

Bird Notes for Hikers May 30, 2020

Tree Swallow & Eastern Bluebird nest boxes

The Tree Swallow & Eastern Bluebird share the same habitat: open fields with scattered trees. Tree Swallows also inhabit wetlands with scattered trees. The trees are needed because these two species nest in holes. As they can't make their own holes, they need woodpecker holes or natural cavities, or nest boxes.

The same nest box design works for both species, attached to a fence post or to a tree. However, a Tree Swallow is more aggressive than a Bluebird; a single nest box in appropriate habitat will mostly be used by a Tree Swallow pair, as they will take it from a Bluebird pair, even though Bluebirds return earlier and have first choice at boxes.

The solution is to put up nest boxes in pairs. The Tree Swallow is aggressive to its own species also, and won't allow another Tree Swallow pair to nest nearby. One box out of every pair will therefore almost always be empty and the Tree Swallow doesn't care if a Bluebird uses it. The empty box might also be used by a House Wren, a Black-capped Chickadee, a Great Crested Flycatcher, a House Sparrow, a Deer Mouse, or even a Flying Squirrel. I have found all of these.

Sometime after I moved here to Wolford Centre in 1976 I noticed that someone had erected a string of nest boxes, in pairs, in suitable habitat along the 10 kilometres of highway between my road intersection and Merrickville. Over the years I saw Bluebirds and Tree Swallows and noted that the boxes were being used. Then, a few years ago, I saw that the boxes were deteriorating and falling down. The caretaker had apparently moved away or died.

In 2012 I took on the caretaking job: cleaning, repairing, replacing, and even adding a few more where there is good habitat. There are now 15 pairs of boxes, although I put up the 15th pair this year too late to attract any attention.

A task important to me is noting and recording the success of each box every year. Most years almost every pair of boxes has a pair of Tree Swallows in one of them, plus there are usually a couple of pairs of Bluebirds somewhere along the highway. This spring has been a good one, despite the early cold, with 13 Tree Swallow nests and 4 boxes occupied by Bluebirds.

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