

Watching Barn Swallows Raise a Family

First, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate my good friend, Bill Lindemann, on his accomplishment of writing 1000 weekly columns for the Kerrville Daily Times. That was certainly an impressive amount of work over an extended period of time, and many of us will certainly miss reading his columns every week.

The fact that I am writing this column about birds this week absolutely does NOT mean that I will try to fill the void left by Bill's "retirement". I have spent many hours with Bill riding around and walking around the Hill Country and have observed first-hand his level of knowledge about, and love for, birds, to be orders of magnitude greater than mine.

But I do like watching birds and that is why I am writing about our barn swallows.

We first had a pair of barn swallows build a nest on the light fixture on our back porch last year. We carefully watched as they first brought globs of mud and meticulously placed each bit in just the right place just as a bricklayer might build a wall. Then there was the egg laying period, then the brooding period, and finally the feeding period as the little ones grew from tiny things to adult size over a few weeks.

When they fledged, we thought that was the end of our barn swallows for the year. But shortly we observed more activity around the nest, and, to make a long story short, our energetic couple did it all over again! I don't remember the exact number of young that they raised last year, but I think it was around 8 or 10. The second brood fledged in early August.

We had hopes they would return this year, so when I cleaned the old nest off the floodlight I thought the light was rather slick and might have been hard for them to hold on to. I decided to make a better place for them to build a nest and so I added a wooden "shelf" just under the porch ceiling very near the light fixture.

I believe it was in April when we first saw barn swallow activity on the porch this year, but they would be around for a short time and then disappear for several days, on and off for most of a month. During that time, they spent a lot of time on and around the light fixture. But I only saw one swallow on my "improved shelf" once for a very brief time.

On May 10 they began building a nest on the light fixture. By May 23 it appeared the female was laying eggs, and by June 5 (maybe several days earlier than that) she was sitting on eggs. Sometime around June 12th to 15th, it appeared that we had little ones.

As of this writing on June 17th, they are still quite small, but both parents are actively feeding them pretty much full time. I counted the rate of a parent bringing food to the nest and it appears to be about one visit per minute. There are now about 14 hours of daylight, which means the parents could be making over 800 trips a day!

I remember watching last year's feeding activity when the young were quite large and I suspect the rate of feeding was even faster because we both commented that we didn't see how the parents could find insects as fast as they were apparently doing.

According to the books and other info I can find about barn swallows, they are just about totally insectivores, and nearly all of their food gathering is done on the wing—thus catching flying insects. I have never seen one perching in a tree or shrub. The only time I have seen one on the ground is gathering mud for a nest. It is common on our porch when one adult is on the nest the other adult will sit on the blades of our ceiling fan on the porch (don't worry, we tape off the switch)—I have never seen one rest on my "shelf", however.

While they are exceptional fliers and very acrobatic, what strikes me as truly amazing is just the fact that they can find and catch enough flying insects in a day to feed themselves and their share of the brood. It surprises me that there are even that many flying insects around most of the time. One more example that Mother Nature is truly amazing.

Until next time...

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