



## Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

### **General information**

- In New England, Barn Swallows are almost always found nesting inside buildings where they build their cup-shaped nests out of mud and grass. They are often seen near farms, where they forage for insects over fields and pastures and where mud is handy. Barn Swallows migrate from Central and South America to North America to breed every spring. Here for only about four months, they fly back south after raising their young.
- Swallows are very aerodynamic and graceful in their swooping flight and are fun to watch as they feed on insects. People often confuse Barn Swallows with other swallows, like Tree Swallows or Bank Swallows. Barn Swallows are dark iridescent blue above, buffy below, with a rusty forehead and throat, and a pronounced forked tail. Tree Swallows are blue above and white below and nest in cavities like bird boxes or hollow trees, and Bank Swallows are brown and white, and nest in burrows in river banks, road cuts, and gravel banks.

### **Barn Swallows are in trouble!**

- Birds like swallows that forage in flight are called aerial insectivores and many of these birds are in decline. Barn Swallow populations increased dramatically with the settlement of New England in the 1800s and early 1900s, when land was cleared and human-made structures provided new nesting sites. In the decades following, Barn Swallow numbers started to decline primarily due to the decline in agriculture and the consequent loss of old wooden farm buildings, many of which were replaced with modern structures sealed against the birds' entry. In the mid-1980s, Barn Swallow populations in New England started declining precipitously. We don't know all the reasons why, but factors in addition to those listed above may be large scale use of pesticides, loss and degradation of wetlands, and climate change. According to USGS Breeding Bird Survey data, Barn Swallows have declined in Massachusetts by about 40% since 1985. According to MA Breeding Bird Atlas data, there was a pronounced decrease in confirmed nesting pairs statewide between 1979 and 2011. Barn Swallows were listed as Threatened in Ontario, Canada in 2012.

### **The good news is that you can help Barn Swallows!**

- It is very important to leave their nests alone while they are nesting! Since we don't know what is causing their decline, we can at least help them when they are here for the four short months it takes them to raise their young. Educate others—let them know about the importance of helping Barn Swallows and not disturbing their nests.

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- If you have a barn or outbuilding, open the windows and doors and let the Barn Swallows in. They do not carry any diseases nor do their droppings. Recent experiments in Massachusetts have shown that in the right setting (open fields and/or large water bodies near your property) putting up artificial Barn Swallow nests, providing mud for nest building, and even playing their breeding calls can attract breeding Barn Swallows. The benefits are worth the effort; since they feed on flying insects they are natural mosquito control! Plus they are a joy to watch as they swoop and dive through the air.
- If you think you have the required habitat for Barn Swallows and want to try to attract them, please contact Mara Silver at ([mnsilver2@verizon.net](mailto:mnsilver2@verizon.net)).



Website: [www.swallowconservation.org](http://www.swallowconservation.org)

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