timing for tree maintenance is September to January, to ensure the least disturbance of birds and nests.
- Certain birds such as hawks, owls, herons, egrets, crows, and ravens often reuse nests and nest outside of the traditional spring and summer season. If a large nest made of twigs is encountered, even if unoccupied, assume that it belongs to one of these birds and do not disturb it.
- Inspect the area carefully for birds and nests. If dealing with large areas or sensitive habitats containing native plants, dense brush, stream sides, or stands of trees, consult with a trained biologist beforehand to conduct a survey.
- Do not be tempted to do your own survey since special training is needed to do an effective survey. Additionally, nesting birds and their young that reside in an area with abandoned buildings, heavy brush, or high in trees require special care.
- All persons should be aware of laws pertaining to the protection of birds and their nests and procedures to follow if a nest is encountered.
- Be sure to hire a licensed landscaper, a certified arborist, or qualified tree trimmer that is concerned with tree health. Handymen and other unqualified trimmers may do more harm than good.
- Most trees are excessively and inappropriately trimmed. Not only does this diminish locations for nests and disturb birds, but it is also bad for tree health. Unnecessary tree trimming includes thinning out pine trees and conifers until you can see through them, pruning sycamore trees without reason as they do not drop limbs, and removing valuable dead palm fronds from palm trees as these are perfect nest locations for orioles and kingbirds.
- Be sure to choose tree varieties wisely before you plant and base their location on future growth and maintenance. For example, do not plant a large tree near a sidewalk that may buckle the walkway and cause a future expense and public safety nuisance.
- To determine if a nest is present: Look for concentrations of white colored droppings then check the vegetation above. When walking nearby, be aware of birds erupting from vegetation or if they scold you as you approach. Observe quietly and note any birds carrying nesting material or food to one place repeatedly.



PHOTO: ALECIA SMITH



## RESOURCES

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To find a qualified biologist to perform nest surveys:

[California's Department of Fish and Wildlife](#)  
or search online

Learn what to do if you find an injured bird through Ventura Audubon's website:

[Resources/Injured](#)

For guidance on safe maintenance around bird rookeries (e.g., for herons and egrets):

[California's Department of Fish and Wildlife](#)

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## IF AN ACTIVE NEST IS FOUND OR DISTURBED

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Stop work immediately within a range of 50 ft of songbird and 500 ft of raptor nests. Do not move or touch the nest, eggs or young.

The nest should be left alone until the young have fledged on their own. If the species is identifiable, California Department of Fish and Wildlife or Ventura Audubon Society may be able to approximate the time until the birds will leave the nest (fledge) when you can start work again. Often this is only 4 to 8 weeks.

If city workers or others are doing the work, ask them to stop immediately and inform them of the laws pertaining to protection of nesting birds. Give them the contact information for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife or Ventura Audubon Society. You should also contact these groups yourself. Record the nest location in the tree or brush, bird species if known, address and cross streets, the maintenance company contact information, and type of maintenance activity.

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