

The Tree Swallows of Nahanton Park

If you enter Nahanton Park from the Winchester Street entrance on any day from the spring through the summer, they will be there. “They” are the quietly present Tree Swallows. Their graceful flight and iridescent blue-green plumage may be the first impression they make on you. The plumage of all adults is the same striking white and blue.

They use the nesting boxes that are scattered around the areas behind the lower gardens and between the upper and lower gardens. Before we began putting up nest boxes, Tree Swallows used old Black-capped Chickadee and Downy Woodpecker holes in trees. I have found Tree Swallows in a Downy’s hole in Cutler Park, across the Charles River from Nahanton Park.

If you wander more closely to their boxes, without overtly predatory behavior, you will hear their quiet, liquid warblings. I find the sounds of Tree Swallows to be among the most peaceful and calming of the noises that nature brings to us.

This year, they arrived back north in Newton by April 3rd. The males may pre-date the females by a few days but not by many days. They become owners of particular nest boxes in short order.

Once they have paired up, they work at constructing nests that consist mostly of grasses in the boxes. Later, they add feathers to the lining of the nest, with the sharp quill end buried in the grasses. Usually the female does the yeoman’s work in nest-building. Males then help by bringing the feathers as egg-laying proceeds. The added feathers seem to help keep the eggs and early nestlings warm.

This process of pairing up and nest building takes them into May before eggs are laid. We have all experienced raw, cold weather in May in Massachusetts. This determines the timing of their egg-laying. They may delay if it is too cold. Two years ago, it was cold and rainy in May and into June. I found a nest of Tree Swallows with young who did not make it.

The incubation period for Tree Swallow eggs is around two weeks. The female does most of this, with the male hanging out close to the nest site whenever the female goes to feed and drink.



ALL PHOTOS THIS SPREAD: PETE GILMORE

Tree Swallow

Both parents are active and obsessive feeders of the young, once they hatch. This takes about three weeks of constant work and must involve less food for the parents themselves. Though the parents can eat berries, the young depend on a steady supply of insects, caught on the wing. Cold and rain keep the bugs down.

When the young first fly out of the nest box, they are quickly very good at flight. The parents may help feed them for a few days, as catching insects on the wing has to be an acquired skill, harder than riding a bicycle is for humans. There is one report of a youngster disappearing over the horizon on its fledgling flight!



Pairing Up and Nest Building

The adolescent birds are colored brown above and white below, and some have a dull brown ring across their breast. This distinguishes them from their parents and also can make it difficult for humans to tell them apart from the brown Bank Swallows.

The adolescent birds usually stay with their parents and other Tree Swallows during the rest of the summer, honing their feeding and flying skills. As August approaches they all begin to form larger and larger flocks, in preparation for the big migration south. At this time, in the late summer and early fall, one can see huge flocks of Tree Swallows swirling around, usually near large marshes and water. There are spectacular sights to be seen at dusk, when a huge vortex of tree Swallows prepares to descend into a roosting place.

They often feed on bayberry berries at this time of year. Their ability to eat vegetative berries stands them in good stead when they arrive in early April during a cold snap with no insects. Other swallow species usually arrive later than the hardy Tree Swallows in the spring



Young, Brown Tree Swallow in Box

In the fall, you can notice that these birds are becoming ever more restless as the urge to migrate rises in them. The Germans have coined a word for this migratory restlessness, *zugunruhe*, “Zug” means journey and “unruhe” is restlessness, from “ruh”, peace or rest.

By September, they have left

us for points south. They travel in large flocks along the Atlantic Coast. Our Tree Swallows spend the winter in the Gulf Coast states, Cuba or Central America.

When they are in the air migrating, they are vulnerable to predation by small hawks and falcons that follow the migration routes of these smaller birds. There is safety in numbers since many alert eyes can make it difficult for the



Feeding Hungry Young

predators to get close. More birds and more eyes also help in finding food sources.

They take several

weeks to migrate south. The older birds know where the large marshes are on their way south. Thus, there are usually adult birds in a migrating flock of Tree Swallows. The big marshy areas have more insects and bayberries around them, and it is crucial for a flock of tens of thousands of birds to know and find these places. The long journey south involves stopovers for rest and fattening up before the next long-distance flight.

So give yourself a relaxing treat, and get out with the swallows this summer. You can enjoy their seemingly effortless and graceful flight, warbles and colors while you also sample the many other sights, sounds and smells of our open spaces in Newton. ■

🌿 Pete Gilmore

MISSION Newton Conservators, Inc.

The Newton Conservators promotes the protection and preservation of natural areas, including parks, playgrounds, forests and streams, which are open or may be converted to open space for the enjoyment and benefit of the people of Newton. It further aims to disseminate information about these and other environmental matters.

A primary goal is to foster the acquisition of land, buildings and other facilities to be used for the encouragement of scientific, educational, recreational, literary and other public pursuits that will promote good citizenship and the general welfare of the people of our community.

The Newton Conservators was formed as a not-for-profit organization 54 years ago in June 1961.

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We welcome material related to our mission from any source. Send proposed articles or letters by email in MS Word or rich text format to bethwilkinson@mac.com. Digitized photographs, maps and diagrams are also welcome.

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