

# 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 steeping 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](http://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), you can erect an alternate structure to provide substitute habitat. For Nature Canada's experimental design plans, click [here](#) for the material list and disclaimer. For the design layout, click for [front view](#), [top view](#) & [side view](#).

## **More Information:**

- Visit [www.naturecanada.ca](http://www.naturecanada.ca) or Contact [info@naturecanada.ca](mailto:info@naturecanada.ca) or call 1 613 562 3447
- Visit <https://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/ai/BARS/> or Contact [lpurves@birdscanada.org](mailto: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/beneficialmanagementpracticesforbarnswallowwhirundorustica.pdf> (prepared for BC, but applicable elsewhere).



BIRD STUDIES  
ÉTUDES D'OISEAUX CANADA

## Barn Swallows, The Shelf That Works

I have been observing birds for many years. I developed a deeper interest in them when we went on a horseback holiday between Port Rowan and Simcoe in 2016. Besides horse riding in the forests there, My husband John and I visited the headquarters of Birds Canada, where we learned that all six species of Ontario Swallows are in decline by 80% or more. They are the Cliff, Tree, Rough Winged, Bank, Barn Swallows, and the Purple Martin.

Although I have loved Barn Swallows for many years it was not until 2016 that I made a concentrated effort to attract them to our riding arena and other buildings. Upon reading that birds do not reuse their nests I mistakenly took down the few old barn swallow nests when the Swallows finished nesting that fall.

Later, I read that Barn and Cliff Swallows **do reuse** old nests, but 2017 was a boon year here (3 pairs in our Bottom Barn) because one aggressive male who chased away all other Swallows had to build a new nest and lost his advantage.

After several failed designs, in 2020 I made some very small shelves, 4x4 inches square. I visited a friend and put some of them in her horse shelter. A few farms down from there, I gave another family some shelves, which they promptly installed in their horse shelter. Success, the birds used them!

That May, I put some in our neighbours' barn which has been vacant for at least a decade. There, Barn Swallows discovered them and used them right away. More success, I found a shelf that works! John and I installed over 100 in our riding arena.

Barn Swallows often make use of an electrical wire attached along an entire joist. They fastened their nest to a wire in my barn.

After 7 years of study, I concluded the shelves must be 10 cm (4") square or smaller, and must be tucked up under a ceiling, porch roof, or eaves, 14 cm (5 1/2") down. They should be four feet apart with a floor joist or rafter as a physical barrier between them. If the structure has a strapped metal roof, placement should be directly under the strap to insulate the nest from the summer heat.

Barn Swallows are losing habitat as old barns are torn down. Ideal alternate structures are open livestock shelters. They will also nest in picnic pavilions, garden sheds and under eaves and veranda roofs, even under deck floors. How can you help increase Swallow populations?

See Facebook; Linda Marie Glass Ward, or telephone the LANDLINE 519 327-4541. **Barn Swallow Carpenter**

Please see my Barn Swallow articles, on line in **The Rider** Ancaster, Ontario

2019 November, How to be a Good Barn Swallow Host

2020 May, My Barn Swallows of 2017

2021 April, Barn and Cliff Swallows

2021 May, Barn Swallows, The Shelf That Works

2021 June, Barn Swallows In a Neighbour's Barn Part 1

2021 July, Barn Swallows In a Neighbour's Barn Part 2

2021 August, Tree Swallows and Other Swallows

2021 September-October, Barn Swallows Where Did They Nest Before There Were Barns

2021 November, What Jack Miner Wrote About Barn Swallows

2021 December, Barn Swallows Interesting Folks

2022 January, Barn Swallow and Other Bird Habitat Loss

2022 May, Oh Happy Day, page 39.

2022 June, Internet Barn Swallow Sources (and other birds and Swallows)

2022 July, Barn Swallow Nest at Katja's Place

2022 October, Barn Swallow Shelves, Cups and Boxes

2022 December, Barn Swallow Cave Turned Phoebe Cave, Part 1

2023 February, Barn Swallow Cave Turned Phoebe Cave, Part 2

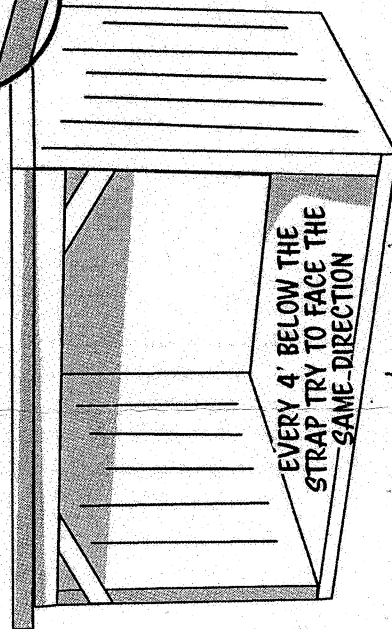
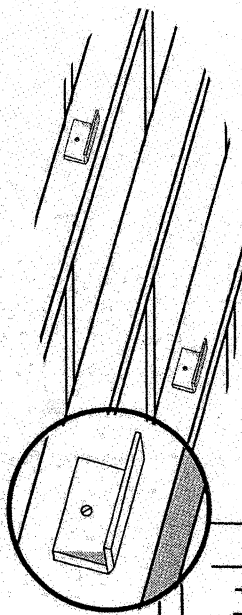
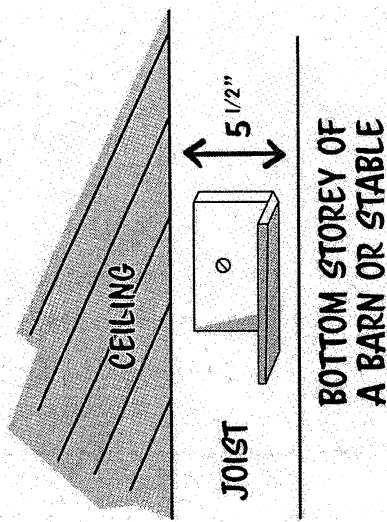
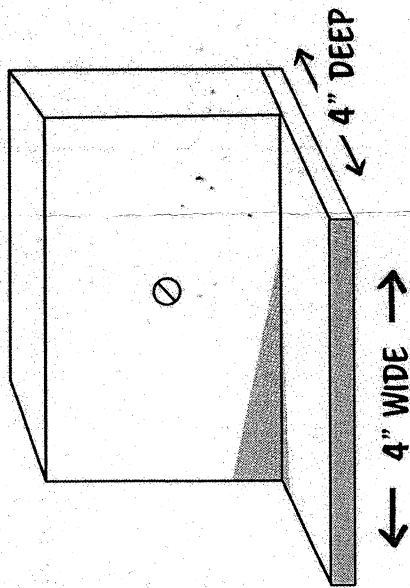
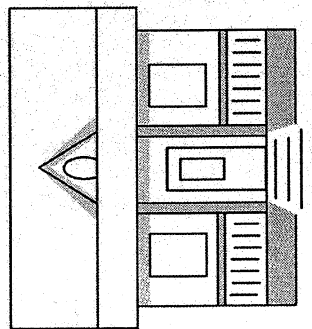
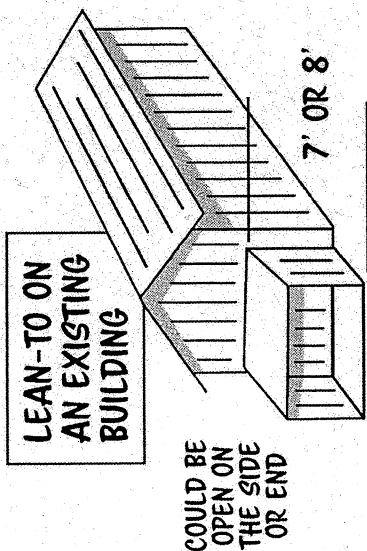
2023 June, Migratory Bird Act, Part 1

2023 July, Migratory Bird Act, Part 2

2023 August, Cliff Swallow Experiment 2023

All these articles are in Section 2 on pages 36-44 at the back of The Rider.

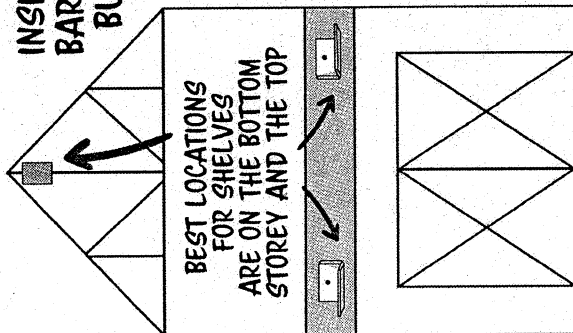
# BARN SWALLOW HOUSING



PLACE EVERY 4' BELOW THE STRAP

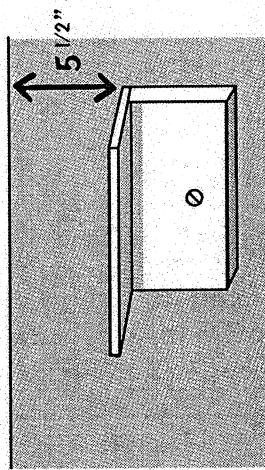
TRY TO FACE THE SAME DIRECTION INSIDE THE HORSE SHELTER

INSIDE A TRUSS STRUCTURE BARN SWALLOWS SOMETIMES BUILD ON THE METAL CLAMPS OR MENDING PLATES THAT HOLD THE TRUSSES TOGETHER. THEY PREFER THE HIGHEST POINT.



ANOTHER GOOD PLACE FOR BARN SWALLOWS!

PUT THE SHELVES UNDER THE STRAPS NOT THE HOT METAL ROOF.



IF YOUR TOOLS DON'T FIT BETWEEN THE JOISTS, TURN THE SHELF OVER

DOORS OPEN FROM MID-APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 7

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