



Barn Swallow



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## Birds of Barrington:

### BARN SWALLOW

AS AN ENGLISH MAJOR, I had favorite poems. At the top of the list was John Keats' "To Autumn". I love the whole poem, but it is the final line that always makes me gulp: "...And gathering swallows twitter in the skies." Clearly it is not autumn yet—we are only officially halfway through summer—but the gathering, twittering swallows already foreshadow coming changes. And that line of Keats always makes me wistful about summer's passing.

One of the most common of the swallow species is the barn swallow. In fact, it is the most widespread swallow on the globe. While barn swallows have been present in the Barrington countryside since May and even earlier, they now gather with their young on utility wires, fences, and dead tree branches or, as Keats observed, in the skies. They are among the bird world's most graceful fliers, flitting and swooping and carving graceful arcs above fields and ponds and lakes as they hawk insects.

The barn swallow is quite easy to identify,

even in motion and in silhouette. It is the only one of the local swallows (six species in all) that has a deeply forked tail. All swallows are difficult to follow with binoculars; they are almost always in motion and rarely is that motion in a straight line. But, if you spot a smallish, graceful, streamlined bird constantly swooping and skimming just above the ground or water, and you see that it has a forked tail, it's sure to be a barn swallow.

If you get a closer look—which is often possible at this time of year when the adults perch with their fledglings—you will see that the barn swallow is handsome with glossy, cobalt blue feathers on its head and back, and tawny feathers below. The forehead and throat are cinnamon. The male and female have similar color patterns, though the male's colors are more intense.

True to its name, the barn swallow has an affinity for barns and other open structures. It likes to have a roof over its nest. The nest is a marvel of avian architecture: a half bowl of dried dabs of mud strengthened with grass and affixed to a barn beam or porch joist or girder under a bridge.

I love watching barn swallows in the spring, gathered at mud puddles or the edge of a pond to pick up beakfuls of mud to begin or add to their nests. I often wonder how many trips it takes to complete a nest. Well over 100, I'd guess.

It will not be long before the barn swallows cease their pond and field skimming and head south to Central and South America for the winter. Until they do, watch for swallows gathering and twittering in the skies. U

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education program for Citizens for Conservation, and has led regular bird walks in Barrington and Chicago, as well as in New York City and Washington, D.C. She currently teaches the Birds in My Neighborhood, a program she helped start with Openlands in Chicago Public Schools.

**The Year of the Bird:** 2018 marks the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the most powerful and important bird-protection law ever passed. In honor of this milestone, National Geographic, the National Audubon Society, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and BirdLife International will join forces with more than 100 other organizations and millions of people around the world to celebrate 2018 as the "Year of the Bird". What bird populations do usefully indicate is the health of our ethical values. One reason that wild birds matter—ought to matter—is that they are our last, best connection to a natural world that is otherwise receding. They're the most vivid and widespread representatives of the Earth as it was before people arrived on it." (Nat Geo, Jan. 2018)