

Barn Swallow

Hirundo rustica



Carolyn Cockram

Agriculture and Insect-Eating Birds on PEI

Agriculture began on PEI in the 1700s. The clearing of land and construction of barns and outbuildings allowed many farm and grassland birds to flourish on PEI, including the barn swallow.

Barn swallows became staples of rural life, and improved conditions by eating thousands of insects daily, helping to control pests. However, populations of barn swallows and other aerial insectivores have seen drastic declines over the last 50 years. Some swallow species, such as the cliff swallow, have gone locally extinct on PEI, while others, including the barn swallow, are declining rapidly.

Landowners and farmers can help insect-eating birds by reducing insecticide use, and ensuring that nesting habitat is available and undisturbed.

IDENTIFICATION

- **Male:** bright blue upperparts, dark chestnut-coloured forehead and throat, and light rufous underparts. Very long, forked tail
- **Female:** very similar to male, but with paler colouring and shorter tail streamers
- Juveniles are more brown, with paler underparts, and lack the long tail feathers of the adults
- An aerial insectivore – feeds on insects in flight, including: beetles, wasps, bees, ants, butterflies, moths and other flying insects



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HABITAT ON PEI

Barn Swallows are found across PEI, often on farms because they build their nests on ledges or under eaves in barns, sheds and other outbuildings. They may also be observed near bridges and lining telephone wires.

BREEDING BIOLOGY

Barn swallows start to arrive on PEI in late April. Both adults help to build the nest, a cup-shaped structure made of mud and grass rolled into pellets, and lined with feathers and bits of grass. Nests can be re-used from year to year.

Eggs are laid as early as mid May but more commonly in early-mid June. The female lays 4-7 eggs which are incubated by both parents for 13-17 days. After 18-23 days the chicks leave the nest. Parents continue to feed their young for about a week after they leave the nest. Some pairs produce more than one brood in a single breeding season.

Barn swallows breed across most of North America, except the extreme northern regions. They migrate south, wintering in Mexico and southward throughout the lowlands of Central and South America .



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CONSERVING OUR FARMLAND BIRDS

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Contact Us

If you would like to report a barn swallow sighting, please contact Island Nature Trust.

Phone: (902)892-7513

Email: landbirds@islandnaturetrust.ca

“Endangered species are sensitive indicators of how we are treating the planet, and we should be listening carefully to their message”

Donald Falk
restoration ecologist

THREATS

Barn swallows and other aerial insectivores are declining. No single reason for their decline has been identified, but there are many known threats. The barn swallow’s biggest threat on PEI is loss and lack of access to nesting habitat. Older barns are increasingly being destroyed and replaced with modern buildings that exclude barn swallows. Predation by cats is another concern.



Traditional wooden barns being replaced with modern buildings

Barn swallows and all aerial insectivores may also be facing a changing food supply. Abundance and timing of insect populations fluctuate locally for many reasons; however extensive pesticide use, climate change and environmental contaminants can intensify these fluctuations. Sufficient food is critical to long-distance migrants. If adequate energy reserves are not reached on breeding grounds, barn swallows may die before reaching their wintering grounds.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Report barn swallow sightings to a local group such as Island Nature Trust. Citizen scientists and the data they collect are crucial in our understanding of local bird species.
- Open doors or windows of suitable buildings to allow barn swallows access to nesting ledges from May to August. Even modern farm buildings can be used by barn swallows if access is provided and ledges are available.
- Install ledges where there are none. A simple 2” x 4” is enough, but more elaborate ledges can be constructed. Ledges should ideally be placed within 12” of horizontal “cover” such as the ceiling, and out of reach of cats.
- Do not remove swallow nests after breeding season is over. They often re-use nests from the previous year.
- Avoid the use of insecticides whenever possible.

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