

# UNIQUE COLLECTION OF ORIOLE NESTS

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In the late 1940s, the Opseth family, Hagen district farmers, started collecting oriole nests, and Otto Opseth now continues the practice started by his sister. Most of the nests are from an aspen grove surrounding the farmhouse.

Settlers in northeastern Saskatchewan often first cleared a small opening in the bush for a farmyard. Then, when breaking the land, they left the trees surrounding the yard standing, thus providing a ready-made shelterbelt. Many of these belts remain and typically house a pair of orioles, a couple of crested flycatchers and one or more pairs of hummingbirds, among other species. With two-thirds of a total yard area of 12 acres being treed, the Opseth place follows this pattern.

Orioles have nested every year. When he was younger, Otto used to climb the tree at the end of the season to get the nest. Later he tried shooting off the branch, a largely unsuccessful venture. Now he cuts down the tree — "they need thinning anyway" — hoping to beat the magpies, who tear open the nests looking for parasites. In one nest fleas lined the bottom to a thickness of 1/8 in.

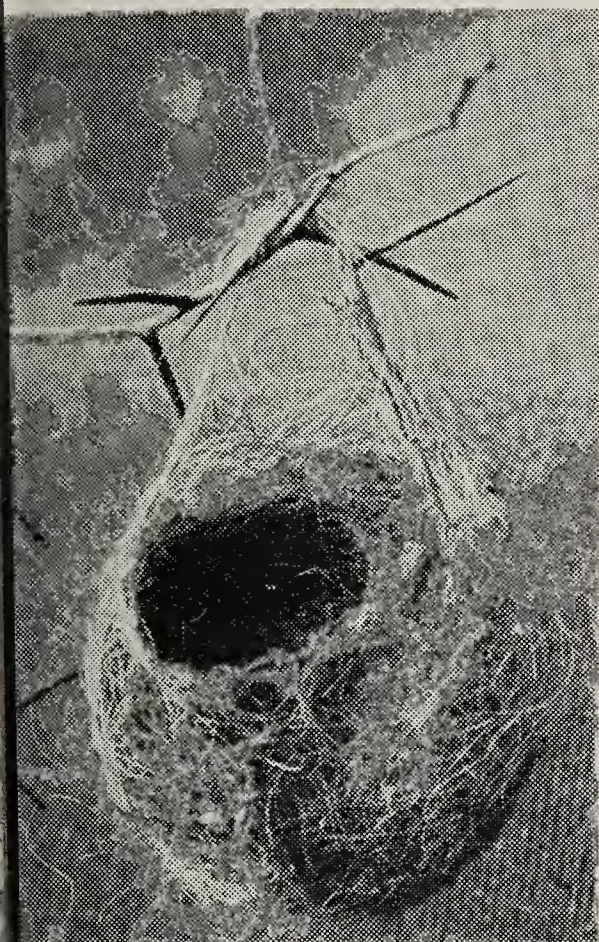
Otto displayed the nests when Thelma and Jim Pepper led a group of field-trippers to his farm in 1988. The Peppers and I went back in October 1989, they to photograph the nests, I to study them. The nests selected were about a third of

the collection and are representative of nestbuilding techniques and factors influencing them.

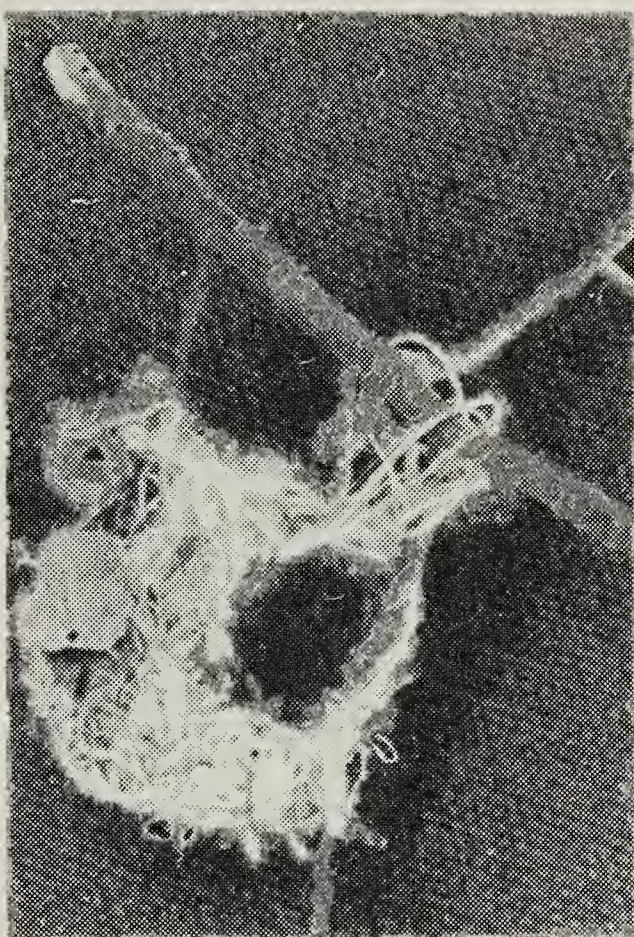
The customary placement of the nest was high in a tall tree, but in the case of Nest I the choice of a hawthorn bush meant a much lower nest. Nest VI (photos) was also in a shrub, at 10 ft. Only other low nest in the group. Once a bird has selected a tree, what triggers it to choose a particular nest site and what precisely to initiate suspension were unclear.

Nest I's suspension was the simplest, a mere loop of only a few strands. Some of the other nests had most intricate suspensions — Nest IIIa, for example. The reason for the difference may be that there were no twigs or branches near the initial point of attachment for Nest I. On the other hand, there were at least four branches close to the top of Nest IIIa, and the bird anchored here to each one. Similarly, alongside Nest I were four branches, one below the other, and again the bird made attachment to each as it worked its way down, or up, the case may be.

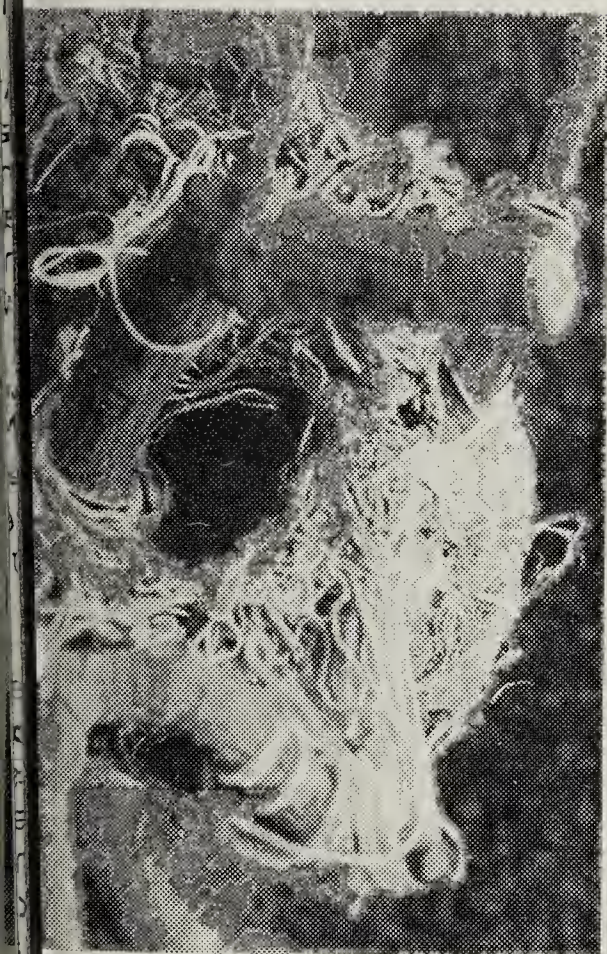
A considerable variety of material was used in the nests. Nest I, though a non-indigenous material — horsehair — may be the pure form of oriole material, having minimum volume, least material, and, as a result, least energy expenditure in construction. This nest was



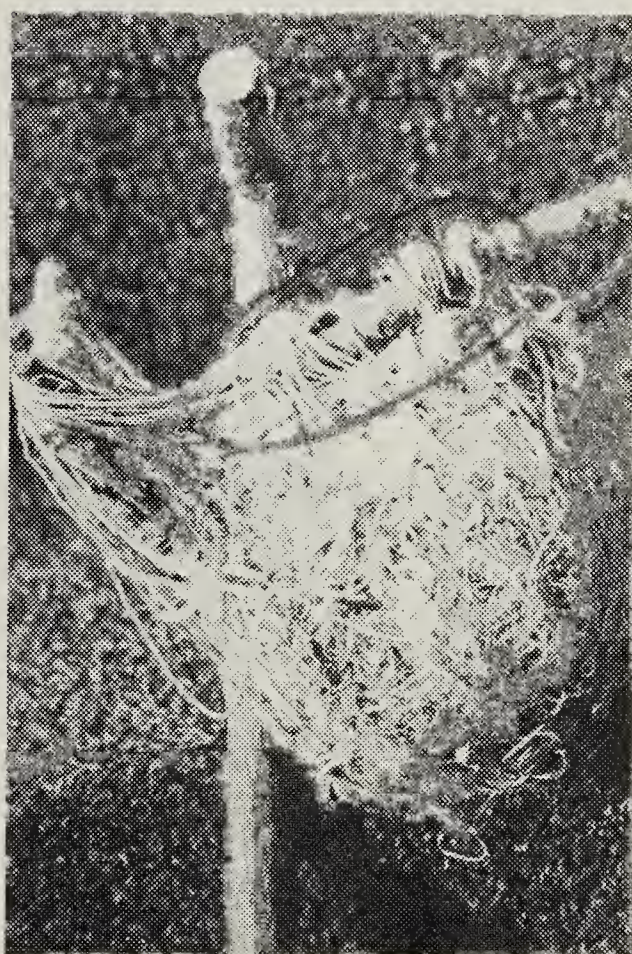
Nest I : Oriole nest, 100% horsehair



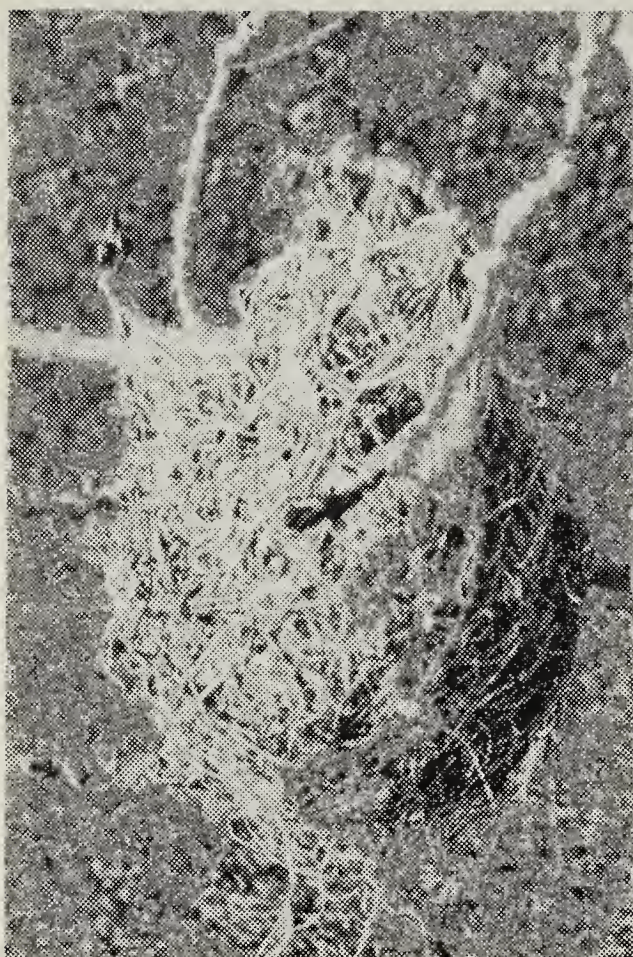
Nest II : Oriole nest, 50% horsehair, 50% string



Nest IIIa : Oriole nest, 75% string , 25% bark fibre



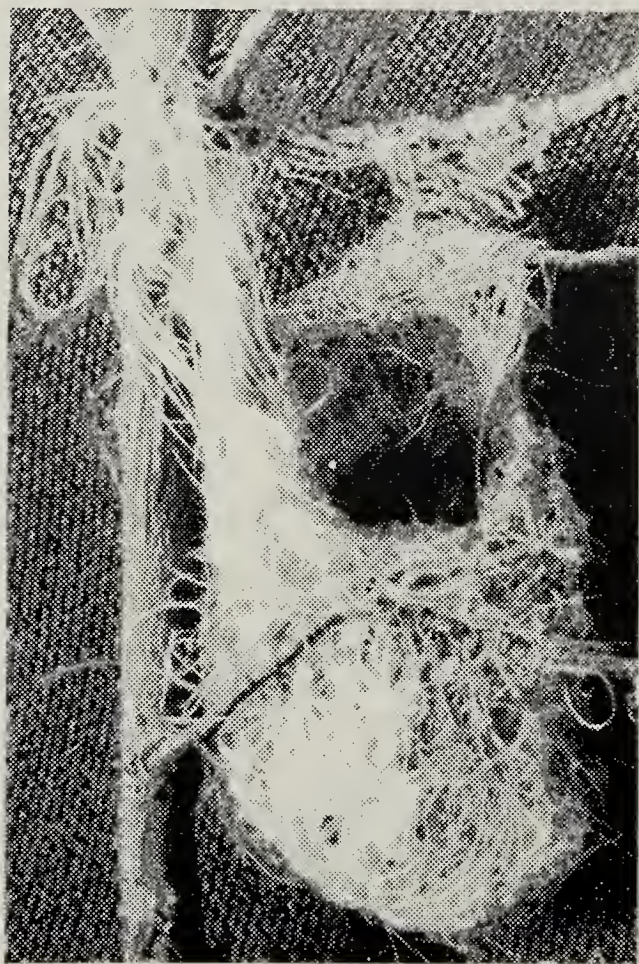
Nest IIIb: Oriole nest, 75% string, 25% bark fibre



*Nest IV : Oriole nest, 100% bark fibre*



*Nest V : Oriole nest, 100% synthetic cord*



*Nest VI: Oriole nest, 100% synthetic twine*

4 in. by 4 1/4 in. by 3 in. high to the top of the opening.

The oldest, smallest and simplest in the collection, Nest I was notable in three respects: ideal suspension, efficient form and optimum use of materials. Entirely of horsehair, it reflects a way of farming now gone.

The Opseths had hung out short lengths of string for nest material and the birds readily took them (Nests II and III). Accompanied by the male, the female would fly down, pick up a length, fly back to the nest and weave it in, still accompanied by the male, who, typical of the species, was in constant attendance but did no work.

Coarseness of string made no difference, but colour did. The birds took white, blue or purple, but not red — not once, but repeatedly and over several years. Their instinct may have been to avoid

strong colours or colours markedly contrasting with surroundings. To human eyes, however, that explanation does not fit with what we see in Nest VI. That nest, made of synthetic twine, was still an eye-catching shiny white when the nest was taken down.

Nests V and VI were of the Plastic type, one made of flat nylon cord from feed grain bags (robins used it too), the other of a teased synthetic twine.

The only truly natural nest in the selected group was Nest IV, which was made solely of bark fibres. The other five used one or more non-indigenous materials. For some reason, the lower part of this nest was 1/4 in. thick, much thicker than in the other nests. One can see through the bottoms of most of them. There was a decided thermal advantage in a thick layer of bark fibre. To begin with, it has a higher insulating value per strand than either plastic or horsehair.

The orioles were not constrained to use one material throughout. Nest II is 80% string and 20% horsehair. Nest III is 75% string, 25% bark fibres and some horsehair.

The weaving appeared most random, looking more like felting on some nests. However, on IIIb (the side view of Nest IIIa) interlacing of lateral and suspending strands may be seen immediately below the cross twig (this section is circled on the photograph).

The typical oval opening was 2 in. by 3 1/2 in. Compared to this, the 1 1/4 in. diameter hole in Nest IIIa was small. The year of that nest, 1979, saw a tent caterpillar infestation in the district. The trees were defoliated, exposing the nest, and though the birds stayed on, they acted shy (Northern Orioles are among the few species that will eat hairy larvae such as tent caterpillars<sup>2</sup>). One view is that the presence of the caterpillars caused the bird to make a smaller opening. Another opinion is that in this particular case the inherent urge to secure the nest to every nearby twig inevitably led to a small round opening.

A female oriole is 7 in. long from tail tip to bill tip, twice the length of her nest.<sup>1</sup> This means that while incubating she has to adopt a U-shape, head and tail pointed up and almost touching.

A collection of nests such as the Opseths' provides insights into variations in building techniques and into results of habitat changes, including impacts of human activities. We are grateful to Mrs. Helen Opseth and Otto Opseth for making the nests available and providing information about them. We greatly appreciated their kind assistance during our visit.

<sup>1</sup>GODFREY, W. E. 1986. The birds of Canada. National Mus. of Canada, Ottawa. 595 pp.

<sup>2</sup>SALT, W. R. and J. R. SALT. 1976. The birds of Alberta. Hurtig, Edmonton. 498 pp.