

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*



Folk Name: Bad-weather Bird, Gust Bird

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Open water, fields

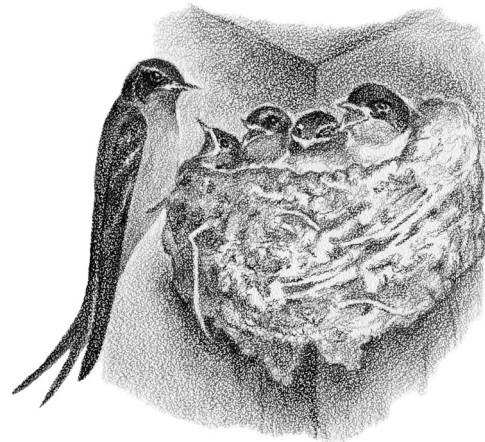
“A barn swallow, lone but busy, blue backed, red-breasted, fork-tailed, darting here and there, now down close to the green clover, now up into the blue sky, stopping a bit to rest on a phone wire.”

—William McIlwaine Charlotte April 24, 1929

The Barn Swallow is one of the best known and most common birds in our open country habitats. It averages 6 ¾ inches in length, which is over an inch larger than the somewhat similarly colored Cliff Swallow. The adult Barn Swallow has steel-blue upper parts, a bright chestnut “visor” on its forehead, a rich chestnut throat, pale cinnamon underparts, and a long, deeply forked “swallow” tail. It is often seen in large numbers (>50) during spring and fall migration, when it readily flocks with other species of swallows. Ninety-nine percent of a Barn Swallow’s diet is flying insects.

Historically, Barn Swallows migrated through the Carolinas to breeding sites in the North. There were about a dozen published reports of nesting in North Carolina, prior to the 1950s, and only two confirmed in South Carolina by 1950. In 1879, Leverett Loomis reported the Barn Swallow was “said to breed, but not commonly” in Chester County, but he never confirmed nesting there. During the 1950s, Barn Swallows began to extend their breeding range in both Carolinas.

Charlotte’s Rhett Chamberlain summarized this change in *The Chat* in March 1958:



J F M A M J J A S O N D

For a number of years now, Barn Swallows have been reported breeding regularly in small groups in northwestern N.C. (Allegheny and Watauga Counties) and on the coast as far south as McClellanville, S.C. There were no known nesting sites in the coastal and Piedmont areas between these points. It remained for John Trott to bring to light last summer the location of a breeding colony of Barn Swallows in Stanly County, about 1 mile SW of Albemarle. On April 19, 1957 he identified an old nest taken from the Palmer barn on that day and on July 15 he went to the barn and found 3 active nests; one with three eggs and two with young. The initial report of the presence of the swallows at this barn came from Mrs. J.U. Whitlock. Continued search for the presence of Barn Swallow nesting sites in North and South Carolina should be fruitful.



Barn Swallow. (Jeff Lemons)



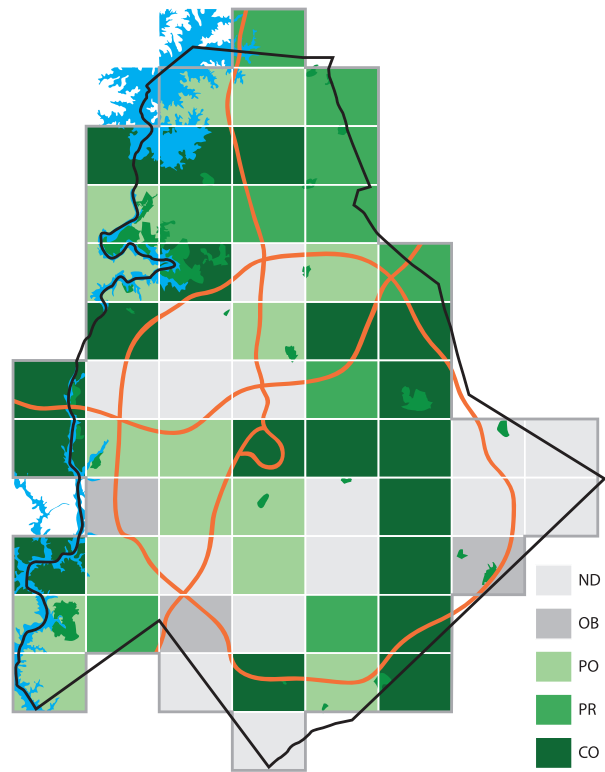
Nestlings begging for food. (Phil Fowler)

And fruitful it was...for today, this species commonly nests throughout both Carolinas. Barn Swallows build their open cup, mud and straw nests under bridges and overpasses along roads, railways, and local greenway trails. They also nest in close proximity to people at homes and on outbuildings. On May 17, 2012, in Union County, NC, Kaarin Leach reported:

I've had barn swallows build a nest and raise a brood three feet from my front door every year for the past four years. I have piano students coming in and out the front door all day five days a week and the birds don't seem to exhibit concern as long as we don't linger. My students thoroughly enjoy seeing the young hang their little faces over the edge of the nest. ...In order to make sure that all is going well with the nest, I've attached a mirror from my old makeup compact to the head of one of my husband's golf clubs...I'm able to occasionally take a peek at the eggs and the babies (to make sure none of them have died). There are five young in there right now. ...The birds are quite lovely. And the juveniles will continue to roost in the nest at night after they're able to fly.

Barn Swallows generally arrive in this region by mid- to late March. Our earliest spring date on file is a bird sighted at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County on March 8, 2012. Our highest one-day count is of 140 birds tallied on an Iredell Spring Bird Count in 1967. Barn Swallows have usually departed the region by the end of September; however, we have a handful of reports of birds sighted during the first two weeks of October. We have

no acceptable reports from November through February. This bird spends its winters primarily in Central and South America.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Fairly Widespread (PR/10, CO/19)