



Audubon at Home in Northern Virginia

4022 Hummer Road, Annandale, VA 22003
Phone: (703) 256-6895 • Fax: (703) 256-2060
www.audubonva.org



Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

What would summer be without the dizzying acrobatics of swallows in hot pursuit of insects over fields, woods and waters? These birds winter from the southern U.S. to Central America, migrating north to breed when temperate conditions generate a ready supply of prey. The Tree Swallow is among the earliest to arrive, sometimes well before insects are abundant. This handsome species, whose iridescent green back and brilliant white underside set it off from the darker Barn Swallow and larger Purple Martin, prefers open areas, edges and wetlands where insects flourish. It can also be seen foraging on the ground. This species has declined with the loss of natural habitat and threats from pesticides and invasive exotic birds like House Sparrows and European Starlings.

What Tree Swallows Need

Food: Primarily insectivores, Tree Swallows take their prey, including countless mosquitoes, on the wing over meadows, woodlots, wetlands and open water. During fall migration they may eat small berries, such as bayberry.

Breeding: By late April in our area, pairs form and begin nesting. This continues for six weeks or more. They choose cavities like old woodpecker holes or bird boxes in open areas or edges, preferably near water. Broods of 5 eggs or so (more when food is abundant) are incubated for about 2 weeks. Both parents make scores of trips every day carrying multiple items to the young until they're able to feed themselves.

Shelter: Cavities and nest boxes double as shelter for this species.

Other: Tree Swallows will compete with bluebirds for nest boxes. Both species face heavy competition from the non-native starlings and house sparrows. Predators like raccoons and snakes are another major obstacle to breeding success.

Resources:

Plants—available from Hyla Brook Farm, DeBaggio Herbs, Merrifield Garden Center, Nature by Design, and other local nurseries

Nest boxes—available at local wild bird stores; the Virginia Bluebird Society provides information on proper installation of nest boxes www.virginiabluebirds.org

Model Tree Swallow Habitats:

Riverbend Park—www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/riverbend/

Huntley Meadows Park—www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley/

Bles Park—www.loudoun.gov/prcs/parks/other.htm

How You Can Help

- Support the protection of streams in your area.
- Install a small pond
- Create a meadow patch with a variety of native plants to provide an array of insect prey.
- Consider erecting nest boxes in pairs, ideally back-to-back. Bluebirds and Tree Swallows usually don't tolerate the same species nesting close by, but are often more amicable with one another.
- To encourage further nesting and safeguard the health of succeeding broods, clear out fouled nest materials after each brood has fledged and thoroughly clean the boxes.
- Leave dead trees standing and allow wildlife to build their own homes. If a dead tree is in reach of your or your neighbor's property, cut off the crown of the tree to remove the weight at the top. The more of the trunk you can leave in place the more habitat there will be available, but even a 12' snag provides habitat.
- Help to fend off the intrusions of sparrows and starlings by monitoring the nest boxes and discouraging these species until they are successfully claimed by Tree Swallows or Bluebirds.
- Add a baffle on the pole and a wire guard on the entrance hole to prevent access by predators.

Visit audubonva.org for more information and other fact sheets