

Tree Swallow Beneficial Practice Guide for Ontario Rural Residents



Tree Swallow landing – note iridescent blue colouring of male



Tree Swallow emerging from a nest box

Timing of migration and breeding activities in southern Ontario:	
Spring arrival	Mid-March to mid-April
Fall departure	Early to mid-August
Nesting	Late April to mid-August
Nest cycle (average number of days):	
Nest building	14 days
Incubation	14 days
Fledging	21 days
Post-fledging parental care	3-5 days
Post breeding roosts	August
Migration to wintering grounds (southern US, Mexico, Central America and Caribbean.	September

Why help Tree Swallows:

Tree Swallows are small birds frequently seen flying high above fields and marshes in pursuit of flying insects. Though still relatively common, Tree Swallow populations have experienced gradual population declines across Canada, possibly due to reductions in available insect prey and loss of habitat. Tree Swallows play an important role in pest management - they eat hundreds of insects each day.

Habitat requirements:

- **Nesting:** The Tree Swallow nests in semi-forested areas, forest edges, and swamps, in tree cavities such as those excavated by woodpeckers. The Tree Swallow will also readily occupy bird-nesting boxes in open, grassy areas such as hay fields, pastures, and orchards.
- **Feeding:** Tree Swallows feed exclusively on insects captured in flight, and need open foraging areas such as fields, pastures, and marshes.

Threats:

Predators: Cats, raccoons, snakes, and foxes prey on Tree Swallows, especially at the nest site.

Nest competition: The House Sparrow and European Starling, two non-native species, will occupy Tree Swallow nest cavities before the swallows return in the spring, preventing them from nesting.



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Pesticides: Neonicotinoid pesticides may reduce the amount of food available to Tree Swallows as residues can persist in some aquatic ecosystems and reduce the number of aquatic invertebrates.

BENEFICIAL PRACTICES:

- **Install nest boxes:** Provide nest boxes for Tree Swallows in open, grassy areas, ideally near a water source (e.g., pond, marsh). Nest boxes should be at least 2-3 m off the ground and include predator guards (e.g., a baffle on the support pole to block access by animals such as raccoons, cats, or snakes). Tree Swallows prefer nest boxes that are south facing. Place nest boxes at least 10-20 m from neighbouring boxes and away from buildings such as houses and barns. Nest boxes for Tree Swallows have the same dimensions as those for Eastern Bluebird.
- **Reduce nest competition:** Install European Starling-resistant entrance holes on Tree Swallow nest boxes. Keeping nest box entries blocked until the arrival of Tree Swallows reduces the risk of nest takeover by House Sparrows. Removal of House Sparrow or Starling nest materials, and discouraging their occupation of nest boxes is recommended.
- **Maintain a food source:** Try to avoid using pesticides adjacent to watercourses and wetlands to help ensure healthy insect populations for Tree Swallows to feed their young.

For more information on Tree Swallows, visit:

1. Visit www.naturecanada.ca or Contact info@naturecanada.ca or call 1 613 562 3447
2. <https://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/ai/tres/> or Contact projectnestwatch@birdscanada.org or call 1 888-448-2473
3. <http://catsandbirds.ca/#sthash.6KyUAi8k.Pq8jWV8B.dpbs>
4. <https://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/OpenNonWebContent.aspx?content=18525.wba>
5. <https://nestwatch.org/learn/focal-species/tree-swallow/>
6. <http://www.sialis.org/tres.htm>

To build your own Tree Swallow nest boxes, click the following links to get detailed construction plans:

- [Golondrinas Tree Swallow Nest Box](#)
- [Maryland Cooperative Extension Tree Swallow Nest Box](#)



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Tree Swallow Box, also houses Blue Birds, Chickadees and House Wrens

Cut the interior floor size 5 1/2 inches by 6 inches by 3/4 inch thick. Notch off the corners or drill some holes in the bottom for drainage, in case rainwater gets inside.

Cut and attach the back, 6 inches wide by 9 3/4 inches high. By using 3/4 inch material you will have no trouble screwing it together. Use screws instead of nails.

Cut the sides to the width of the box. They need to slant on the top. A 1/2 inch difference is sufficient so, 9 3/4 inches at the back and 10 1/4 inches at the front. In northern Ontario the birds are more susceptible to cold than heat. If necessary a row of vent holes may be drilled at this time. Screw the sides to the bottom and back.

The top can be made at this time. Thicker is better for insulation purposes. A nice overhang is good to keep the rain out. Make the back flush or you will not be able to install it on a building, tree, or pole. I recommend a piece of roofing steel on the top, to make it last longer. Cut the wooden top 8 inches by 10 inches. Follow the diagram to install a cleat holding the front on. Do this after the box is assembled and before the roofing steel is installed.

A removable front is necessary, with an oblong horizontal hole, 1 1/8 inches high by 2 inches wide. If you have the means to protect the edges of the hole with metal, do so to prevent the English House Sparrow from pecking it larger. The centre of the hole needs to be 6 inches from the floor. The inside of the front panel needs some kerf cuts below the hole inside, or it should be made from rough lumber, so that the chicks can climb out of the hole. **These specs are very important.**

Screw little cleats on the inside to prevent the front panel from sliding side to side. Screw a 1 by 2 on the bottom of the box, to hold up the front panel, and to hold a little mending plate (plumbing strap).

Measure and cut each piece and install each piece so you can measure them individually except the two sides which are the same. Don't forget the kerf cuts and vent holes and cuts. They are much easier to do before assembly than after, although it is possible to correct without taking them apart. **Screw** the entire box together.

Refer to the drawing for the door requirements. To put the door on and off, just back the screw off of the plumbing strap and turn it. Do this with a hand screwdriver. Wiggle the door off.

Do not be tempted to add perches, platforms etc. Native birds do not need them and English House Sparrows and European Starlings love them!

English House Sparrows, an introduced species, will take over birdhouses. They will peck eggs, and kill the young or even the parents of Bluebirds and Tree Swallows. The oblong hole deters them somewhat but does not prevent them from entering. For best results, if you have enough land, place these boxes 300 feet from buildings and bridges. English House Sparrows, which are actually a finch with a powerful beak, choose sites near on or in man made structures. Hence the name, House Sparrow.

Bluebird usually prefer boxes about 5 feet high, but will accept one higher. Both Bluebirds and Tree Swallows need the box on a post in the open, although we had Bluebirds in a box on the north end of our wood shed. Tree Swallows usually nest in a box 12 or more feet high, but will nest lower. Chickadees and House Wrens are not so picky, often nesting in a box on a building or possibly a tree trunk or a post in a treed area. House Wrens will beat up intruders. Bluebirds and Tree Swallows will not fly through tree branches to get to their nest boxes. If possible the opening should face away from prevailing winds.

According to other experts, Bluebirds will not nest within 100 feet of other Bluebirds and for Tree Swallows the distance is 60 feet, so for best results, "Put two boxes 15 feet apart and space another pair 100 feet away." In 2022 I found this to be untrue. This spring Tree Swallows fought off Bluebirds when the boxes were 15 feet apart. If you have enough land, **one** box every 100 feet is probably better.

Clean out the boxes in the fall and spring.

Linda Marie Glass Ward
April 15
2021

Hole 6" ø
From Floor
1 1/8" High x
2" wide

The Steel Roof is Flush at the Back
Larger Than the Wood Roof Roofing
Cleat Holds the Door on

8" x 10 1/4"

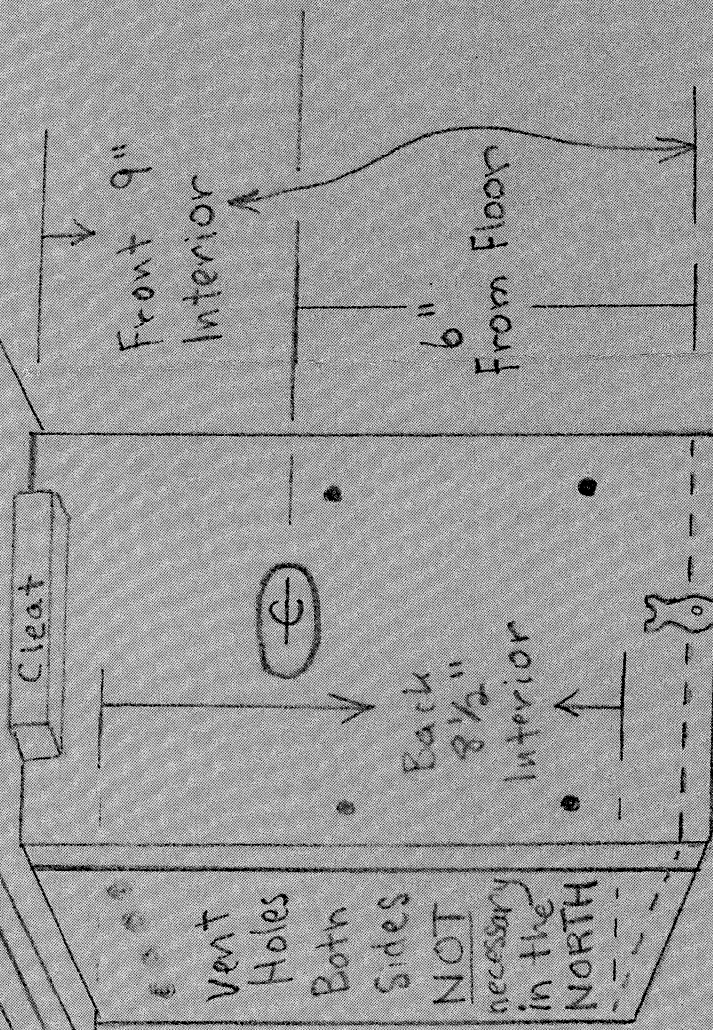
Wood Roof

Insulates Solid Back

Vent Holes Both Sides

NOT necessary in the NORTH

Screw to a Post Through the Back



Front 9" Interior

6" From Floor

Back 8 1/2" Interior

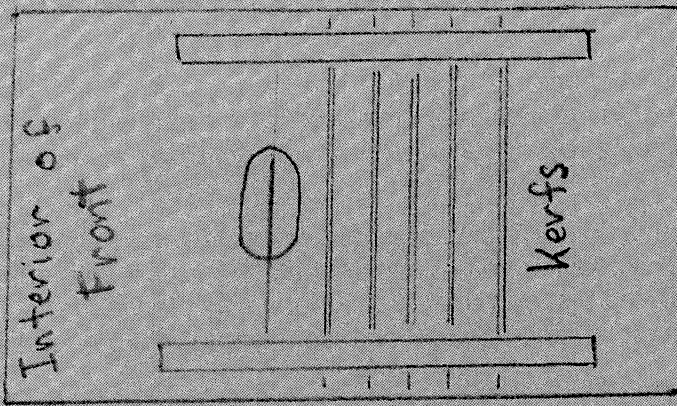
Plumbing Strap Holds Door

Cleft

Drains →

VENT HOLES MAY NOT BE NECESSARY

Floor 5 1/2" x 6" Interior measurement



Interior of Front

Kerfs

Leave Space for

Cleats Stop Door Drains From Tipping

No Perches!
No platforms!