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One of Our Most Useful Bird Families

by

William L. Finley and Ed F. Averill.

The stories of some birds are as old as the history of man. Long before the Bible was written, the swallow family was closely related to the human race. One can read in the Bible that the swallow observes the time of their coming, and she finds a nest for herself.

It's a world-wide family, and it is doubtful if there is a more useful family of birds in the world. In our country there are seven regular species. They are decidedly birds of the air, capturing insects and eating them while on the wing. Many migrating birds fly by night and feed by day, but the swallows, as far as known, travel only in the day-time. At night they stop at roosting places among the trees, often at the edge of lakes and marshes.

All through the northern part of this nation, when the flying insects begin to fill the air, the swallows leave the south on business. Combing the air from morning to night, they destroy such a great number of noxious flying things that no one can estimate. The swallows have short, triangular bills and large mouths, and their wings and bodies are so shaped that they have speed and agility to pick up house flies, mosquitoes, gnats and many other insects that are a pest to mankind.

If we have warm days in March, the swallows are lured north. Sometimes they run into cold rains or snowstorms

that may sweep the air clear of insect life. They pass with such ease and swiftness that they may swing south again for dinner. It was perhaps a change of this kind that gave rise to the well-known adage, "one swallow does not make a summer."

In the earlier days, before this country was settled, the swallows made their homes on cliffs, in the holes in sandy banks, and in the hollows of trees. Many still have their nests in such places from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Some have forsaken these primitive haunts and have selected nesting places about ponds, or have chosen the buildings in cities or rented many bird houses that have been put up.

Anyone interested in the study of birds around Portland or in the Willamette Valley can get acquainted with six different kinds of swallows. Five of these different species have a wide range through the Middle West and the East. The violet-green swallow is a western bird and is more common and perhaps the most attractive that is found about our homes here in Oregon. The male is easily identified by its green back, glossed with violet. While it formerly selected holes in trees, it is now more of a dooryard bird and prefers the bird houses in gardens and orchards. They like to line the bird houses with bits of straw, then hunt for feathers, especially around the chicken yard, to complete the nest. During the nesting time it is easy to make friends with these violet-greens. If you blow a few feathers in the air, every swallow takes part

in the game of diving to catch these and carry them to the nest.

The tree or white-bellied swallow has steel-blue upper parts. It is not like the violet-green, and it still prefers the deserted nests of woodpeckers or a cavity in a dead stump. They do not mass together in breeding colonies, and this is largely because the trees are not full enough of holes. Like the violet-green, the tree swallow seeks feathers for lining its nest. Anyone can make friends with these birds by tossing feathers in the air.

Two other swallows are somewhat alike because they both prefer to gather in colonies to nest in holes in sand banks. One is called the bank swallow, the other rough-winged swallow. These more dull colored birds are easily distinguished from other swallows, but they look very much alike. The dingy rough-wings are not as sociable as the bank swallows, as they are in smaller colonies during the nesting season. If, to distinguish these two birds, one can see a brown band across the breast, this is the bank swallow. The rough-winged swallow has a plain gray breast and no band on the throat.

The barn swallow is the most distinctly marked and is by far more musical. The dark steel-blue of the upper parts and the long forked tail differ it from the five other swallows found in the Willamette Valley, and especially along the coast-line. They do not nest in colonies like some of the other swallows, but they prefer a rafter in a barn or under a bridge.

The nest is made partly of mud and is cup-shaped. They are sometimes called bridge swallows.

The natural nesting places of cliff swallows are on a rocky wall not far from a good supply of water. It seems necessary for them to find a clay mud in order to render the nest strong enough to support eggs and nestlings. One may see them along the water's edge, holding their tails up, fluttering their wings like a swarm of gigantic bees. They make hundreds of bottle-shaped nests, pasted on the side of a cliff. One disadvantage of this is a rain storm that may wet the nests and cause them to fall. In later years, when more buildings arose in different parts of the State, the cliff swallows discovered that it was safer to build under the eaves of barns and other buildings, so they are now known as eave-swallows. Because they like a big barn, they are often called barn swallows. The nest is quite different from that of the real barn swallow, as it is a gourd-shaped structure of mud pellets with a round entrance hole. In some places, large colonies of these birds also nest under the highway bridges. Where these cliff swallows plaster their nests under the eaves of a barn, no farmer should drive them away, as they live on destructive insects.