

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

SWALLOW CONGREGATIONS

DEALING WITH A
COMMON PROBLEM



SWALLOW CONGREGATIONS

DEALING WITH A COMMON PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

The effortless flight of the swallows as they gracefully hawk insects over open fields and roadways has long captured the imagination of man. When these same birds begin to build mud nests from our eaves, prevent us from using doorways or yard space by driving us away from nests, or begin to leave masses of droppings from their young, people quickly lose their interest and begin looking for ways to control the “problem”.

The large open areas man creates as he settles new territory prove an attractive “kitchen pantry” for a wide variety of flying insects that inhabit our croplands, yards, parks and right of ways. As these insect populations grow, we begin to see more and more swallows in the same areas, minimizing the damage created by the foraging insects. Since their food is there, the birds look for shelter and water sources in the area. Shelves, ledges, eaves and other flat surfaces that we tend to build into our homes, office buildings, garages and outbuildings, bridges and culverts become the prime locations for these birds to nest.

Nesting swallows are strictly seasonal – these birds build a nest for the specific purpose of sheltering young and use it only for a short time during which they raise the young. Protective sites are chosen to provide protection from rain, wind, predators and other “threats” to their young. Since humans are perceived as a threat, these very good parents will attempt to drive us, and our inquisitive children, away from the nest area. Nest building takes less than 2 weeks, followed by about a week during which the female will be laying eggs. Incubation then lasts about 2 weeks followed by about 18 days until fledging. Problems develop because of the gregarious nature of these birds – often nesting in colonies. As many as 55 Barn Swallow nests were reported in one barn by one reference while another reports finding thousands of Cliff Swallow nests in a single colony. The very number of birds present results in unpleasant deposits of bird droppings in the nesting area.

Made of mud and straw, Barn Swallow nests are often semicircular in shape tapering downward into a cone (see figure 1). They are usually lined with feathers. While these birds used to nest on cliff faces, caves or in rock

crevices, they now find our barns, bridges, carports, boat houses and even our own houses the ideal substitute.

Cliff Swallows build a gourd-shaped mud nest, which they plaster to the sides of buildings and other structures – just as they would have to the side of a cliff (see figure 2). The nest chamber is lined with grasses, hair and feathers.

SOME SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Swallows, their nests and its contents, like most other North American birds, their nests and its contents, are protected by both state and federal laws making it illegal to harass the birds or destroy their active nests. This includes such often suggested control methods as “shooing” the birds with a broom, spraying the nests with water, or simply knocking down the nests once recognized. These reactionary tactics should be replaced with a proactive preventative method to make the habitat less suitable for swallows, preventing rather than “correcting” the problem.

There have been no chemical sprays found to be effective in reducing the number of Barn Swallows or Cliff Swallows nesting in an area. Simply reducing the mud supply immediately around your home is also not going to be effective. Instead of trying to control the supply of building material, limiting the supply of optimal building sights presents an effective, economical and simple solution. Remembering that these birds have an affinity for open skies, hanging plants that will blow in the wind close to the areas where the birds are building nests has effectively discouraged these species – with the added benefit of replacing the mud nests with vegetation. Similar distractions can be achieved with strips of tinfoil, windsocks or other blowing devices as long as they create movement near the nest sight.

Another technique removes the 90 degree or less angle and the vertical surfaces these birds seem to prefer, creating a surface on which these birds can not effectively build their nest. These changes can be temporary (tinfoil and masking tape, tangle foot or wood putty) or permanent (actually creating a new angle for your eaves) creating an angled barrier between the vertical wall and the horizontal eave (see figure 3). The important thing is to remove the surface on which the nest would otherwise be attached. This requires a proactive effort however, noticing the swallow activity around your home and acting before significant nest building takes place.

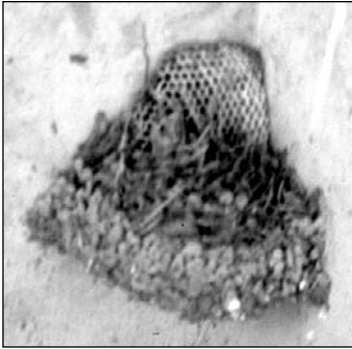


figure 1



figure 2

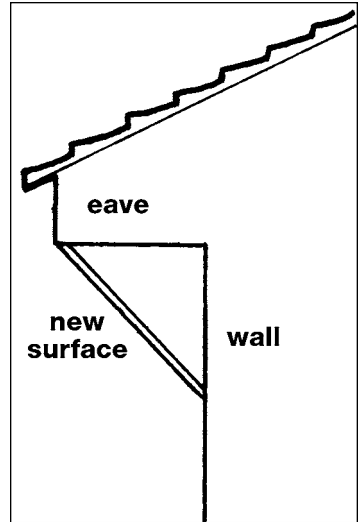


figure 3

CREATE OR PRESERVE ALTERNATE HABITAT NEARBY

Simply removing the habitat the birds are currently using does not create a situation that will contribute to the long term health of the species. Man has created a situation that forces these birds to live in close relation to our communities. We have destroyed much of their natural habitat, leaving them with few alternatives but to seek structures we build to make their homes in.

Encouraging your community to build bridges and overpasses in such a way that they provide needed nesting sites for these birds ensures that, when you decide to discourage them from nesting on your home, they will

still have nesting sites in your community. Birds should not be discouraged from nesting on abandoned buildings, and portions of buildings where the birds can be tolerated. Even some active homes can house healthy communities of nesting swallows. Some homeowners will welcome these birds nesting on their home where they can enjoy watching them.

Nest boxes do not work for swallows – these birds, with the exception of the Tree Swallow – were not traditionally cavity nesters, preferring to nest under overhangs on vertical structures. There has been no effective structure made that will encourage Cliff Swallows to nest. Barn Swallows have been successfully encouraged to nest under nesting shelves similar to those used for American Robins or Eastern Phoebes (see figure 4). Locating these shelves close to but not on the surfaces you are trying to discourage the Barn Swallows from nesting on may reduce your frustration and provide habitat needs for the birds.

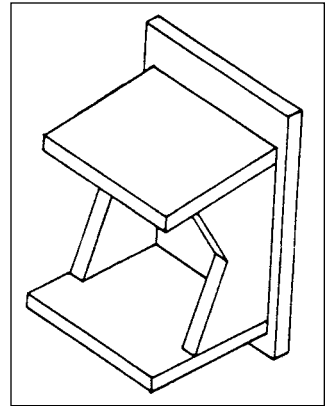


figure 4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet would not have been possible without the assistance of numerous people across the state including: Cliff Shackelford, Ornithologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Wildlife Diversity Branch who got the project started and provided editorial and technical assistance, Mark Lockwood, Conservation Biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Natural Resources Program who provided technical guidance, and Linda Tschirhart of the Bryan office of Wildlife Damage Management Program who offered technical assistance. Urban Biologists John Davis, Diana Foss, Judit Gowen and Rufous Stephens as well as Texas Birding Classic Development Coordinator Matt Dozier also provided insight. Their assistance is greatly appreciated.



4200 Smith School Road
Austin, Texas 78744