

Which Birds Are Colonial?

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About one in eight bird species worldwide nest in colonies.

Simply defined, a bird colony is a group of birds nesting together in the same place at the same time. Some colonies are hard to miss -- large, noisy, with thousands, sometimes millions, of birds packed together within inches of one another. Some colonies are made up of nests scattered across a broad area or include just a few pairs of birds. In any case, a colony contains birds that frequently communicate and react to each other.

The following is a list of North American bird families in which most species are colonial nesters. Note that most are marine or coastal waterbirds or birds that feed on airborne insects.

Albatrosses

Shearwaters and Petrels

Storm-Petrels

Tropicbirds

Boobies and Gannets

Pelicans

Cormorants

Anhingas

Frigatebirds

Hérons and Egrets

Ibises and Spoonbills

Storks

Flamingos

Gulls and Terns

Auks, Murres, Puffins

Swifts

Swallows and Martins



Albatrosses spend almost all their time out at sea, coming to land only to nest.



Beach-nesting colonial birds, like these Black Skimmers, often lay their eggs directly on the sand.



Some species that typically nest in colonies, like the Great Blue Heron, will occasionally nest alone.



Many fish-eating species are colonial, including puffins and pelicans.



Purple Martin colonies are almost always found in human-made structures.



However, flamingos and many other colonial birds will not court or nest unless in a group.



Colonial-nesting birds found outside of North America include penguins, parrots, bee-eaters, and African weavers. Here the nest of a Jabiru, a colonial tropical American stork, houses a colony of Monk Parakeets.



Western Grebes sometimes nest near colonies of gulls or terns, which may act as sentries for approaching predators.

Rusty Blackbirds, and other blackbirds and orioles, may nest in loose colonies if food is abundant.



The Common Eider builds concealed nests where foxes occur, but joins dense colonies on islands where there are jaegers and other predatory seabirds.