

Let's Have More Swallows

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I sat in a folding chair out behind our barn, as I often do when the weather is fair and my older daughter is riding her horse. I wasn't watching my daughter however. I was watching birds in the sky, swallows, sometimes high in the sky, sometimes low to the ground, and often high, low, and everywhere in between.

They were glistening dark blue on the back, upper side of the wings and top of the head, when the sun shone on them, dark orange-red face and throat, orange breast and belly and forked tail with patches of white. They were barn swallows, of course, common summer birds over much of North America, recognized by everybody who knows a robin I think.

Four of them swooped in and out of the barn through a large open door, going to two nests inside, one on the side of a beam, the other on the side of a ceiling light. There may have been more than four flying in and out of the barn but how could I tell?

Barn swallows all looked alike. There were two nests with nestlings so I assumed there were four adults feeding them but fledglings from earlier broods sometimes help feed nestlings of subsequent broods. So I've read.

Occasionally I saw a different kind of swallow in the air behind a barn, a swallow that was dark on the top of the head, back, wings and tail, white underneath. When the sun shone on it the dark had a greenish sheen. These were tree swallows, common birds this time of year over and around the marsh adjacent to our pasture.

I see tree swallows flying when the weather is fair, perched on branches of trees around the marsh and on the power lines along the road by the marsh. They nest in hollows, deserted woodpecker holes in the trees around the marsh.

I like swallows. Everyone who goes outdoors on spring and summer days should like

swallows. Their food is flying insects. Each swallow scoops up and eliminates thousands of insects every hour of every day these birds are flying.

Another species of swallow is the cliff swallow. They build nests on the faces of cliffs, many nests close together, colonies. They also sometimes nest on the outside of a building. A pair of cliff swallows nested on the front of our barn one year. The next year and the next there were three nests, together, on the front of our barn. The next year, however, the nests were deserted. Now time and weather have erased all evidence of the cliff swallows that



Barn Swallows - Cornell Lab



Cliff swallows Alamy stock

nested on our barn.

There are two other species of swallow that nest in North America, bank and rough-winged. Both are brown on the top of the head, on the back, wings and tail. The rough-winged is also brown on the throat and upper breast though it's a lighter brown than on the back. The bank is white underneath, on the throat, breast and belly with a brown band across the upper breast below the throat.

Bank and rough-winged swallows both nest in gravel pits and other man-made diggings. They tunnel into the banks and lay their eggs, then raise their broods in the tunnels, often several feet from the entrance hole to one of the tunnels. Bank swallows also tunnel into dirt banks along rivers.

Since they are both brown and the only different in appearance between them is the color of the throat and the brown band across the upper breast of the bank swallow, and they often nest side by side it's a challenge to distinguish a bank from a rough-winged swallow. There's a gravel pit a few miles from my home and every summer I go to that pit and challenge my observational ability by trying to distinguish the rough-winged from the bank.



Rough winged swallows swartenztruber.com