

Profile

Tree Swallow

Tachycineta bicolor

Tree swallows are small birds (5-1/2 inches total length) with long wings and small legs and feet. Adults are iridescent greenish-blue above and white below on the chin, breast and belly, and have short black beaks and dark reddish-brown or brownish-gray feet.

Juvenile tree swallows are similar in appearance to adults, but are brownish rather than greenish blue. They also have a dusky wash across their white chests. One-year-old females look very similar to adults, but have a mixture of brown and greenish-blue iridescence above.

They spend much of their time in flight and tend to glide more than any other species of swallow. In flight, they have been clocked up to 19 mph.

As their name suggests, tree swallows spend very little time on the ground, preferring instead to perch. They rarely walk and are not good at it. Occasionally they will sidestep along a perch for short distances, but otherwise, they fly from perch to perch.

To bathe, swallows swoop down over water. They lightly brush the water and then begin to fly upwards, shaking the water off. They don't swim but occasionally tumble into water while grappling in aerial combat or fighting over nesting cavities.

One female, too wet and too exhausted to fly, "swam" using a butterfly-type stroke with her wings for over 50m to where she could climb out on emerging vegetation.



They also bathe by preening extensively during rainfall, using the rain as a shower.

Tree Swallows breed throughout central and northern North America. The northernmost limit of the Tree Swallow breeding range coincides approximately with the tree line.

Tree Swallows are fully migratory and migrate during the day, often in loose flocks, and roost together in large groups at night. They winter in southern North America, primarily in Florida, and along the Caribbean coast of Central America where they prefer open areas near water and fields, especially wooded swamps and shorelines.

Outside of the breeding season, Tree Swallows congregate into enormous flocks and night roosts, sometimes numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

They start gathering about an hour before sunset at a roost site, slowly forming a dense cloud. They swirl around in a huge vortex, wheeling low over the cattails or small trees. With each pass, large numbers drop down into the roost until the whole flock has landed. Below, a flock settles on shrubs in Panther Island during the 2010 CBC.

During cold spells in winter and early spring, Tree Swallows may form tight roosting clusters, often in sheltered, sunny areas.

Tree Swallows are relatively silent in social flocks outside of the breeding season. Winter flocks can give constant loud buzzy notes while feeding on Wax Myrtle, and they twitter incessantly when flocks scatter.

A Tree Swallow's diet is primarily flying insects, although plant materials comprise about 20% of the food.

Swallows forage in flight, in open areas above water or ground. They sometimes forage in flocks when insects are abundant. They can also glean insects from the surface of water or off of vertical surfaces.

Swallows feed from dawn until dusk, mainly on flies, beetles and ants, but stoneflies, mayflies, spiders, and grasshoppers are also common prey. When weather conditions are bad, they feed on vegetation including bulrushes, wax myrtle, and other plants' seeds. They are one of the few species of birds that can digest the Wax Myrtle berries.

Annual adult survival rates are estimated at 40 to 60%, and the average life span of a Tree Swallow is 2.7 years. The oldest known wild Tree Swallow lived at least 11 years.

Tree Swallow adults may be taken in flight by raptors including Sharp-shinned Hawks, Kestrels, Merlins, Peregrine Falcons, and Great Horned Owls. Tree Swallows respond to predators by mobbing them as large numbers of the swallows swarm and dive-bomb the predator while giving alarm calls.

