

Barn Swallow Beneficial Practice Guide for Ontario Rural Residents



Barn Swallow in flight – note forked tail and dark-coloured head



Barn Swallow at nest – note half-cup mud nest

Timing of migration and breeding activities in southern Ontario:	
Spring arrival	Early to mid April – late April in cold spring
Fall departure	Early August to September
Nesting dates	One to two weeks after arrival (early to mid May), second brood early July to early August
Nest cycle (average number of days):	
Nest building	7-14 days
Incubation	14 days
Fledging (when young leave nest)	20 days after hatching
Parental care – post-fledging	about 7 days
Post-breeding roosts	August
Migration to wintering grounds	Arrive in South America: late August - September

Why help Barn Swallows:

Barn Swallows are small, acrobatic birds frequently seen flying low above fields and barnyards in pursuit of flying insects. Though still relatively common, Barn Swallow populations have declined steeply across Canada, possibly due to reductions in available insect prey and loss of habitat. Barn Swallows play an important role in pest management – they eat hundreds of insects each day.

Habitat Requirements:

Nesting: Barn Swallows typically nest on human-made structures, including **barns, sheds, culverts, house eaves, and bridges**. Barn Swallows require a nearby source of mud to build their nests. Both parents collect mud pellets and grass stems, and attach them to a vertical surface, such as a ledge or beam. Once the mud shell is constructed, they line it with grasses and feathers. Barn Swallows often reuse old nests by adding fresh mud and grasses.



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Feeding: Barn Swallows eat only flying insects, and rely on healthy insect populations to raise their families. They rarely travel beyond 500 metres from their nest sites to collect food. Ponds, streams, hedgerows, hay fields, and pasture with grazing animals provide a great source of insect prey for swallow.

BENEFICIAL PRACTICES: How to make your property a better place for the Barn Swallow

- **Provide access between nests and outdoors:** Access between the nest and the foraging area outside is essential at all times. Leave windows or doors open during the breeding season. If the doors must be closed for livestock, ensure that some windows remain open.
- **Provide nesting platforms:** Ledges can encourage nesting in suitable locations such as among barn beams. Ledges should be at least 8-10 cm wide and placed at least 15 cm below the ceiling and 3 m above the ground. Placing platforms on ledges and under eaves can also provide nesting areas for Barn Swallows. [Click here](#) to see an easy-to-build nesting platform.
- **Avoid heat build-up:** Heat in the top of a barn can cause dehydration, premature fledging, or even death of young. If this is a problem in your barn, here are two solutions: If possible, paint the roof of your barn white or a light colour to reflect heat and lower the temperature. Ensure good ventilation in the area where the swallows are nesting; or, if this is not possible, [discourage swallows from nesting](#) (Damage Prevention and Control Methods) in the areas that trap heat.
- **Minimize disturbance at the colony:** Discourage cats from approaching Barn Swallow nests and mud collection areas during the breeding season. Make sure barn cats are spayed and/or neutered so they that do not contribute to the overpopulation of outdoor cats. See www.catsandbirds.ca for tips and ideas for your cats.
- **Maintain food source:** Maintain pastures, hay crop, and riparian habitat (buffered stream, pond, or swamps) within a few hundred metres of the colony to provide Barn Swallows with food.
- **Protect watercourses and wetlands:** If you use pesticides, consider reducing pesticide use in proximity to water, including phasing out use of neonicotinoids anywhere near water courses, and create wide natural buffers around ponds, streams, and along drainage ditches.
- **Create alternative structures for nesting:** In the absence of Barn Swallows' favorite nesting structures (barns), an alternate structure can be erected to provide substitute habitat. For alternate design plans, click [here](#) and [here](#).

More Information:

- Visit www.naturecanada.ca or Contact info@naturecanada.ca or call 1 613 562 3447
- Visit <https://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/ai/BARS/> or Contact lpurves@birdscanada.org or call 1 888-448-2473
- <http://www.hww.ca/en/wildlife/birds/barn-swallow.html> (Hinterland Who's Who)
- <https://bcswallowconservationproject.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/beneficialmanagementpracticesforbarnswallowhirundorustica.pdf> (prepared for BC, but applicable elsewhere).



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