

The Orioles Return

Gena Husman/Robin Arnold

It was a good day. I found a cheap source of off-brand grape jelly and came home with several large jars. Every year around the beginning of April we begin stocking up on grape jelly. Soon the orioles will be returning and we want to be ready for them. The males arrive first, followed by the females about a week later. Last year the male Baltimore Orioles showed up at our feeder on May 5. We scrambled to get the jelly out so they would stay around. Seven days later, on May 12, we saw a male Orchard Oriole at the feeder eating jelly. By late May we had 3 pair of Baltimore Orioles and 1 pair of Orchard Orioles eating at our jelly feeders. It's true: if you put out grape jelly, they will come. And stay.



You can buy oriole feeders or make your own. We put jelly in the cut-off bottoms of plastic water bottles which we tack on a post, and in the empty rind of an orange half which we stick in spaces in our

chain-link fence. From mid May when the orioles first show up through early September when the last of them leave to go south, it's a full time job keeping enough jelly in the feeders.

Within a week or two of their arrival, the female begins construction of the hanging "pendant" nest which she builds high up in the branches of the cottonwoods at the back of our property. Although we've tried to spot the nests, we've only been able to see them after the leaves have fallen and the birds are long gone. Shortly after her nest is built, she lays 4 or 5 eggs and incubates them for 12-14 days until they hatch. Both parents feed the babies until the fledglings leave their nest about 12-14 days after that. The oriole parents bring their babies to the feeders and feed them jelly until they learn to eat it on their own. It's quite a sight to see 3 or 4 stubby-winged baby orioles lined up on the top of our fence flapping their wings and begging loudly for jelly as the parents fly from the feeder with beaks full of dripping grape jelly to each of the babies. This continues until late summer when the orioles leave as suddenly as they arrived.