

Smart Stuff

with Twig Walkingstick

Dear Twig: A bird flew by holding, ahem, poop in its beak. Ahhh! Then it dropped the poop in a pond. I probably don't want to know, but what was it doing?

Baby birds don't wear diapers. You probably already know that. So when they do what all babies do, you'd think they'd make a mess of their nest. But they don't.

Why? Because (drum roll) many bird babies poop their poop out in **fecal sacs**. Hurray!

Basically, fecal sacs are capsules of poop. (Picture a tiny water balloon.) Strong and flexible, the walls of the capsule are made out of mucous.

Inside the walls safe 'n' sound is the poop. The sac works like a **diaper**. It keeps the nest and the babies clean. And it's easy to carry and get rid of. Which is probably what you saw: a parent bird tossing a fecal sac.

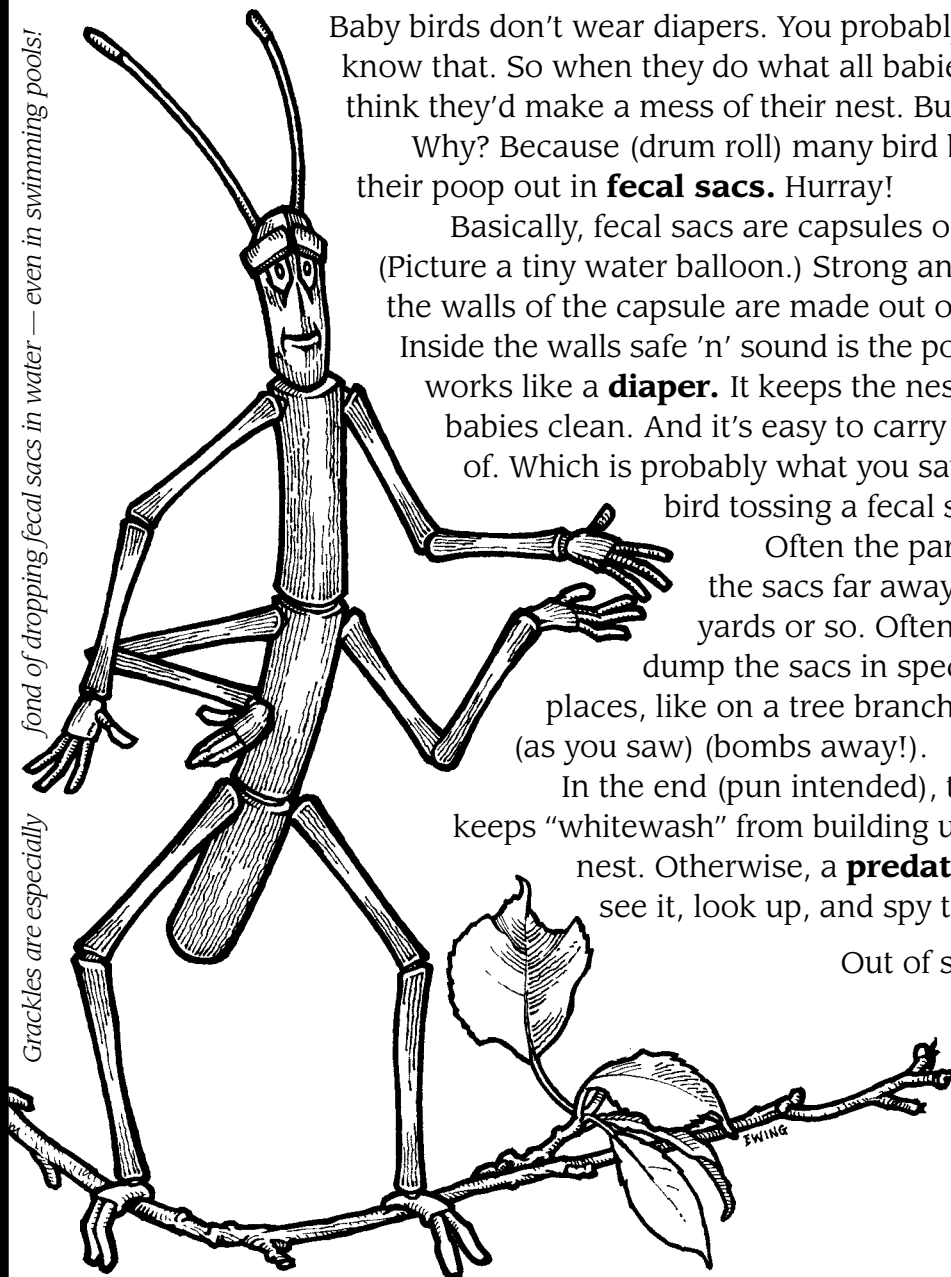
Often the parents take the sacs far away, even 100 yards or so. Often, too, they dump the sacs in special hiding places, like on a tree branch or in water (as you saw) (bombs away!).

In the end (pun intended), the practice keeps "whitewash" from building up under the nest. Otherwise, a **predator** might see it, look up, and spy tasty babies.

Out of sight,

Twig

Grackles are especially fond of dropping fecal sacs in water — even in swimming pools!



From your scientific friends at The Ohio State University — specifically, the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/) and OSU Extension (www.ag.ohio-state.edu/).



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For the week of
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Dear Reader: Twig has been mostly away from his office (a hole in the trunk of a hickory tree) since early July due to a family medical emergency. In order to get the schedule back on track, and, if you're a newspaper editor, to make sure you have Twigs on hand to publish, columns for the weeks of July 2, 9, 16, 23 and 30 and Aug. 6, 2006, will be sent to you in the course of the next two days. All will have been previously released. This one first appeared Aug. 1, 2004. Look for new Twigs to resume the week of Aug. 13. For more information related to this week's column, try http://www.labayoubluebird.society.org/new_page_3.htm.

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