



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

June 14, 2024

Happy Father's Day!

As Father's Day approaches, we are thinking about all the male birds of the world who go the extra mile to provide parental support and care to their young. Males who participate in the chick rearing process are rare but not unheard of. From alternating nest duties and incubating eggs to putting themselves in life-threatening situations to provide for their families, these dads deserve some praise this Father's Day!

The Great Horned Owl is the primary hunter for his family. The male bird takes on the important task of bringing back food for the female owl while she is incubating her eggs, which can last anywhere from 30-37 days. Once the owlets hatch, the mother remains on the nest to brood and during that time the male is responsible for feeding both her and their young. After a few weeks of food deliveries and owlet growth, the female owl can leave the nest and assist in the hunting duties. In one study, it was observed that after a female owl's death, her partner took on the solo parenting duties of his five-week-old owlets.

Another species that partakes in cooperative parenting is the symbolic Bald Eagle. Many have witnessed Jackie and Shadow, the Bald Eagle pair in Big Bear Lake whose relationship gained attention in 2017 thanks to livestream nest cameras. They showcase the joint effort this species goes through to parent their young. Together they laid and cared for over fourteen eggs but sadly only two to three have made it to adulthood. Despite this, the couple continue to incubate and tend to the same nest year after year.

Typically, Bald Eagle pairs begin their parenting adventure during the nest making stage that can begin as early as three months before the nest is completed and occupied. Both the male and female eagle forage for nest materials and the female works to assemble the nest once all the materials are procured. The Bald Eagles take turns incubating their eggs. Once hatched, the parents alternate keeping their babies warm, defending the nest, hunting, and feeding their young. Bald Eagle fledglings continue to rely on both their parents for food for weeks after leaving the nest until they are confident enough to hunt on their own.

Female Emperor Penguins lay one egg and then leave the incubation period up to their male counterparts. The male Emperor Penguin incubates the one egg not on a nest but on top of his feet for up to 66 days! During this time his focus is to keep the egg warm and free from harm. The male stays mostly still during this period and does not eat. Once hatched, the baby relies on both mom and dad to keep them warm and find food.

Nature is nothing short of amazing and these dads deserve our appreciation! Other male birds that warrant a mention for their paternal instincts are the Northern Flicker and Acorn Woodpecker. The Northern Flicker is involved with incubation, feeding and nest sanitation duties. The Acorn Woodpecker employs all members from their complex social circle, both breeding and nonbreeding members, to brood, feed and keep an eye on the young of the group. While it is important to note that female birds do the brunt of the work in avian pairs, many male birds play a prominent role in the caretaking responsibilities required to raise young.



Former Great Horned Owl patient in care at CWC.



Bald Eagle pair in nest, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Empire Penguins with their young, courtesy of Wikipedia.