



## **TREE SWALLOWS! THE AERIAL ACROBATS**

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Many people put out nest boxes expecting to attract bluebirds but instead become frustrated when tree swallows claim the boxes. Removing tree swallow nests in hopes of still attracting bluebirds, to many people's surprise, is illegal to do. Such drastic measures, even if legal, are unnecessary and may in turn lead to many more flying insects around one's lawn. Why not enjoy the aerial acrobatics of this species instead? There are nest box placement strategies which will allow both tree swallows and bluebirds to nest in close proximity while minimizing the competition for boxes.

### **LIFE HISTORY**

Tree swallows are a native bird which like bluebirds, are secondary cavity nesters. This means that they cannot excavate their own cavities and thus are dependent on cavities created by downy or similar-sized woodpeckers or on nest boxes. Being slightly smaller than a bluebird, tree swallows can use any cavity that the bluebird can.

Once they locate a cavity, tree swallows will build a short grass nest, often with grasses slightly more coarse

than those selected by bluebirds. Most of the nest building is done by the female, but the male may bring nesting materials to her. While the nest building is in progress, it is often difficult to distinguish between the nests of tree swallows and bluebirds. At completion, though, a bluebird nest will generally be taller and have a deeper cup while the swallow nest will typically be shorter and flatter.

Occasionally, swallows, like bluebirds, will use pine needles instead of grass in the nests. The best identifying feature, however, is the feather lining found in nearly all swallow nests. Swallows are especially attracted to white feathers. I have frequently found their nests lined with duck feathers, but have also found turkey, pigeon, owl, hawk and a variety of other feathers. Once a swallow finds a feather, it quickly attempts to take it to its nest, but frequently it may encounter several other swallows which will compete for those treasures in aerial dogfights.

Once the nest is completed, the female will lay one small white egg each day until the clutch of 5-7 eggs is completed. After this she will start incubating the eggs which will hatch in 14-15 days. Only the female incubates the eggs but when she leaves the cavity to feed, often the male will enter the box and stand guard at the entrance. The young will remain in the nest for approximately 21 days before leaving the nest. Adult swallows sometimes leave the nest

area for extended periods during the nest building period and may even leave for several days during incubation. This behavior extends the time it will take eggs to hatch but does not appear to have a significant impact on the nest success. The adults will fly up to a mile away in search of small insects to feed the chicks. They will collect up to 50 insects in the back of their throats and return to the nest to feed them to the young. Unlike bluebirds, swallows do not find insects on the ground. They catch insects on the wing as they dart seemingly recklessly through the air. During the nestling period, the adults remove the chicks' fecal sacs. If water is nearby, the swallows will drop the sacs there; if not, they will dispose of them on land.

Once the young swallows leave the nest, they never return to it. They are excellent flyers from the first flight and can be seen being guided by the adults through the air on their initial flights. Adults may feed the chicks for the first 2-3 days after fledging before they are completely independent. Usually once the young have fledged, the families will leave the area, congregating with many others in swampy areas with an abundance of flying insects.

Swallows are highly dependent on those flying insects and extended cold periods with low insect activity can be devastating to them. The male tree swallows will obtain the adult blue-green plumage by the first fall, but the females will retain their brownish plumage through their second year.

## **MANAGEMENT**

Tree swallows are the birds most often found in New York State bluebird boxes. Boxes placed near water are especially attractive to them but they will nest in any fairly open area. To maximize your chances of attracting bluebirds amidst competition from swallows, we recommend placing two boxes 5-10 feet apart. While swallows will usually exclude another pair of swallows from nesting this close, they often will accept a bluebird pair. Swallows defend only their nest site itself, while bluebirds defend a larger territory (from other bluebirds) around their nest site. We have had excellent success with box pairing within the state.

## **BANDING**

I banded tree swallows for many years. Unlike most female bluebirds, the female swallows are easy to catch on the nest for banding. I banded a majority of the females on my research trails. I also banded nearly all the nestlings before they fledged. I have found that many adult females return to the same area if not the same nest box from year to year. It appears that unlike birds banded as adults, those banded as chicks disperse more widely and are only rarely ever encountered again near the areas where they were banded as chicks.

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