

# Celebrating Animals

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**“The grace and beauty of birds** during mating season is something to behold,” says Francoise Macomber, who spent a week observing a great egret couple build a nest at Florida’s Venice Area Audubon Rookery. The birds had just finished weaving in a new twig when one arched up and, with extended pinfeathers, presented Macomber with the perfect shot.

“I’ve never seen a couple more dedicated. ... They worked from sunrise to sunset,” says the retired clinical psychologist. “They had three chicks, and all survived.”

To capture the majesty of birds on film, Macomber shows similar dedication: Every year she travels from her Bethlehem, Conn., home to Sunshine State rookeries, where she spends 10 hours a day for several weeks watching a single pair. Her patience and close

observation pay off. “I can tell when the male is going to get a twig. I can tell when the female will rise up and put on her best display as he comes in with the twig.”

She also gets an intimate view of community dynamics as birds squabble over prime real estate and steal twigs from one another. “When the babies hatch, it’s hilarious. One nest is always yelling at another nest.”

Neighborhood bickering aside, great egret couples demonstrate strong mutual affection: Macomber loves to watch mated pairs scratch each other’s backs and gently rub against each other.

Being privy to such moments “makes my soul sing,” she says. “There are not words to describe [how I feel] when I’m sitting there looking at the birds.”

— **Ruthanne Johnson**

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