

## **St. Charles Park District Nature News – August 27**

The neighbor's kids were out the other day, chattering excitedly as they soaked up some summer sun. It was snack time—seems like it's always snack time with these guys—and the four of them jostled each other as they gathered together and waited expectantly for their treats to come.

Finally Mom, or maybe it was Dad, or possibly an older sibling (it's tough to tell with this group) showed up with a little nosh, and the ravenous quartet went absolutely nuts. The little guy closest to me made a grab, but the prize—something with wings—went to one of the youngsters in the middle.

Mom, or Dad, or big brother or sister, took off again almost immediately, leaving the youthful clan seemingly unattended. But it wasn't long before another small meal arrived and was stuffed down a gaping gullet.

I suppose now's just as good a time as any to mention that the four kids, lined up along a phone wire outside the Pottawatomie Community Center, are probably only between three and four weeks old, not counting the time they spent in their eggs. And I should probably point out that they'll be leaving, very soon, on a journey that will take them as far as South America. And, yeah, I guess I should also mention that our spirited neighbors are barn swallows.

If you happen to live near water, or in an area that used to be open farmland, chances are you have barn swallow neighbors too. These gregarious birds, named after their propensity for nesting in barns, build their mud nests under the eaves of sheds and houses, on porches, under bridges...if it's a sturdy structure and has lots of flying insects nearby, it's a good home for barn swallows.



Historically, barn swallows nested in caves—a geologic feature that, you may have noticed, is in short supply here in northeastern Illinois (with the notable exception of Devil's Cave in North Aurora, IL, which plays host to thousands of school kids, and a pair of northern rough-winged swallows, each year).

But humans provided the birds with a whole new range of options for nesting. There are anecdotal reports of barn swallows building nests on summer longhouses. Then, when the European settlers showed up, wham, bam! It was Fat City for these flyers. Log cabins, houses and finally the namesake barns went up, providing acres of vertical surface area just right for affixing mud and grass—the swallows' primary building materials. Even better, because many predators shied away from places people populated, barn swallows enjoyed, and still benefit from today, the rare treat of rearing young in relative safety.

By aligning themselves with what is arguably the world's most invasive mammal, barn swallows have become the world's most abundant swallow species. They breed in North America, Europe and Asia and overwinter in Central and South America, Africa and even northern Australia. Population estimates put their numbers at around 190 million.

That's a lot of barn swallows. And, while some people may disagree, I think having a lot of barn swallows is a good thing. They eat bugs by the bazillions. They're fascinating to watch. They build mud nests with their mouths—no hands required. And, for all you beginning birders out there, they're easy to identify. No other swallow species has a long, v-shaped, scissor-like tail like that of the barn swallow.

If you haven't done so already this year, try to put some time aside to head out to a good barn swallow-viewing spot (Pottawatomie Park, by the Anderson's Paddlewheel Riverboats, is a great place). But don't wait too long. South America is a long way away and, even now, the swallows are gathering in preparation for their trip. If you miss them you'll have to wait another seven or eight months before they'll be back again. To go that long without a glimpse of one of our most entertaining summer visitors...that's a prospect that's hard to, well, you know...

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