

Nature stories for young readers

MYSTERY OF THE FOUR EGGS

VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA



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A PARTNERSHIP FOR TEACHERS, CHILDREN AND EDUCATION



The story is based on observations made at Sanjay Van, part of South Delhi's Ridge forest and the neighbouring institutional campuses in the months of April - July 2010. Two Yellow-wattled Lapwing's and four Redwattled Lapwing's nests were observed.

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



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Look! Eggs... Redwattled Lapwing's eggs!"

**A brown bird that was sneaking away, turned back
and asked sternly, "Who says so?"**

"I," taken aback for a moment I answered meekly.





“What makes you think so?” The bird demanded with some anger.

“I am not thinking. I know it,” I protested.

“Ha! So sure of yourself?”

This was going a bit too far. A bird bullying me! I was just crossing the playground and as luck would have it, chanced upon the eggs. I was thrilled to see them again.

The first time I saw such eggs, I was surprised and a bit scared too. I hid myself behind a bush. My brother joined me and as we watched, a big bird with long yellow legs walked over and sat on them.

“That’s a Redwattled Lapwing,” my brother had whispered.

“I have seen similar eggs in the forest...”

“Similar, you say!” The bird interrupted.





"What are you getting at?"

"Just that these eggs are mine and I am certainly not a Redwattled Lapwing."

"Why! Of course you are not. But, hold on! How can you claim these eggs as yours? You thief!" I asked angrily.

**"Don't you dare call me a thief! Now PROVE IT!"
The bird bellowed.**

"Prove what?"

"Prove that these eggs are not mine if you can."

"But how?"

"Ha! Ha! My dear kid, learn to be sure of yourself before accusing. Run along and think up a plan."

"Fine, I will bring back one of those eggs. You can then see for yourself..."





"YOU will do nothing of that sort," the bird threatened. "What right do you have to take away something that is not yours?"

I cursed myself for getting into a nice mess.

"Look bird," I said, "I promise not to touch those eggs or these. But I promise to solve the mystery. Wait here while I think of something."

I went back to the forest. It is an urban forest: a

huge area where nature is protected. As the forest is within the city, there are no dangerous animals in it. It's a place of relaxation and people use it for walks and exercise. In this forest is a small pond and a garden beside it. After the monsoon, water in the pond recedes. By the end of winter, trees drop leaves and the forest thins down. It is now early summer. A perfect time for exploring and last week, our exploration had led us to the eggs.

The eggs were pointed at one end and rounder at





the other. They were arranged like petals of a flower; narrow end at the centre and broader side outside. They had spots and splashes unevenly distributed all over. The dark and pale brown markings were bigger on the rounded side.

I picked up a stick and placed it gently beside the eggs, taking care not to touch them. I then broke the stick to almost the same length as the egg. Like a forensic expert, I took pictures of the eggs, from all angles. "I have all the evidence to prove my case!"

I said to myself and hurried back to the playground. I got to where I thought I had seen the eggs but no matter how hard I looked, I could not find them.

“This is puzzling!” I said aloud, scratching my head. At the lake, it was easy spotting the eggs because there was only a narrow stretch of land between the trees and water. Moreover, the eggs were on a low mound beside the bamboos and I knew how to get there. But I had no landmark to help me on this huge playground.





**"Looking for the eggs, my dear?" Asked the bird,
standing beside me and smiling broadly.**

"Funny, I didn't notice you!" I said.

**"Nor the eggs I suppose," said the bird, smiling
again broadly with great pride.**

"Yes. Where are they?"

"Right under your nose! Look here!"

UNBELIEVABLE! The eggs were right in front of me and I had not seen them. When our teacher told us about chameleons, I had tried hard to visualise a camouflaged chameleon. I now had a good example of a camouflage!

I was dazed. It took me a while to recover. I pulled out the measured stick from my pocket and placed it slowly beside one of the eggs. More surprise and confusion. “These eggs are smaller than those” I said in a very low voice.





I stared at the eggs. And then at the display on my camera. How could I compare the eggs? How could I match the colours? And suddenly a thought occurred. "Can you tell me what a wattle is?"

"Yes, of course," said the bird. "A wattle is a fleshy, bright coloured skin fold that some of us birds have. A cock is an example. It has a wrinkled wattle."

"Then you are a Yellow-wattled Lapwing. And these are your eggs!" I exclaimed.

“Correct on both counts! I am glad you noticed the differences between us and the Redwattled Lapwings. We are smaller of the two. As you can see, our eggs are similar but NOT identical!”

“But I can’t understand why you birds don’t make a nest. Won’t it be much safer for your eggs and chicks?”

“Just when I was admiring you for being a Sherlock Holmes, you turned out to be a Watson,” the bird





said with unhidden disappointment and took off in a huff quoting Sherlock Holmes: ‘You see, but do not observe’.

I ignored the insult and stood right there. Circling back and landing gracefully beside me, she ordered, “Look again. What do you see around the eggs?”

I was not sure what the bird wanted me to look at. “Well, what do I see..., stones and sticks and a pod, wait! Lots of stones..., arranged here... you arranged

them or what?" I looked at the bird quizzingly.

"Quite right," the bird said. "What you see is our nest. We make it that way. There are other birds that make such nests. You have already seen the Redwattled Lapwing's nest –"

I was surprised at what the bird said. "Nest? You call this a nest!"

"Oh! You think nests are made only on trees? What





do you think a nest is?" The bird questioned.

"A nest ... something to hold eggs, of course!"

"Also something to protect eggs and chicks. Our nest protects our eggs by making them difficult to spot. Why! You got fooled yourself."

The Yellow-wattled Lapwing then gave me a nice neat lesson on how they make their nests. First they scrape out a shallow depression with their body.

They then pick and toss stones, mud clods, sticks, grass; anything that merges with the surroundings and arrange them around the scrape. They are careful in selecting a site for their nest. The site must naturally help camouflage the nest. The bird continued, "Our eggs are not shiny. They look so much like the stones around them."

Though I had seen two sets of eggs, it never occurred to me that these birds deliberately arrange stones and sticks to make a nest.





But strangely, the nest did not impress me. “Your nest is perhaps great for camouflaging your eggs, but what about your chicks? What happens when your eggs hatch?”

“Our chicks don’t need a nest!” declared the bird as she flew away.

The Lapwings and their nests





Yellow-wattled Lapwing



Yellow-wattled Lapwing's nest in the playground



The flat playground where Yellow-wattled Lapwings nested



Yellow-wattled Lapwing's nest in a garden



Yellow-wattled Lapwing incubating eggs



Redwattled Lapwing



Redwattled Lapwing's nest



Redwattled Lapwing incubating eggs



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