

## AMERICAN ROBINS NESTING IN PHRAGMITES

by Kenneth Hudson

The American Robin has long been known to breed in a variety of habitats and to use a diverse array of substrates to support its nest. Still, one might assume that by now all possible kinds of nesting locations would have been observed and reported. But during the spring of 1993, in Boston's Fenway neighborhood, I found ten robin nests that had been built in phragmites reeds bordering a shallow freshwater stream.

When I notified the North American Nest-Record Card Program at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology about this discovery, they informed me that no other reports of robins nesting in phragmites could be found in their files. At last count Cornell's file of American Robin nest cards totaled more than 16,000 (Lowe 1993, pers. comm.). What I had noticed by mere happenstance at the Fens turned out to be something new (or at least something newly reported).

To say that I was surprised to find robins nesting in phragmites would be an understatement. In earlier seasons I had observed Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles nesting in phragmites at the Fens and at the nearby Riverway. I had also observed that many birds use these giant reeds for shelter and as a place in which to seek food. But I had not imagined that robins might breed in such apparently unsuitable habitat.

I found the first nest on April 29. It was about three feet above the ground in a dense reedbed. At that season fresh green reed growth had barely begun to sprout among the tall dead stalks left over from the previous year. The nest was supported entirely by old dry reedstalks. Identification was absurdly easy: an adult robin was clearly visible in the nest. At first I felt that this find might be an anomaly without much significance. Still, I kept my eyes open and paid a bit more attention than usual to the local reedbeds.

The very next day, April 30, I found two more robin nests in reeds at the Fens. Two additional nests were added to the list on May 2. On May 3 I tallied four more. The tenth and last nest of the year was found on June 7. In view of these dates all of the nests, except possibly the last, were likely of the season's first brood nesting attempts. Every one of these nests was supported solely by dead reedstalks. With one exception, all were found at or near the landward side of reedbeds—that is, on the side opposite the stream. Each nest was between approximately three and six feet above the ground. In every instance identification was confirmed by observing, and in some cases photographing, an adult robin at or in the nest.

Unfortunately, I was not able to see whether any of the nests contained eggs or nestling birds. Therefore, information such as clutch sizes and fledging success rates are not available. (I would dearly like to know the latter statistic in

particular, and to compare it with the corresponding figures for nests in more orthodox sites.) On a couple of occasions later in the season I saw recently fledged robins in the reeds not far from known nest sites. Of course, these birds might have hatched in some nearby tree or bush.

Most of the known robin nests in the Fens reedbeds were relatively easy to see once initially spotted. Dull overcast days turned out to be the most favorable conditions for seeing the nests, because bright sunshine produced confusing patterns of light and shadow among which nests were hard to pick out. A couple of nests were so visible from nearby paths or sidewalks that I wondered why no other birders had noticed and reported them. But one nest proved to be an exception. The nest was embedded in an extremely close-packed clump of reedstalks that leaned at an angle of about forty-five degrees. The reeds concealed the nest so effectively that I was unable to see more than a tiny part of it no matter how I shifted my viewpoint. Even from a distance of only four or five paces it was almost invisible. I am still amazed that the adult birds were able somehow to squeeze through that compact vegetation and construct a nest in it. The site truly appeared more appropriate for an arboreal snake than for a robust songbird.

In all, I found ten robin nests in phragmites and forty-four in other plants, primarily deciduous small trees and bushes (e.g., rose, lilac, ash, birch, red-black oak), during the 1993 season. Thus, approximately eighteen percent of the known robin nests (determined by clearly seeing an adult bird at or in the nest) were located in phragmites.

If a few careful observers will visit the Fens in future seasons and do some painstaking fieldwork, a lot more light can be shed on this intriguing matter of robins nesting in phragmites. Exactly how many of them are doing so and what proportion of the local robin population they comprise are questions that remain to be answered. Also remaining to be answered is the extent to which robins in other locations might be nesting in phragmites. I encourage readers to visit the nearest reedbed and watch for such behavior.

The chief lesson to be learned from these observations is that time spent studying bird behavior is never wasted. Even when the species is abundant, widespread, well known, and easily identified, there is always a real possibility of learning something entirely new about it. If you cannot travel to the tropical rain forests to discover a new species, stay close to home, and discover a common species doing something that no one has reported before.

### References

- Lowe, J. 1993. Personal Communication (letter to K. Hudson, June 7, 1993, regarding inquiry on American Robins nesting in phragmites), Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York.

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After moving to Boston over twenty years ago, he became seriously interested in the urban habitat. He has written several reports and articles on Boston's birds, including "Birding Boston: The Common to the Fens" (*Bird Observer* 20(6):296-306).

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