

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*



Folk Name: White-bellied Swallow

Status: Migrant, local Breeder, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Open water, fields

Tree Swallows are medium-sized swallows averaging just under 6 inches in length. They are greenish blue above and white below, and adults have notched tails. Tree Swallows are known for migrating in flocks which, in the fall, can be especially large along the coast of the Carolinas. Flocks estimated at 250,000 birds have been reported. During the breeding season, pairs nest individually—not in colonies.

We have reports of Tree Swallows present in the Carolina Piedmont during every month of the year. Still, this species is a very rare find in this region from November through February. It has been tallied on at least one local Christmas Bird Count. It is considered a hardy bird and it is the only one of our swallows that can survive here during periods of cold weather. At these times, it is able to supplement its normal insect diet by eating winter berries. Spring migrants are usually present in numbers from March through May and fall migrants move through from late July through October.

Our peak spring count is an estimated 300 birds reported at Riverbend Park on March 25, 2013. Lori Owenby reported there were “probably more—flying against the wind over the Catawba River and sitting on large grid power lines that cross the water—very close views of some of them!” Our highest fall count is an estimated 150 birds seen at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County on October 24, 2013.

The Tree Swallow has been documented as a migrant in the Carolina Piedmont since the early 1800s. Leverett Loomis recorded them as “common” during migration in Chester County in the late 1870s, and noted he found



them most often in the “vicinity of mill-ponds and other extended bodies of water.”

In the early twentieth century, the Tree Swallow was still known only as a transient and winter visitor in the Carolinas. The southeastern limit of its breeding range extended down into Virginia. Prior to 1950, it was confirmed nesting in Virginia’s tidewater region, and an expansion of the breeding population along the coast into North Carolina was considered almost inevitable.

Surprisingly, the first documented nesting of the Tree Swallow in North Carolina wasn’t recorded until 1979, and even more surprising to many, was that the nest wasn’t found at the coast, but far away in the mountains in Ashe County. Several nesting records from other mountain counties soon followed. These swallows were found utilizing both natural tree cavities and artificial nest boxes.

In the late 1980s, a few Tree Swallows were confirmed nesting at two North Carolina locations in the Piedmont and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they finally were documented at several sites along the northeastern coast. Nesting in South Carolina was suspected in the late



Tree Swallow in Davidson. (Jeff Maw)



Nestbox pair on the Mecklenburg-Gaston county line. (Lee Weber)

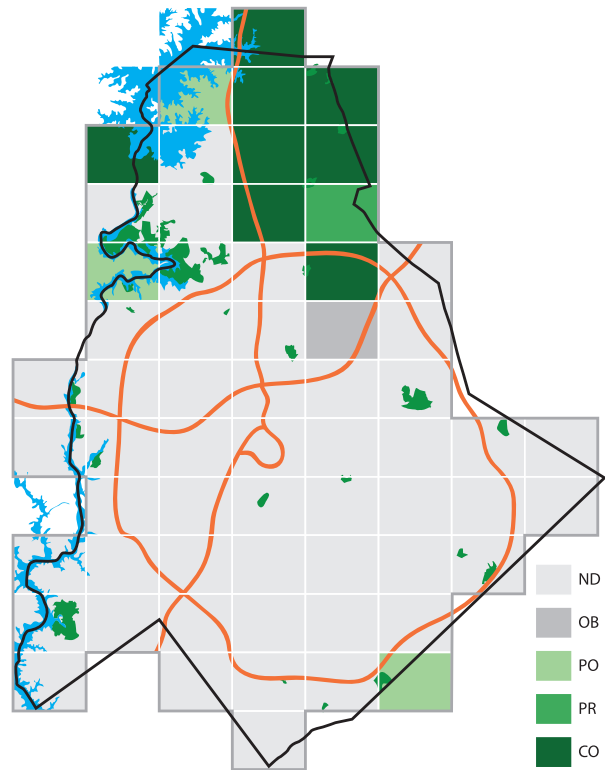
1990s, but wasn't fully confirmed there until 2001, when a successful pair was found in Pickens County at Table Rock State Park.

The Tree Swallow now breeds sporadically in parts of the Central Carolinas. It appears the first documented nesting record in the region is a nest Dr. Mark Stanback found in 1999 in Iredell County at Davidson College's Lake Campus. The first one found in Mecklenburg County was a nest in a bluebird box, discovered by Mary McDaniel, along the edge of the Catawba River on June 16, 2003. This pair fledged four young on 1 July.

Dwayne Martin confirmed nesting at Riverbend Park in Catawba County around 2007. The birds nested there for at least three years. Martin banded some of the nestlings. In 2012, Martin found Tree Swallows nesting at St. Stephens Park in Catawba County. In 2014, he noted one pair building a second nest about 1 ½ weeks after successfully fledging young. Second broods for this species are more common at the southern edge of its range.

Dr. Mark Stanback at Davidson College has been studying the Tree Swallow in the region since 1999. He documented its expansion from one nest in Iredell County to more than 50 in Iredell and Mecklenburg counties over about a decade. Stanback and his students have amassed a large data set on the nesting phenology of this swallow in the Central Carolinas.

A note of thanks to Dr. Stanback for sharing his nest location data with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas. One volunteer, Rob Gilson, observed a pair of adults feeding young at the West Branch Nature Preserve on the early date of March 26, 2015.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/1, CO/8)