A photograph of a duck swimming in a pond. The duck is dark brown with a reddish-brown patch on its head. It is surrounded by tall, green grasses that are partially submerged in the water. The water is calm, reflecting the green of the grasses. The background is a soft-focus view of more grasses.

*Nature stories for young readers*

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VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA



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**VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA**

*Vidya*  
**Online**

A PARTNERSHIP FOR TEACHERS, CHILDREN AND EDUCATION



*The story is based on observations made in Sanjay Van, part of South Delhi's ridge forest, in the months of May to August 2010. The Dabchicks and Tailorbirds have a long breeding season.*

*Photographs in this book may not show the actual size of birds or their nests.*

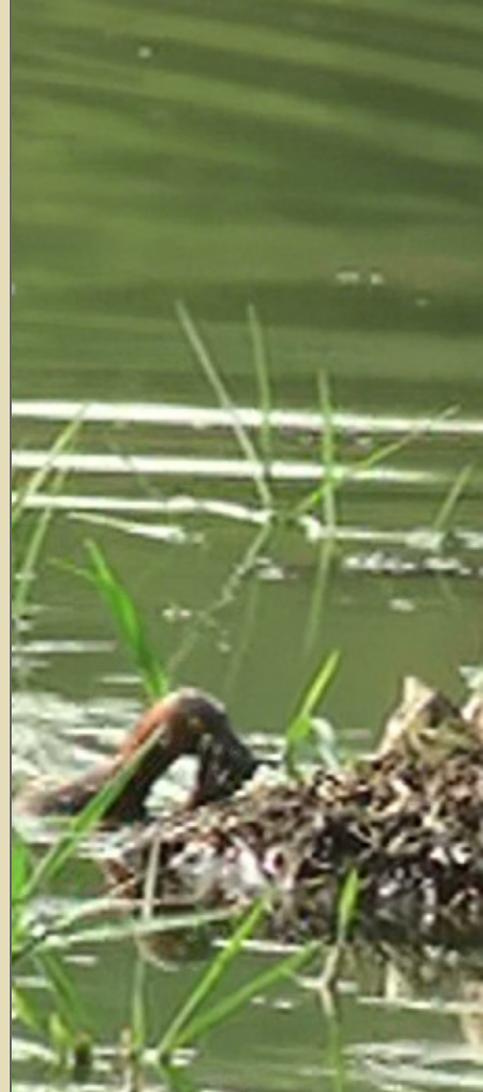


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Two birds were working for more than half an hour. They were making a pile of rotten weeds. These small birds were expert divers. I always had trouble predicting where they would emerge after they dived in.





In some miraculous way, they always found some rotten weed or leaf every time they dived. And they would quickly swim back to heap it on the pile.

Every now and then, one of them would get on top of the pile. The whole arrangement would gently shake! Was the pile resting on something? Or was it floating?

I could not contain my curiosity anymore. “What are you making? An island to rest?”

**“What are YOU doing here?” Demanded a brown white and black bird.**

**“Who are you?” I asked, surprised.**

**“I am Hoopoe and I live in these parts. We birds keep to ourselves and mind our business.”**

**Perhaps Hoopoe was hinting that I should mind mine. But how could I go away without finding out what the water birds were doing?**





**When I continued to hang around, Hoopoe gave up and flew away.**

**I made myself comfortable on the lake bund beside the Amaltas tree, determined to find out what was happening.**

**The tree was flowering. And I looked up to admire the long clusters of buds and flowers hanging loosely all over the tree. But got startled when Hoopoe suddenly yelled:**

**“Hey! WHAT are you doing!”**

**“What... am I doing?” I asked, completely at a loss to understanding why Hoopoe was yelling at me.**

**“Leave the leaf alone,” she admonished.**

**I then realized that without my knowledge, I was pulling at the leaves of a tree I was standing beside. Pulling back my hand immediately, I apologized for tearing leaves. I noticed it was a Teak tree and**





one of its leaves was folded.

“A nest... Tailorbird’s nest!” I exclaimed excitedly.

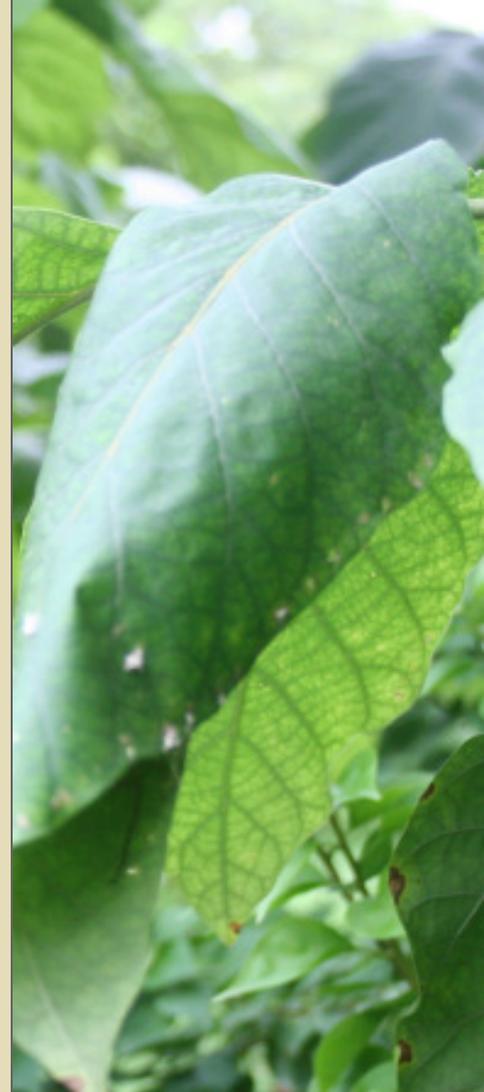
“Only they can stitch leaves to make a nest.”

“Well... you are partly right. Warblers can stitch too,” she said and sternly warned, “Don’t ever... ever, pull at leaves or disturb plants for no reason at all.”

I stood transfixed, admiring the nest. It was not like what I had seen in books. The picture in my book

showed three or perhaps four leaves stitched together to form something like an inverted cone. But this nest was made using a single Teak leaf. I could clearly see the holes made in the margins and lower part of the leaf. Pulling fibres, perhaps cotton or cobweb, the bird had brought both ends together to form a cylinder.

One end of the cylinder was packed with soft fibres and grass. And this wonderful nest had one tiny beautiful egg!





I looked back to find Hoopoe smiling. “A small nest for a small bird. Be good enough to step back. Parents will be here any moment. They won’t like their little secret revealed,” she said.

I ignored her. Never before had I seen a Tailorbird’s nest. Now that I had, I wanted to wait for the parents to come by.

“Look there,” Hoopoe said, “see that beautiful green bird. Its name is Small Green Bee-eater!”

Sure enough a pretty green bird was perched on the wire and in its longish thin beak was trapped a bee!

“Ho... a Bee-eater!” I was amused at the name.

“Like us, both male and female Bee-eaters look alike. But in the case of sunbirds or sparrows, they look different. Many other birds...”

I knew all about birds being differently coloured in





some cases and paid scant attention to what she was saying.

“Come with me,” ordered Hoopoe and proceeded to lead me to the southern side of the lake. Her urgency prompted me to follow her quietly. Pits were dug, perhaps some years ago, to plant saplings. But nobody had taken the idea further. Pointing to a pit, the bird asked what I saw.

“Nothing, just a pit and a hole in the cutting.”

**“That’s a tunnel! And the Bee-eater made it, two months ago.”**

**“Whatever for?” I asked in disbelief.**

**“To nest!” Hoopoe told me how bee-eaters make tunnels; more than 3 feet long, and lay their eggs at the end of the tunnel. “Would you have ever guessed that such a small bird can dig such a long tunnel? Kingfishers also make tunnel nests. But the nesting season of both these birds is over.”**





I realized I was tricked. Hoopoe had deliberately led me away from Tailorbird's nest.

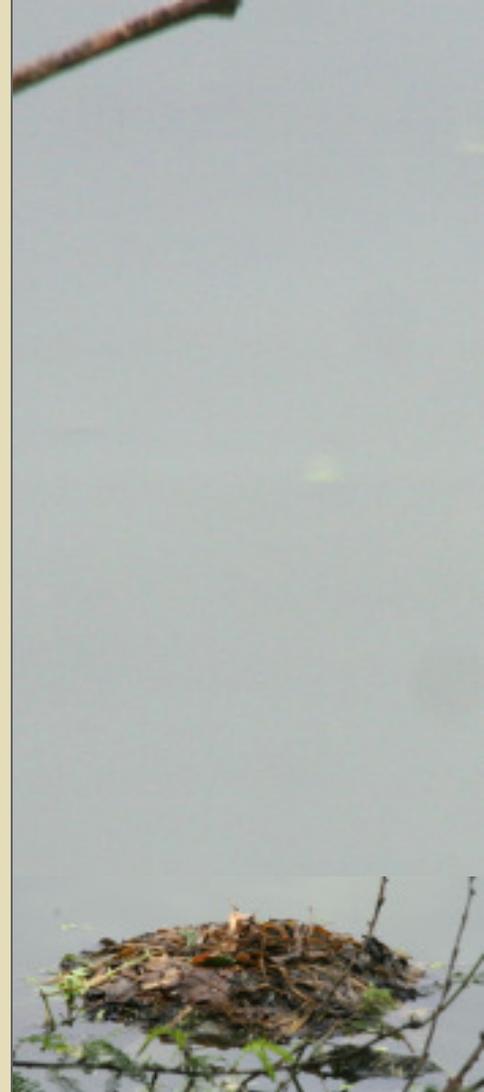
"Oh! You are keeping an eye on me."

"Of course," said Hoopoe. "Remember, we don't like people snooping on us."

I became thoughtful and understood why Hoopoe was acting difficult. She wanted nests to remain undiscovered.

But of what interest is a tunnel nest that is no more in use? I got bored and walked towards the lake. Lazily I counted the small water birds swimming expertly. Examining the lake from end to end, I could spot many heaps like the one I had seen earlier. I turned to ask Hoopoe if she knew what those heaps were but she had vanished.

I went back to the garden to look for her. But instead caught sight of a small black bird getting into a covered dustbin! What was the bird doing there?





**“Eggs! NEST!”**

**“Don’t scream,” admonished Hoopoe, flying over.  
“That’s a Magpie Robin’s nest. Come away and don’t  
draw attention. Magpie Robins usually nest in tree  
holes, but...”**

**How could the bird think of such a place? A dustbin!  
I was curious and peeped in. What a pile of sticks  
the birds had put together! What an astonishing  
nest!**

**“Wait... WAIT! A pile! Those water birds were also making a pile. Are they making a nest too?”**

**Hoopoe took a long time to answer. “Well... Yes,” she said hesitantly, “Dabchicks, that is what they are called; it is their nesting time too.”**

**“Hey! Is the nest floating? Have they laid eggs yet? I can’t see any. Will they not rot in water? And will snakes or other birds not eat them up? Oh! Please. Please tell me!”**





Hoopoe looked uncomfortable. She seemed to be debating whether or not to tell me about it.

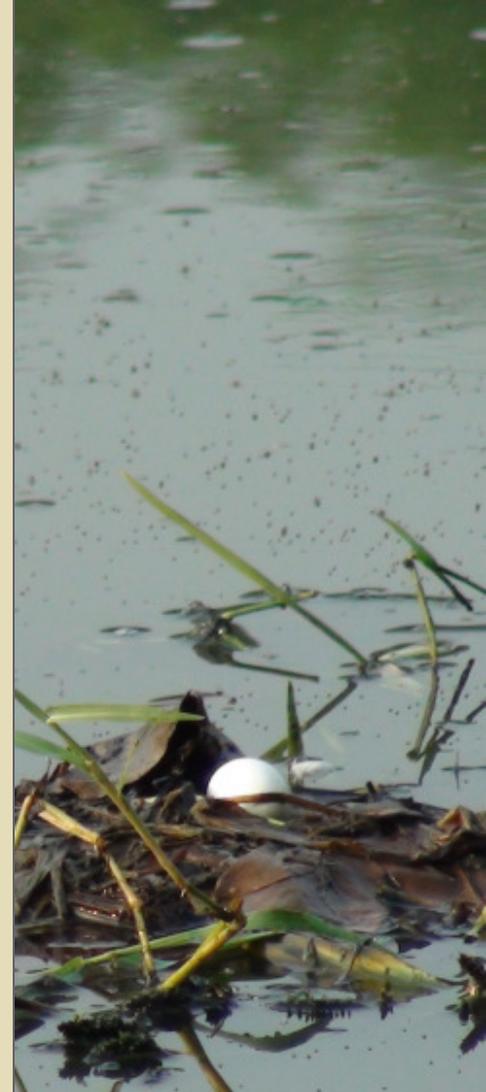
After a while, looking gravely at me she said, “Nest making and raising chicks is a very important task. We put in so much effort into it and if nests get detected..., eggs and chicks get eaten. We try to be as secretive as possible about our nests. Most times we succeed! But you..., well, what can I do now?”

I promised not to draw attention to nests. I also

**promised not to disturb nests or scare parent birds or do anything that would bring harm to the chicks. And after a lot of begging, Hoopoe told me the secret of the Dabchicks' nest.**

**Their nests don't sink. They are built on some sort of a support; a tree stump or a submerged plant.**

**Once the nest is ready, they lay 3 to 5 eggs and cover them up with more rotten weeds! That way nobody gets to see them, except when they are freshly laid**





or when the bird removes the covering to incubate. When they leave their nests, they always take care to cover up the eggs again.

I was observing the Dabchicks keenly and listening carefully to Hoopoe.

How amazing! Though I had seen lots of birds, I hardly knew where or how they made their nests.

Mischievously I asked, “What about your nest?”

**When and where and how do you make it?"**

**Beak sealed, the bird gave me a long hard stare.  
Should I have expected anything else?**

**\*\*\***





**Meet the characters**



Hoopoe



Dabchick or Little Grebe



Small Green Bee-eater



Father Tailorbird



Mother Tailorbird



Mother Magpie Robin



Father Magpie Robin



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