Name: _____ Date: _____

The Cuckoo That Hands Off Its Parenting

Circle group

Most birds build a nest. They lay eggs and feed their chicks for weeks. The common cuckoo does none of this. A female cuckoo watches for a small bird that is building a nest. One example is the reed warbler. When the owner leaves, the cuckoo slips in. She lays one egg with the others. Then she flies away for good.

The trick works because of a disguise. Cuckoo eggs often look like the eggs of the bird that will raise them. They have the same colors and speckles. Each female picks one host bird, so her eggs match that bird.

The cuckoo egg often hatches a little early. The new chick often pushes the other eggs out of the nest. Then the foster parents have only one mouth to feed. The chick grows much bigger than they are. They still bring it food. Its wide, bright mouth and loud call are hard for them to ignore.

Hosts can fight back. Over many generations, some birds learn to spot odd eggs and toss them out. Then cuckoo eggs get even better at looking the same. Scientists call this an arms race. Each side keeps getting better in answer to the other.

Questions

1. What does a female cuckoo do with her egg?

_____

_____

2. Which bird is an example of a host?

_____

_____

3. What does the cuckoo chick often do after it hatches?

_____

_____

4. Why do some hosts toss out odd eggs?

_____

_____

5. Why do the foster parents feed a chick bigger than they are?

_____

_____

6. What does the term arms race tell us about hosts and cuckoos?

_____

_____

Words to know

host: the bird that unknowingly raises another bird's egg
foster: taking care of a young animal that is not your own
generations: groups of animals born and growing up at about the same time

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

Name: _____ Date: _____

The Cuckoo That Hands Off Its Parenting

Triangle group

Raising a family takes most birds a great deal of work, from building the nest to feeding hungry chicks for weeks. The common cuckoo skips every one of those jobs. A female cuckoo keeps an eye out for a smaller bird, like a reed warbler, that is busy with its own nest. The moment the owner steps away, the cuckoo darts over, adds one egg to the clutch, and leaves for good.

What makes the scheme work is a clever disguise. Cuckoo eggs often look remarkably like the eggs of the bird that will raise them, with similar colors and speckles. Each female tends to specialize in one host species, so her eggs match that bird's.

Often the cuckoo egg hatches a little earlier than the others. In many cases the new chick pushes the other eggs out of the nest, which leaves the foster parents with only one mouth to feed. The chick grows much larger than its adopted parents, yet they keep carrying food to it, partly because its wide, bright mouth and loud begging call are so hard for them to ignore.

Hosts are not helpless, though. Over many generations, some birds have become better at spotting odd-looking eggs and tossing them out of the nest. In response, cuckoo eggs have become even better copies. Biologists describe this long contest as an evolutionary arms race, with each side improving in answer to the other.

Questions

1. What does a female cuckoo do with her egg?

_____

_____

2. Which bird is given as an example of a host?

_____

_____

3. What does the cuckoo chick often do soon after it hatches?

_____

_____

4. Why do some hosts toss out odd-looking eggs?

_____

_____

5. Why do the foster parents keep feeding a chick that is bigger than they are?

_____

_____

6. What does the term arms race suggest about hosts and cuckoos?

_____

_____

Words to know

host: the bird that unknowingly raises another bird's egg
specialize: to focus on one particular kind of thing
foster: taking care of a young animal that is not your own
generations: groups of animals born and growing up at about the same time
evolutionary: having to do with slow changes in living things over time

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

Name: _____ Date: _____

The Cuckoo That Hands Off Its Parenting

Square group

Most birds construct a nest, lay their eggs and devote several weeks to feeding their young. The common cuckoo avoids every one of those responsibilities. A female cuckoo keeps watch for a small bird, such as a reed warbler, that is occupied with building its nest. As soon as the owner wanders off for a moment, the cuckoo slips in, lays a single egg among the others, and then flies away, never to return.

The scheme succeeds because of a careful disguise. Cuckoo eggs frequently resemble the eggs of the species that will raise them, with remarkably similar colors and speckles. Each female tends to specialize in one particular host species, so that her eggs match that bird's.

The cuckoo egg usually hatches slightly before the others, and in many cases the newborn chick shoves the remaining eggs out of the nest, leaving the foster parents with only a single mouth to feed. The chick eventually grows far larger than its adopted parents, yet they continue to carry food to it, partly because its wide, bright mouth and loud begging call are so difficult for them to resist.

The hosts are not helpless, however. Over many generations, some birds have grown better at recognizing unfamiliar-looking eggs and tossing them out of the nest, and in response, cuckoo eggs have become even more convincing copies. Biologists describe this prolonged contest as an evolutionary arms race, with each side improving in reply to the other.

Questions

1. What does a female cuckoo do with her egg?

_____

_____

2. Which species is given as an example of a host?

_____

_____

3. What does the cuckoo chick often do shortly after it hatches?

_____

_____

4. Why have some hosts begun tossing out odd-looking eggs?

_____

_____

5. Why do the foster parents keep feeding a chick that is larger than they are?

_____

_____

6. What does the term arms race suggest about the hosts and the cuckoos?

_____

_____

Words to know

host: the bird that unknowingly raises another bird's egg
specialize: to focus on one particular kind of thing
foster: taking care of a young animal that is not your own
generations: groups of animals born and growing up at about the same time
evolutionary: having to do with slow changes in living things over time

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

For the teacher: The Cuckoo That Hands Off Its Parenting

Each student sheet carries a shape, not a level. The same topic and facts, written three ways.

Circle: The Cuckoo That Hands Off Its Parenting

Easier · 201 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 2.5

1. She lays it in another bird's nest and flies away.
2. The reed warbler.
3. It pushes the other eggs out of the nest.
4. They have learned to spot eggs that do not look like their own.
5. Its wide, bright mouth and loud call are hard to ignore.
6. Each side keeps getting better to answer the other.

Triangle: The Cuckoo That Hands Off Its Parenting

This passage · 238 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 7.4

1. She lays it in another bird's nest and leaves.
2. The reed warbler.
3. It pushes the other eggs out of the nest.
4. They have become better at noticing eggs that do not match their own.
5. Its wide, bright mouth and loud begging are hard for them to ignore.
6. Each side keeps improving to answer the other, like two rivals trying to outdo each other.

Square: The Cuckoo That Hands Off Its Parenting

Harder · 244 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 10.6

1. She lays it in another bird's nest and then leaves for good.
2. The reed warbler.
3. It shoves the other eggs out of the nest.
4. Over many generations they have become better at recognizing eggs that do not match their own.
5. Its wide, bright mouth and loud begging are very hard for them to resist.
6. Each side keeps improving in reply to the other, like rivals trying to outdo one another.