



: Bird Brief :

***Tree Swallow* (*Tachycineta bicolor*)**

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ORDER: Passeriformes (142 Families)

FAMILY: Hirundiniae (92 Species)

A little over a week ago in mid-March, a “Blood Moon” was visible during the early morning hours as the Earth passed in front of the full Worm Moon in a lunar eclipse. Now, the sun is continuing to angle north and the days are getting longer. Spring is underway! American Robins are foraging for worms, Mallards and Canadian Geese are pair bonding, Red-winged Blackbird males have claimed their desired breeding locations, and early Tree Swallow males are back to claim *their* best nesting location for the breeding season. In fact, a few days ago I spotted a male Tree Swallow on top of a nest box at Lakeshore State Park. It was a cloudy, cold, windy day, but he was determined to pick the best box. Today, not only did I see midges, but I saw a male Tree Swallow chirping while flying over the pond at Veteran’s Park. Tree Swallows are one of the first song birds to migrate to breeding grounds in the spring. This can be stressful for the swallow because food is scarce and the weather can be cold, windy, and even snowy. However, males must compete for and claim an optimal breeding site before the females arrive to begin nesting. Tree Swallows are almost always on the wing, so seeing midges today was a good sign that food is becoming plentiful enough to help replenish nutritional losses from their early migration to this region. I have seen Tree Swallows bathe on the wing and even drink on the wing. I find that swallows, in general, are very graceful drinkers; leaving behind minimal ripples or drops on the water surface, compared to swifts or other small birds.

Tree Swallows have some unique characteristics compared to other songbirds. They have slender bodies with pointed wings which allow for endurance and efficiency for staying on the wing for long periods of time. They fly in circular to oval patterns and reverse direction with ease. This acrobatic flight makes it easy to catch small insects. Tree Swallows have a short bill with a wide gape. They are able to open their mouth wide and quickly close their strong jaws once they catch an aerial insect. During the winter months, Tree Swallows often feed on berries and they are among only a few bird species that can digest the wax found on certain berries like bayberries, which are found in southern states.

Common habitats for Tree Swallows include forest edges, open fields, and fresh water which are areas plentiful with the insects on which they prefer to feast. During migration, large roosting flocks form as they move south, frequenting sugarcane fields in Louisiana as they make their way down to Central America. The huge flocks will perform flights that look like tornados prior to roosting.

In March, the iridescent, glossy, blue males arrive back to choose nesting sites in northern climates. Tree Swallows prefer nest sites that face east or south during the first half of the breeding season and then base their choice on availability later in the breeding season if they plan an additional brood. Once the brownish females arrive, pairs become established through mating rituals. Tree Swallows form monogamous pairs. Females typically make a cup-shaped nest in nest boxes or empty tree cavities by using dried grasses. Then,

here is my favorite behavior Tree Swallows perform!

Once the very small white eggs have been laid, the pair will find curved, typically white or pale, feathers that the female will place under the eggs. These selected feathers have been shown to curl around the eggs acting as camouflage from predators, acting as insulation, and acting to repel moisture. Scientists once believed the feathers prevented parasites, but this has been disproven. Studies have proven, though, that feather lined nests lead to more successful offspring that fledge earlier compared to those from non-lined nests.



Top view of an empty
Tree Swallow nest

There is one more behavior I have noticed with Tree Swallows. From time to time, I will see a male pick up a curved white feather, drop it from flight, catch it again, and repeat. There are times I have seen a group of males trying to catch the falling feather. This behavior is not entirely understood. However, scientists have hypothesized they are building agility, competing for territory, teaching young, or just “playing.” However, I have wondered if the males might be dropping the feather in an attempt to rid it of parasites before putting it in the nest. At any rate, this “feather playing” is really great fun to watch!

References:

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