

BARN SWALLOWS

As warmer temperatures come to Cache Valley, we are seeing the annual return of friendly Barn Swallows. These long-range travelers show up at our doorsteps, having traveled thousands of miles, and immediately begin the business of building mud nests and raising offspring, as if we weren't even there. When autumn temperatures begin to decline, the swallows disappear as suddenly as they show in the spring.

Most of us take this small, slender, sleek, insect-eating bird for granted. With wide mouths and deep forked tails, barn swallows are well suited for capturing insects in the air. They have exceptional agility in flight and drink by skimming the water surface while flying. Barn swallows catch a variety of insects from various insect orders. Common victims from foraging swallows include mosquitoes, flies, beetles, wasps and bees. These busy birds prefer an open habitat for foraging, a body of fresh water for drinking, a supply of mud for nest building and a suitable surface for nest attachment beneath an overhang or ledge.

Swallows are territorial and will usually come back to the same nesting site. These birds have made a very successful switch from cliffs and caves to man-made structures for placement of their mud pellet nests. Some homeowners consider swallows to be a minor nuisance and tolerate nesting swallows as pleasant and interesting companions around the home. Other homeowners become frustrated with mud damage to outer walls and eaves and smeared feces below nesting sites.

In the United States, swallows are classified as migratory insectivorous birds under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Swallows are also protected by state regulations making it illegal to disturb them once they lay their eggs in the nest. It is also illegal for any person to take, possess, transport, sell, or purchase swallows or their parts, such as feathers, nests, or eggs, without a permit. The only way to eliminate barn swallows is to take down the nests after the birds are gone and attempt to exclude them from rebuilding.

Swallows are very persistent, however, and will likely return the following year to nest in the same location. Nest removal should be initiated at the first sign of nest building because of the difficulty in obtaining a permit to remove nests with eggs or young. Usually nests can be washed down with a water hose or knocked down with a pole. Removing nests by these methods is a messy and time-consuming process and may cause water damage to the building. As builders of mud nests, swallows have evolved to persist despite nest failures from rain or moisture. Because swallows will persistently rebuild nests, removal will be required for several days during nest building. Persistence is undoubtedly affected by the physiological condition of the swallows, past nesting history at the site, and the availability of alternate sites. The swallows may return again the following year, and unless additional control measures are implemented, the whole process may need to be repeated.

Swallows prefer surfaces that provide a good foothold for nest attachment. Removal of the rough surface of a wall and/or overhang makes a site less attractive. Sometimes the removal of a doorframe or simple modification of a porch light is sufficient to discourage nest building. Some home owners have had success with a fresh coat of paint that dries to a slick surface, use of plexiglass, aluminum foil, sheet metal or fiberglass at strategic locations. Chemical roost repellents, noise makers, revolving lights, and hawk, owl or snake models have shown little, if any, success.

The architectural design of buildings influences site suitability. Buildings with overhanging eaves at acute to right angles with the wall are potential nest sites. Conversely, sites where the overhang and wall meet at an obtuse angle or are rounded and concave are rarely used. The width of the overhang may be important to site suitability. Few colonies are observed with an overhang of less than 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 cm).

Substrate texture is also factor; wood, stucco, masonry, and concrete surfaces are favorable substrates for nest attachment. Nests on metal surfaces are usually located at a crotch or joint where the swallow can gain a foot-hold. In situations where construction is planned and swallows are present on nearby structures, consideration to materials and design may eliminate future problems. Swallows may move to nearby structures if control is applied at an existing colony.

There are businesses, such as Fly-Bye.com, who specialize in providing materials and products to exclude troublesome birds and insects. Home owners who are frustrated by sharing their homes with swallows may want to consider options recommended at this site. Some of the control methods illustrated at this site do not enhance the appearance of the home, however.

The time from nest building to departure seldom exceeds 60 days. Since their numbers appear to be dwindling and since their annual return is a sure sign of spring, perhaps we should all welcome them, let them eat troublesome insects and simply wash the walls and porch after they leave.