



# E L E M E N T S

Sue ABRAMSON  
Wendy BROCKMAN  
David MORRISON  
Kate NESSLER



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HUNT INSTITUTE  
for Botanical Documentation

E L E M E N T S

Curated by Lugene B. Bruno and Carolina L. Roy



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The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, a research division of Carnegie Mellon University, specializes in the history of botany and all aspects of plant science and serves the international scientific community through research and documentation. To this end, the Institute acquires and maintains authoritative collections of books, plant images, manuscripts, portraits and data files, and provides publications and other modes of information service. The Institute meets the reference needs of botanists, biologists, historians, conservationists, librarians, bibliographers and the public at large, especially those concerned with any aspect of the North American flora.

Hunt Institute was dedicated in 1961 as the Rachel McMasters Miller Hunt Botanical Library, an international center for bibliographical research and service in the interests of botany and horticulture, as well as a center for the study of all aspects of the history of the plant sciences. By 1971 the Library's activities had so diversified that the name was changed to Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation. Growth in collections and research projects led to the establishment of four programmatic departments: Archives, Art, Bibliography and the Library. The current collections include approximately 24,000+ portraits; 200+ archival collections; 29,504 watercolors, drawings and prints; 243,000+ data files; and 30,429 book and serial titles. Including artworks dating from the Renaissance, the Art Department's collection now focuses on contemporary botanical art and illustration, where the coverage is unmatched. The Art Department organizes and stages exhibitions, including the triennial *International Exhibition of Botanical Art & Illustration*.

We are grateful to the four artists for their enthusiastic response to the concept of this exhibition and for the privilege of learning more about their individual perspectives and artistic development during the process of creating these artworks.

We thank Steve Rogers, Collections Manager of Birds and Herpetology, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for his engaging assistance with the selection of birds, nests and eggs, and for coordinating the loan of these materials. We also thank Liz Garvey, of Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York, for her assistance.

This document does not include individual images of all the artworks that were on display in the exhibition. The artists, Sue Abramson, Wendy Brockman, David Morrison and Kate Nessler, hold the copyright to all of the images of their artworks reproduced here, with their permissions. David Morrison's images are courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York.

# INTRODUCTION

This exhibition features drawings and watercolors of bird nests with a focus on the natural and man-made materials incorporated into these architectural structures, as well as photographs of forest understory that will transport the viewer between the landscape and the ephemeral artifacts that signify the remains of a cycle of building, incubating, nesting and fledging. The featured artists are Sue Abramson, Wendy Brockman, David Morrison and Kate Nessler. The creators of these drawings and watercolors of bird nests and photographs of transitional landscapes are inspired by the relationship

of the nest to time, place, music and architecture. Each artist has imbued the structures and the materials used and the locations and environments where built with their individual insights and perspectives. Also included in the exhibition is a selection of birds, nests and eggs on loan from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

Pittsburgh artist Sue Abramson's photographs of the Frick Park woodlands are a response to the raw materials in nests and the extraordinary visual chaos of these habitats. Minnesota artist Wendy Brockman's watercolors of nests, eggs,

feathers and plant materials are rich with nuance and complexity and speak of time and place. Indiana artist David Morrison's colored pencil drawings are an exploration of the issues of existence, regeneration and obsessiveness through his examination of the layers of natural and found objects that compose the architectural structures of nests. Arkansas artist Kate Nessler's watercolors are expressive of symphonic movements, and they reflect the intrinsically creative and practical use of disparate materials that are woven to create structures of the strength and balance essential for survival.



American Robin: Nest; male study skin P154495; female study skin P167449; eggs E1713. Lent by Section of Birds, Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

# BIRD NESTS

Through a combination of instinct, adaptation and learned behavior, birds create architectural structures that sustain the cycles of new generations. Although each species may be “hard-wired” to build a specific form, different birds of the same species will build nests with variations. Nests range from a simple, scraped depression in the dirt or sand (plover), to a hollow in a tree branch or trunk (chickadee), to a mixture of mud and saliva adhered to forms (swallows) to an intricate woven sack that is sewn to a forked branch (oriole). The majority of bird species gather and intertwine coarse twigs and vines, leaves and grass, and fur and down to build a form that is both sturdy and camouflaged on the exterior, and cushioned and soft in the interior, to protect their eggs. Birds are recyclers, using fall and winter debris from the garden and woods. They are resourceful in their search for appropriate materials, often interspersing or substituting man-made articles, such as fishing line, pieces of plastic bags, string or wire, with or for natural elements. We

can admire and learn much from their structures, whether simple or complex, for they are built specific to purpose so as to survive wind, rain and predation.

Nest structures and the environments of North American birds have inspired the artists. Through their drawings, paintings and photographs, they have examined the layered source materials, or elements, in these forms. Their artworks not only are representational manifestations, but also evoke the transience of individual moments within a passage of time and concepts of memory and home.

*Notes:*

*Nest forms of different species often are similar, and identification is often difficult without having seen the birds or their eggs. Since the artists discovered them after they had been abandoned, we were able to make only educated guesses as to the identity of many of the nests herein.*

*The nests are not held by the artists. Federal regulations prohibit private possession of bird nests, eggs and feathers.*



## Sue ABRAMSON

I am attracted to the visual chaos of the woods, especially its light, lines and textures. My photographs reflect a common theme, namely identifying and describing a sense of place.

# Wendy BROCKMAN



I am inspired by concepts of time, place and remembrance when referencing nests and feathers in my paintings. My intent is to represent both nature and the human experience and to provide a new perspective and appreciation of each subject.



## David MORRISON

Birds are the architects of nature, and I am interested in dissecting and examining the layering of natural and man-made materials in their nests. My drawings explore issues of existence, regeneration and obsessiveness.

## Kate NESSLER



Each painting took me on a path of discovery through the moments and the movements in the creation of each nest. Its form and function, within a space in which only it could exist, revealed the delicate strength, the balance of weight and counterweight and the intrinsic knowledge and creativity of its maker.

*Spring Nest*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by  
Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches





*Fall Nest*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.



*Left: Seasons' End*, watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2014, 22.5 × 18.5 inches. Nest by Red-winged Blackbird, constructed with variety of plant material, in cattails [*Typha angustifolia* Linnaeus, Typhaceae].

*Right: Briar Nest*, watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2014, 27 × 30 inches. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material and hair, in multiflora rose [*Rosa multiflora* Thunberg, Rosaceae].





*Memory*, watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2014, 22 × 18 inches. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material and fur, in bittersweet [*Celastrus orbicularis* Willdenow, Celastraceae].

*Sky View*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by  
Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.





*Bird Nest Series No. 9*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2014, 20 ×14 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material, Easter grass, foil ribbon.

*Bird Nest Series No. 2*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2015, 35 × 16.5 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York. Nest by Ruby-throated Hummingbird, constructed with variety of plant material, animal fur.





*Bird Nest Series No. 3*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2015, 16 × 39 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York.  
Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material.

*Bird Nest Series No. 4*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2015, 16 × 39 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York.  
Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material.





*Left: Bird Nest Series No. 5*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2015, 39.5 × 23.5 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material, in catalpa [*Catalpa* Scopoli, Bignoniaceae].

*Right: Bird Nest Series No. 6*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2015, 16 × 39 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material.





*Left: Bird Nest Series No. 7*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2015, 16 × 39 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York. Nest by European Starling, constructed with variety of plant material.

*Right: Bird Nest Series No. 8*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2015, 35 × 16.5 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York. Nest by Baltimore Oriole, constructed with variety of plant material, string, plastic strips.





*Bird Nest Series No. 1*, colored pencil on paper by David Morrison, 2014, 19 × 14 inches, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York. Nest by American Robin, constructed with mud, variety of plant material.

*Bed of Leaves*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by  
Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.





*Left: Autumn Silence*, watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2014, 22 × 26.5 inches. Nest by ?American Robin, constructed with variety of plant material, in paper birch [*Betula papyrifera* Marshall, Betulaceae].

*Right: Epilogue*, watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2014, 27 × 23 inches. Nest by Baltimore Oriole, constructed with variety of plant material, fishing line and lure, in cottonwood [*Populus deltoides* W. Bartram ex Marshall, Salicaceae].





*Left: Vestige*, watercolor on Cowley's honey calfskin vellum, by Wendy Brockman, 2014, 20 × 23 inches. Nest by Vireo, constructed with variety of plant material, in paper birch [*Betula papyrifera* Marshall, Betulaceae].

*Right: Twisted*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.





*Storm Collection*, mixed media  
(watercolor, graphite, colored  
pencil) on Strathmore 300 bristol  
by Wendy Brockman, 2012, 22 ×  
25.5 inches. Herring Gull feather  
and marram grass [*Ammophila  
breviligulata* Fernald, Poaceae alt.  
Graminae].

*Below: Red Feathers, Northern Cardinal, watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2012, 9 × 11 inches.*



*Above: Turkey Feathers, Wild Turkey, watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2013, 9 × 11 inches.*



Gallery installation of a selection of Wendy Brockman's watercolors.

*Branch and Floating Leaves*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25  
film negative by Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.



*Nest with Maple Seeds*, watercolor and pencil on honey vellum by Kate Nessler, 2012, 15.5 × 43 inches. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material, newspaper, synthetic batting.



*Assemblage*, watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum by Kate Nessler,  
2014, 22 × 14 inches. Nest by ?Brown Thrasher or ?Northern Mockingbird,  
constructed with variety of plant material, in forsythia [*Forsythia* Vahl,  
Oleaceae]





*Right: Encircled*, watercolor, body color and pencil on veiny vellum by Kate Nessler, 2014, 22.5 × 30 inches. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material, feather.

*Left: Suspension*, watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum by Kate Nessler, 2014, 25 × 17 inches. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material.





*Right: Poisoned*, watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum by Kate Nessler, 2014, 17 × 25 inches. Nest by unknown bird species, constructed with variety of plant material in rose bush [*Rosa* Linnaeus, Rosaceae/].

*Left: Entropy*, watercolor, pencil, body color on veiny vellum by Kate Nessler, 2014, 29.5 × 17 inches. Nest by ?American Robin, constructed with variety of plant material, mud.



*Huber*



*Left: Pink Rose*, watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum by Kate Nessler, 2014, 14 × 22 inches. Nest by Northern Cardinal, constructed with variety of plant material, in rose bush [*Rosa* Linnaeus, Rosaceae].

*Woven Trees*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.





*Fine Lines and Light*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

*Wild Nest*, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative by  
Sue Abramson, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.



# THE ARTISTS



*Photo by Anthony Susan*

## Sue ABRAMSON

From a suburb of Philadelphia, to a summer camp in the Adirondacks, to a geodesic dome on the side of a mountain in Maryland, to a house one block from Frick Park in Pittsburgh, Sue Abramson has always lived close to nature and wandered in the parks and woodlands. For the last 30 years she has captured in her photographs the ever-changing light, textures, lines and forms in the wooded areas of Frick Park, resulting in several series that link the progression of her interpretation of this environ. Her photographs have been featured in numerous one-person and group exhibitions. Since 1987 she has been teaching at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, and since 1989 has been affiliated with Silver Eye Center for Photography. Abramson also offers workshops on a variety of photography techniques and is a guest lecturer and an exhibition juror and coordinator.

*Web site:* [www.sueabramson.com](http://www.sueabramson.com)



“Throughout my photographic career, I have focused on a number of subjects using different cameras and printmaking techniques. Even with this diversity, most of my work reflects a common theme, namely identifying and describing a sense of place. As a result, I have spent a significant amount of time in the woods. I have always been, and continue to be, attracted to the visual chaos of that space, especially its light, lines and textures, as well as the sense of peace and inspiration that I find there.

“For me, shooting in the woods has been a cyclical process, one in which I use the natural world as my photographic raw materials. Although this work can be categorized into at least six different projects, they all relate to each other to form a larger

Woodland series. In this regard, all of the images are shot in black and white with the intention of describing and abstracting the landscape.

“The earliest work, which began in the late 1970s, was an exploration of dynamic range—specifically how film records light and shadow versus the way the eye sees it. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I collaborated with a colleague to explore regional state parks. Initially she focused on wildflower specimens while I framed trees and plants in the forest understory. By the end of our shooting relationship we had inspired each other so that our subjects had reversed, and I began photographing specimens. In the early 2000s, I started scanning my negatives and using the computer to manipulate the work. I began to treat woodland elements as drawings made of textural fields flattened in the camera. This was a way to bridge the connection between drawing with light on film and printing with ink on paper.

“For an exhibition in 2005 on the Pittsburgh city parks, I focused on documenting the changes in Frick Park throughout the seasons. In 2006 my personal and artistic connection to the woods helped me to process the overwhelming grief I experienced

after the sudden loss of my husband. The most recent work in this project is currently on display in *Elements*. Returning to the woods again in 2013, I introduced the elements of time, weather and downed trees to my work. I also incorporated the concept of habitats. The woven and twisted vines and foliage in these images provide both shelter and nourishment.

“The Woodland photographic series follows my relationship, over the years, with light, form, texture, specimens, chaos, overgrowth and place. As all relationships change through the mechanisms of time and chance, my photographic response to the woods follows this flux in much the same way that forests change over the years through the process of chance and contingency.”

— Sue Abramson



## Wendy BROCKMAN

Wendy Brockman developed a deep appreciation of her surroundings early in life. Growing up in rural Michigan, she spent many hours hiking and sketching in the dunes and woods along Lake Michigan. She now lives and works in Minnesota, where northern forests and rocky shorelines provide inspiration. Largely self-taught, she explores her interests in art and environmental issues using a variety of media. An avid observer, her work examines bits and pieces of nature and the responses they evoke, and her imagery revisits and builds on those past experiences, employing similar subjects and adding layers of suggestion and meaning. As her career and focus have evolved, feathers, nests and shoreline elements have become favorite subjects of interest. Widely exhibited, Brockman's paintings have been included in solo and group exhibitions. Her work has received national and international exhibition awards and is held in public and private collections throughout the United States.

*Web site:* [wendybrockman.com](http://wendybrockman.com)

*Below: Beach Nest*, watercolor on Cowley's Kelmscott calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman, 2013, 9 ×11 inches. Nest by Plover on shore.



*Above: Gallery installation of four feathers and Beach Nest (to left)*, watercolors on Cowley's Kelmscott calfskin vellum by Wendy Brockman.

“The subjects I select reflect an important lifelong connection with nature and a need to examine my relationship with my surroundings. As my work and creative process have evolved, my use of natural details to tell stories and explore concepts has expanded and has become central to my imagery.

“I began working with nests and feathers about ten years ago, using them as a visual framework to express issues and ideas. My current work examines concepts of time, place and remembrance while exploring these richly detailed structures. Capturing nature’s complexity and fragility, these delicately detailed watercolors and drawings speak of change and transformation. My intent is to represent both nature and human experience, and my hope is that viewers will look at nature in new ways and with increased appreciation.

“The steps from subject to finished painting are many, and my creative process has been a fluid, personal journey. Nests and feathers are incredibly intricate, each one specific to species and habitat. To paint them accurately, as well as convey a sense of time and place, is challenging, and my efforts to successfully capture the essence of these subjects has influenced my process.

“Observation is fundamental in this work, and my paintings are developed from informational sketches, notes

and studies. Any photos are generally for botanical or structural reference. My process begins with loose field sketches to capture a general sense of structure, habitat and materials. Notes describing both the subject and the responses it evokes are scribbled down as I draw. Sometimes I snap a photo on my phone, and often, I gather up bits of grass, twigs and leaves from the surrounding area for reference.

“Created and composed in the studio, each artwork progresses at its own pace. Basic forms and sketches are adjusted as the piece develops and details are added as necessary. The paintings are woven together through shape, texture and color. I alter, add and eliminate elements as each piece moves forward. My color palettes are determined by each subject and are mixed and added as I work, some pieces requiring quiet tonal colors, and others, rich, vibrant hues. In the end, each painting reaches its own balance of structure, color and story.

“Creating and selecting new work for this exhibition has been a remarkable experience. Each painting is a glimpse of one of those special moments when nature speaks to us.”

—Wendy Brockman



## David MORRISON

In the last several years, Morrison, a native of Indiana, has been intent on portraying, in his hyperrealistic colored pencil drawings, moments in nature, such as when spring buds and new leaves erupt on a tree branch. He is fascinated also by the scarification of fallen tree branches caused by disease, infestation and decomposition, representing the degeneration of plant materials and how they echo the living conditions of man and nature. He is interested in capturing the reality of their existence, with all the imperfections, echoing their fragile existence in nature, instead of an idealized beautification of nature. Morrison's current series of bird nests embraces the relationships of birds to their environment, and his observations focus on the detail and construction of these ephemeral structures. Since 1987 Morrison has been professor of printmaking at the Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. He also is a visiting artist and guest lecturer at numerous universities. His award-winning work is in the collections of more than 25 museums and has been exhibited in over 250 national and international exhibitions.

*Web site:* [www.garveysimonartaccess.com/artists/david-morrison](http://www.garveysimonartaccess.com/artists/david-morrison)

Gallery installation of David Morrison's colored-pencil drawings.



Look deep into nature, and then you will  
understand everything better.

—Albert Einstein

“My intent is to show birds as the architects of nature. The drawings explore issues of existence, regeneration and obsessiveness. I’m interested in dissecting the bird nests, examining the archeological layers of found materials, both natural and man-made, and then creating the composition of these exquisite structures.

“My initial idea for the *Elements* exhibition was to show all the natural and man-made ingredients the birds use for their nests, with one large bird nest showcased in the center of the wall installation with drawings of the man-made and natural ingredients that compose nests on the side. I usually start by photographing the nests and using the photos for reference as I do drawings. As I started photographing some of the nests, they literally started falling apart. I realized how fragile their existence was; yet they form the foundation for newborn life.

“The drawings capture a moment of this existence, before they are reclaimed back into environment. My drawings depict the degeneration cycle of nests and how they echo the living conditions of man and nature. I am interested in portraying the reality of their existence, with all the imperfections and beauty, echoing their fragile existence in nature.

“The drawings are hyperrealistic. They capture minute details of the subjects that I portray, but they are only an illusion of the actual reality. I became obsessed with drawing the nests and tree branches by looking at them through magnifying glasses that allowed me to peer deeper into an astonishing world of abstract shapes and patterns. I then realized the complexity of nature and how magnificent it is. Every time I start a new drawing, the discovery process starts anew. In the finished drawings, the nests and tree branches are isolated on a pristine white background, devoid of all the distractions of the surroundings. My intention is to show the beauty of a simple nest or a fallen branch with a nest and for the viewer to reexamine the realities of nature. These remarkable nest structures are crucial to the life cycle of birds and thus mankind.”

—David Morrison



## Kate NESSLER

Since 1980, Kate Nessler, a native of Chicago, has lived on 40 acres of woods, pastures and fields in the Ozarks of Arkansas. There the subject matter for her artwork is often discovered, and in her studio on the property she layers watercolor and graphite, mainly on vellum, to express her ideas. Although no longer teaching, for many years she offered workshops featuring painting on vellum. She is the recipient of several awards. Through her numerous solo exhibitions her work has been collected worldwide.

*Web site:* [www.katenessler.com/](http://www.katenessler.com/)

*Pond's Edge*, watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum by Kate Nessler, 2014, 26 × 14.5 inches. Nest by Red-winged Blackbird, with variety of plant material, in cattails [*Typha angustifolia* Linnaeus, Typhaceae].



“In the first painting I did for this exhibition, *Suspension*, I saw a moment, a moment just before the music begins, before all movement happens. It was the pause in the conductor’s baton, the breath before a beginning.

“As I began each painting, I looked closely at the nests and discovered both movement and moment: the creative and practical movement of disparate materials—displayed separately in *Assemblage*—woven into a space, and a moment in which those materials still held all the elements of their being. Each nest revealed its unique blend of form and function in a space in which only it could exist. An essential and necessary stiffness of the cattails allows a blackbird nest to survive just there in *Pond's Edge*. A lightness of color and materials appears in the breezy springtime of *Pink Rose* while the deep shadowed darkness of *Poisoned* suggests a space among the thorns safe from all but one predator.

“I realized, too, that just as in a symphony with its movements, the nests brought a wide range of expression—the wild swirl of broken leaves and stems in *Encircled*, the slow but inevitable falling away in *Entropy*. Each nest, too, revealed much about its makers: a delicate strength, a balance of weight and counterweight, an intrinsic knowledge and creativity necessary to suit the material to the space, the space to the material,

and of course delightful surprises — the *Nest with Maple Seeds* cleverly hidden deep inside an abandoned newspaper mailbox. But no matter the form or the arrangement, the most important realization for me was discovering that in the wind or the calm, through winter cold or summer heat, something always remained, something kept at its core the nest's essence, its reason for being. The center, the safe place in the nest, held.

“While all of the paintings are on vellum and all done by the same hand, each required a fresh eye and individual technical approach. I saw them differently. Some arrived onto the vellum in a single fluid unquestioning sweep of color and line and form. Some took on a darker feel. In *Poisoned*, the subject bothered me, hurt in a way, the background needed to reflect that darkness. I developed a way of scrubbing and layering the paint onto the surface to show depth of both mood and structure. Later in the year, when spring arrived, I found that there was still life in the plant, the small fresh green leaves showing at the base of the plant.

I then included those leaves (that hope), along with a blush of green in the darkness. I used this technique of scrubbing and layering color in other pieces to differing effects.

“I like the somewhat abstract use of blended color and form as a balance to the precision of the nests. No nest was the same, yet some were a path to another. Each had to tell its story, so I followed and tried to do whatever it took technically to express it. I know that there are specific techniques and stylistic approaches individual artists take or are identified with, but the story sometimes requires the artist to step aside from the known technique and find more than one single known way. These each took a new path of expression. Sometimes one led to another's enhancement, some stood alone.”

—Kate Nessler

*Below:* Gallery installation of Kate Nessler's watercolors on vellum.





*From left:*

American Robin: Nest; male study skin P154495; female study skin P167449; eggs E1713.

Hooded Warbler: Nest N2795; male study skin P167646; female study skin P168115; eggs E415.

Red-winged Blackbird: Eggs E4302; female study skin P166281; male study skin P103564; nest N2888.

Warbling Vireo: Female study skin P167199; male study skin P126436; nest N10423; eggs E396.

Lent by Section of Birds, Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

# Bird Species Referenced in this Exhibition

## Red-winged Blackbird

[*Agelaius phoeniceus* (Linnaeus, 1766), Icteridae]

The Red-winged Blackbird is one of the most abundant species in North America. It frequently spends its breeding season in wetland areas like marshes and rice paddies and often builds nests on cattails, but it can also be found nesting in sedge meadows, alfalfa fields or wooded areas along waterways. The female Red-winged Blackbird builds the cup-shaped nest by winding springy plant material around several close upright stems. Wet leaves and decayed wood are added into the woven structures, and the interior of the cup is plastered with mud and then lined with soft, dry grasses.

The nest on display here (*see p. 60*) is unique because it was constructed largely in and with ferns, many leaves still visible on the thin stems. The female of the species is brown mottled with white while the larger male is black with the characteristic red and yellow shoulders. The eggs, typically numbering three to four but seen here in a clutch of five, are pale bluish grey with splotches, streaks and dots in shades of dark brown.

[See: Wendy Brockman, *Seasons' End*, p. 16; Kate Nessler, *Pond's Edge*, p. 58]

## Ruby-throated Hummingbird

[*Archilochus colubris* (Linnaeus, 1758), Trochilidae]

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird, the sole hummingbird species with breeding territory in eastern North America, occupies the largest breeding range of any North American hummingbird, inhabiting woodlands, orchards, fields and backyards across much of the eastern half of the continent. Despite the relative abundance of breeding sites and a large population, Ruby-throated Hummingbird nests are often very difficult for the average person to spot owing to their frequent placement on top of branches up to 40 feet off the ground and their very small size (about 2 inches across and 1 inch deep). Females of the species often construct these small cup nests out of thistle or dandelion down held together with spider silk, decorating or camouflaging the exterior with moss or lichen.

In this grouping two different Ruby-throated Hummingbird nests are displayed (*see p. 63*), one as a clear example of the use of lichen on the exterior as decoration or camouflage and the other as an example of the very soft downy interior created with plant down and spider silk. A clutch of two eggs is displayed alongside a male and a female. The male, owner of the namesake ruby throat,

appears to have black or brown feathers on the underside of his neck, but when the light hits these feathers at the right angle a brilliant red color is seen. Both have wings and backs with shades of green and mottled gray undersides.

[See: David Morrison, *Bird Nest Series No. 2*, p. 21]

### **Northern Cardinal [*Cardinalis cardinalis* (Linnaeus, 1758), Cardinalidae]**

Another cup-shaped nest builder, the Northern Cardinal is the state bird of Indiana and can be found in a wide variety of trees and shrubs. Though the female is the primary nest builder, the males occasionally bring additional supplies, which the female uses her whole body to crush, bend and stamp down into a cup. [See: Wendy Brockman, *Red Feathers*, p. 35; Kate Nessler, *Pink Rose*, p. 44]

### **Plover [*Charadrius* Linnaeus 1758, Charadriidae]**

Primarily shorebirds, plovers also can be found inland living in golf courses and grasslands and along lakes all over North America. As scrape nest builders, plovers use their chests to carve out depressions in the sand, often adding bits of shell, pebbles or vegetation throughout the incubation period. Because this type of

nest is so easily preyed upon, juvenile plovers often leave the nest within a few hours and are capable of full independence after a few days. [See: Wendy Brockman, *Beach Nest*, p. 52]

### **Rock Pigeon [*Columba livia* J.F. Gmelin, 1789, Columbidae]**

An underappreciated bird, the Rock Pigeon has a very long history of domestication and interaction with humans going back to Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets and Egyptian hieroglyphics. More recently, pigeons were used by military forces during World Wars I and II to carry messages because of their specific talent for finding their way home, no matter where in the world they were released. This amazing feat is performed through a combination of sensing the earth's magnetic fields, using cues based on the position of the sun, and perhaps even through sound and smell cues. Common to both city and country, the pigeon nests on building ledges and rooftops, in barns, under bridges and on natural cliffs. The male picks the nesting site, cooing to attract a mate, and then the female builds the structure around and under her body using materials delivered by the male. This nest can be reused many times and often is built up and strengthened through years of adding materials on top of built-up fecal matter, unhatched eggs and food waste.



This female Rock Pigeon, a former racing pigeon, is displayed beside a truly unique nest, built by what must have been a very strong bird in downtown Pittsburgh (*see p. 63*). This steelworking pigeon constructed her nest primarily out of scraps of baling wire tangled together with twine, a few twigs and other bits of plant material. Though the eggs displayed here are not original to this nest or this pigeon, they exemplify those that would have been incubated in this cozy structure (*see p. 63*).

**Baltimore Oriole [*Icterus galbula* (Linnaeus, 1758), Icteridae]**

Common all over eastern and east-central North America, the Baltimore Oriole can be found in open woodlands, forest edges and small groves of trees like American elm, maple and cottonwood. Orioles are architects of one of the more intricate nest types. Hanging, woven, and stitched nests are made with combinations of weaving, knotting and stitching fibers together to create structures that are light, flexible and very strong. To increase security, they are often placed at the outer edges of trees or bushes and suspended, making them difficult to reach for arboreal predators. Each species that utilizes this type of construction uses identifiable knots and stitches, and a Baltimore Oriole nest may have as many as 10,000 stitches. The female builds this

complicated nest by first hanging long fibers over a small branch high up in the tree. She then darts her beak in and out of the hanging fibers, never deliberately tying knots but creating knot-like tangles throughout. More fibers are added and the tangling continues until a sock-like woven basket is formed. It is not uncommon to find strange materials woven into oriole nests, including scraps of plastic, hair and wool. These intricate nests can take two weeks to complete and are very resilient.

[See: Wendy Brockman, *Epilogue*, p. 31; David Morrison, *Bird Nest Series No. 8*, p. 27]

**Herring Gull [*Larus argentatus* Pontoppidan, 1763, Laridae]**

The quintessential gray-and-white, pink-legged “seagull” that we have come to recognize in North America is the Herring Gull. Because of its scavenging habits, it can be found in settings as varied as open waters and landfills, mud flats and park picnic grounds. The gulls often congregate in large mixed-species groups in these areas but prefer to breed in more secure locations near water, like lakeshores. They are builders of the scrape style of nest, a minimalist nest created by scraping a shallow depression into the ground and, often, lining it with materials by either tossing items into the depression from outside or by tucking items under

the body from inside. Because of the limited defenses inherent in this nest location and type, birds and eggs are often camouflaged, and chicks tend to leave the nest very soon after hatching. Herring Gull pairs pick nesting sites together and will often hollow out several nesting options, scraping and lining depressions in the ground, and then continue to add vegetation to the chosen nest throughout the incubation.

[See: Wendy Brockman, *Storm Collection*, pp. 34, 36; *Harbor Drift*, p. 36]

**Wild Turkey [*Meleagris gallopavo* Linnaeus, 1758,  
Phasianidae]**

As one of only two birds native to the New World that have been domesticated (the other being the Muscovy Duck), the Wild Turkey can be found living year-round in open forests and clearings in 49 states (excluding Alaska) and in parts of Mexico and Canada. Females of the species scrape nests into the ground at the bases of trees, under shrubbery and occasionally in open fields, and use only plant material found at the site of the nest.

[See: Wendy Brockman, *Turkey Feathers*, pp. 35, 36]

**Northern Mockingbird [*Mimus polyglottos* (Linnaeus, 1758),  
Mimidae]**

Found year-round all over the United States, and the state bird of Arkansas, the Northern Mockingbird has made a comeback after nearly vanishing from parts of the East Coast in the 19th century. This formerly popular pet, famed for its extraordinary singing abilities, could fetch a hefty price tag, and nestlings were often taken from nests and adults trapped. Now that it has gone out of fashion to keep a caged mockingbird, populations have grown and nests can be found in shrubs, thickets and trees, sometimes very high up. These nests are made of twigs, grasses and man-made materials like plastic ribbons and aluminum foil.

[See: Kate Nessler, *Assemblage*, p. 39]

**Ring-necked Pheasant [*Phasianus colchicus* Linnaeus, 1758,  
Phasianidae]**

Though the Ring-necked Pheasant can be found in a hugely varied range of habitats all over North America, it tends to choose very specific types of habitats for different activities. Nesting, for example, tends to occur in grassy roadsides and ditches, fields of hay and wetlands. Pheasants often create very humble nests using materials found beside the nest depression, and it is not

uncommon for them to lay their eggs in other species' nests. In fact, male pheasants often harass other ground-nesting birds, chasing away male Prairie-Chickens and attempting to mate with females of that species, having been hatched and raised in Prairie-Chicken nests themselves and perhaps feeling confused.

[See: Wendy Brockman, *Prairie Feather*, p. 36]

**Downy Woodpecker [*Picoides pubescens* (Linnaeus, 1766),  
Picidae]**

Common to forests and woodlands across North America, the Downy Woodpecker is the only bird in this exhibition that creates a cavity style of nest, chipping away at tree trunks. Cavity nests exploit the relative safety of holes and crevices in trees that provide protection from predators and the elements and are created in two ways. Primary cavity nesters excavate their own nests using their flattened beaks to chisel out wood, slender and pointed beaks to dig, or short and stumpy beaks to gouge at surfaces. Secondary cavity nesters rely on existing cavities and will spend a great deal of time outfitting their inherited cavities by building thickly lined nests within the cavity. The male and female Downy Woodpecker excavate their nest together, taking up to three weeks, and pad the cavity with wood chips leftover from excavation.

[See: Wendy Brockman, *Old Feathers*, p. 36]

**Hooded Warbler [*Setophaga citrina* (Boddaert, 1783),  
Parulidae]**

Its bright yellow body and black head and neck, appearing similar to a hood, easily identify a strongly territorial bird common to eastern hardwood forests, the Hooded Warbler. The small cup-shaped nest, built by the female over a few days, includes plant fibers, grasses, bark strips and spiderwebs and is lined with downy plant fibers, fur and feathers. The nests are built in vertical forks in bushes and trees, particularly in forests with shrub understories. A frequent victim of the Brown-headed Cowbird's parasitism, the warbler either continues to incubate and then raise the cowbird chicks or will build a new nest directly on top of the existing one, sacrificing both its eggs and the cowbird's in the process.

Displayed here (*see p. 60*), the Hooded Warbler's hood is nicely visible on the male of the species, a black swath of feathers surrounding the otherwise yellow face and neck. Aside from this feature, the male and female share a vivid yellow coloring on their undersides, green-brown backs and white mottled tails. Their nest, a cup woven into forked branches, is structurally similar to that

of the Warbling Vireo, and the four eggs are white with brown streaks, similar to those of the vireo. It is easy to see why these two species, with such similar nests and eggs, are both parasitized by the Brown-headed Cowbird.

**European Starling [*Sturnus vulgaris* Linnaeus, 1758,  
Sturnidae]**

The entire population of European Starlings in North America can be traced back to 100 birds brought to New York City's Central Park in the 1890s and let loose, an effort to bring to America all of the birds ever mentioned in Shakespeare's writings. While lack of genetic diversity is often problematic, in the introduced starlings it seems to have had little ill effect, and the species is often considered a pest, with a population here now near 200 million. Male starlings choose the nesting sites, preferring cavities leftover from woodpeckers or in some sort of structure, and begin building their nests to attract a female. The cavity is filled with grasses, pine needles, feathers, trash and leaves, with fresh green plant material repeatedly added throughout the nesting period. Both males and females will incubate the eggs, taking turns adding and removing plant material.

[See: David Morrison, *Bird Nest Series No. 7*, p. 26]

**Brown Thrasher [*Toxostoma rufum* (Linnaeus, 1758),  
Mimidae]**

True collaborators, male and female Brown Thrashers together choose the nest site, build the bulky cup, incubate the eggs and feed their young. They can be fiercely protective and have been known to strike humans and their pets hard enough to draw blood. Their shrubby habitats, found in a wide variety of locations, are popular also with predators, explaining the protective behavior. This is also a possible reason for why thrasher fledglings tend to be much younger than those of similar species of their size, sometimes leaving the nest as young as nine days old. [See: Kate Nessler, *Assemblage*, p. 39]

**American Robin**

**[*Turdus migratorius* Linnaeus, 1766, Turdidae]**

The American Robin, the state bird of Wisconsin, is a very common species in North America. It builds a cup-shaped nest. This archetypal nest is the type most common among bird species; it provides protection for eggs with high walls and a soft, cushioned interior space and is also strongly supported and anchored to the structure upon which it is built, often high off the ground. Birds that use this type of nest produce chicks that

are born helpless and dependent, remaining in the nest for quite some time. The cup is created with a huge variety of materials, but the process of creating the cup, which is done using the body, head, wings and beak, means that its size is directly related to the size of the maker. Female robins build their nests from the inside out, pressing and shaping materials such as dead grass and twigs into shape with their body or the wrist of their wing. A bit of a scavenger and hobo, the robin uses all kinds of found materials to build its nest and tends to be indiscriminate about the location, building on branches as well as in gutters, eaves and light fixtures.

This American Robin nest shows the cup-shaped weaving style with added mud typical of the species (*see p. 60*). The larger male and smaller female share the gray-brown back and wing coloring with copper undersides and are primarily differentiated by size.

The four eggs illustrate the “robin’s egg blue” color perfectly.

[See: Wendy Brockman, *Autumn Silence*, p. 30; David Morrison, *Bird Nest Series No. 1*, p. 28; Kate Nessler, *Entropy*, p. 42]

### Warbling Vireo

[*Vireo gilvus* (Vieillot, 1808), Vireonidae]

There are several species of vireo common to North America, and all build open cup-shaped nests suspended in forks of branches.

These tend to be formed out of grasses, bark strips, pine needles, hair, moss and rootlets, and often include insect silk or egg sacs in the construction of the nest or as decoration on the outside. Fiercely territorial, the male often patrols the nesting territory and guards the female while she builds the nest. This protective instinct is helpful as other birds frequently parasitize vireo nests, especially the Brown-headed Cowbird, which lays its eggs in the already built vireo nest and flees. The vireo either continues to incubate and then raise the cowbird chicks, or in some instances will expel the cowbird eggs from the nest.

This Warbling Vireo nest, constructed in a forked branch, is a great example of nest parasitism as it contains a cowbird egg alongside a vireo egg (*see p. 60*). At this stage the eggs are very close to the same size, but the cowbird egg is easily recognized by its prominent brown markings compared with the much lighter vireo egg. Four more Warbling Vireo eggs are displayed alongside the male and female of the species, very similar in size and coloring.

[See: P. 60; Wendy Brockman, *Vestige*, p. 32]

## **SOURCE MATERIAL:**

Cornell All About Birds: [www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org)

Goodfellow, Peter. 2011. *Avian Architecture: How Birds Design, Engineer and Build*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Harrison, Hal H. 1975. *Eastern Birds' Nests* (Peterson Field Guides). New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Harrison, Hal H., and Roger Tory Peterson. 1979. *Western Birds' Nests* (Peterson Field Guides). New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

### *Elements*

19 March–30 June 2015

#### **Works by Isaac Sprague (1811–1895) [not illustrated], Hunt Institute collection:**

[Nest with Fagaceae, Pteridophyta and Poaceae alt. Graminae], ink on paper, 5.25 × 6.75 inches, HI Art accession no. 8070.1.

[Nest in Fagaceae], ink on paper, 6.5 × 6 inches, HI Art accession no. 8070.2.

#### **Works by Sue Abramson, lent by the artist:**

Bed of Leaves, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

Branch and Floating Leaves, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

Fall Nest, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

Fine Lines and Light, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2007, 20 × 20 inches.

Sky View, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

Spring Nest, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

Twisted, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

Wild Nest, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

Woven Trees, archival ink-jet print from 2.25 film negative, 2014, 20 × 20 inches.

**Works by Wendy Brockman, lent by the artist:**

Autumn Silence, [American Robin and *Betula papyrifera* Marshall, Betulaceae], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2014, 22 × 26.5 inches.

Beach Nest [Plover], watercolor on Cowley's Kelmscott calfskin vellum, 2013, 9 × 11 inches.

Briar Nest [*Rosa multiflora* Thunberg, Rosaceae], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2014, 27 × 30 inches.

Epilogue [Baltimore Oriole and *Populus deltoides* W. Bartram ex Marshall, Salicaceae], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2014, 27 × 23 inches.

Harbor Drift [Herring Gull and *Ammophila breviligulata* Fernald, Poaceae alt. Graminae], mixed media (watercolor, graphite, colored pencil) on Strathmore 300 bristol, 2014, 22 × 25.5 inches.

Memory [*Celastrus orbicularis* Willdenow, Celastraceae], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2014, 22 × 18 inches.

Old Feathers [Downy Woodpecker], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2012, 9 × 11 inches.

Prairie Feather [Ring-necked Pheasant], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2013, 9 × 11 inches.

Red Feathers [Cardinal], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2012, 9 × 11 inches.

Seasons' End [Red-winged Blackbird and *Typha angustifolia* Linnaeus, Typhaceae], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2014, 22.5 × 18.5 inches.

Storm Collection [Herring Gull and *Ammophila breviligulata* Fernald, Poaceae alt. Graminae], mixed media (watercolor, graphite, colored pencil) on Strathmore 300 bristol, 2012, 22 × 25.5 inches.

Turkey Feathers [Wild Turkey], watercolor on Cowley's veiny calfskin vellum, 2013, 9 × 11 inches.

Vestige [Vireo and *Betula papyrifera* Marshall, Betulaceae], watercolor on Cowley's honey calfskin vellum, 2014, 20 × 23 inches.

**Works by David Morrison, courtesy Garvey|Simon Art Access, New York:**

Bird Nest Series No. 1 [American Robin], colored pencil on paper, 2014, 20 × 14 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 2 [Ruby-throated Hummingbird], colored pencil on paper, 2015, 35 × 16.5 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 3, colored pencil on paper, 2015, 16 × 39 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 4, colored pencil, 2015, 16 × 39 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 5 [*Catalpa scopoli*, Bignoniaceae], colored pencil on paper, 2015, 39.5 × 23.5 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 6, colored pencil on paper, 2015, 16 × 39 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 7 [European Starling], colored pencil on paper, 2015, 16 × 39 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 8 [Baltimore Oriole], colored pencil on paper, 2015, 35 × 16.5 inches.

Bird Nest Series No. 9, colored pencil on paper, 2014, 20 × 14 inches.

**Works by Kate Nessler, lent by the artist:**

Assemblage [Brown Thrasher or ?Northern Mockingbird and *Forsythia* Vahl, Oleaceae], watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum, 2014, 22 × 14 inches.

Encircled, body color and pencil on veiny vellum, 2014, 22.5 × 30 inches.

Entropy [American Robin], watercolor, pencil and body color on veiny vellum, 2014, 29.5 × 17 inches.

Nest with Maple Seeds, watercolor and pencil on honey vellum, 2012, 15.5 × 43 inches.

Pink Rose [Cardinal and *Rosa* Linnaeus, Rosaceae], watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum, 2014, 14 × 22 inches.

Poisoned [*Rosa* Linnaeus, Rosaceae], watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum, 2014, 17 × 25 inches.

Pond's Edge [Red-winged Blackbird and *Typha angustifolia* Linnaeus, Typhaceae], watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum, 2014, 26 × 14.5 inches.

Suspension, watercolor and pencil on Kelmscott vellum by Kate Nessler, 2014, 25 × 17 inches.

**Items Also Exhibited, lent by Section of Birds, Carnegie Museum of Natural History:**

Red-winged Blackbird: Nest N2888; female study skin P166281; male study skin P103564; eggs E4302.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird: Nest N10422; nest N10421; female study skin P114717; male study skin P170846; eggs E468.

Rock Pigeon: Wire nest N10424; female study skin P154189; eggs E4399.

Hooded Warbler: Nest N2795; female study skin P168115; male study skin P167646; eggs E415.

American Robin: Nest; female study skin P167449; male study skin P154495; eggs E1713.

Warbling Vireo: Nest N10423; female study skin P167199; male study skin P126436; eggs E396.