

Tree Swallow

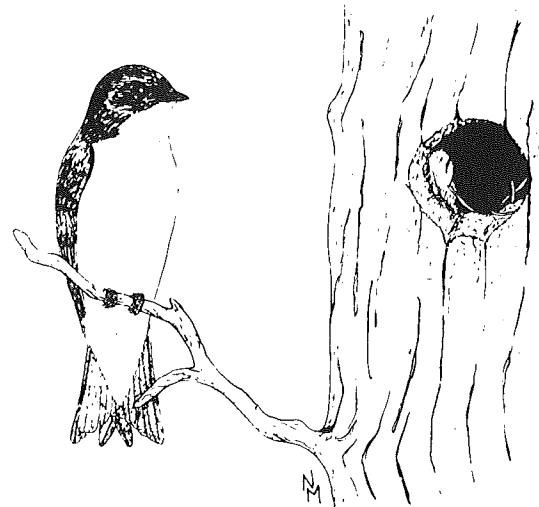
Tachycineta bicolor

Tree Swallows are among the most familiar Vermont birds. Their breeding habitat is usually, but not always, located near water; it includes farmland, wet meadows, marshes, and brooks, as well as villages near meadows, streams, or ponds. Nests are often placed in dead snags that project above the water of a lake or pond. The Tree Swallow's affinity for water habitats is related to the abundant insect life in such areas. The other major requirement for nesting habitat is the presence of cavities suitable for nest sites—primarily natural cavities, old woodpecker holes, and nesting boxes. Although highly territorial at the nest site, Tree Swallows sometimes nest in close proximity if suitable nest boxes or trees with old woodpecker holes are present. Single pairs will sometimes take up residence at remote beaver ponds.

Swallows are active birds and are found in open habitats where observation is not difficult. The Tree Swallow, widely distributed in Vermont, was found in 178 of the 179 Atlas Project priority blocks. Since their nests are often located near foraging areas, confirmation was fairly easy. The location of active nests, indicated by the Atlas Project codes ON (entering nest box), NE (nest with eggs), and NY (nest with young), represented 71% of all confirmations.

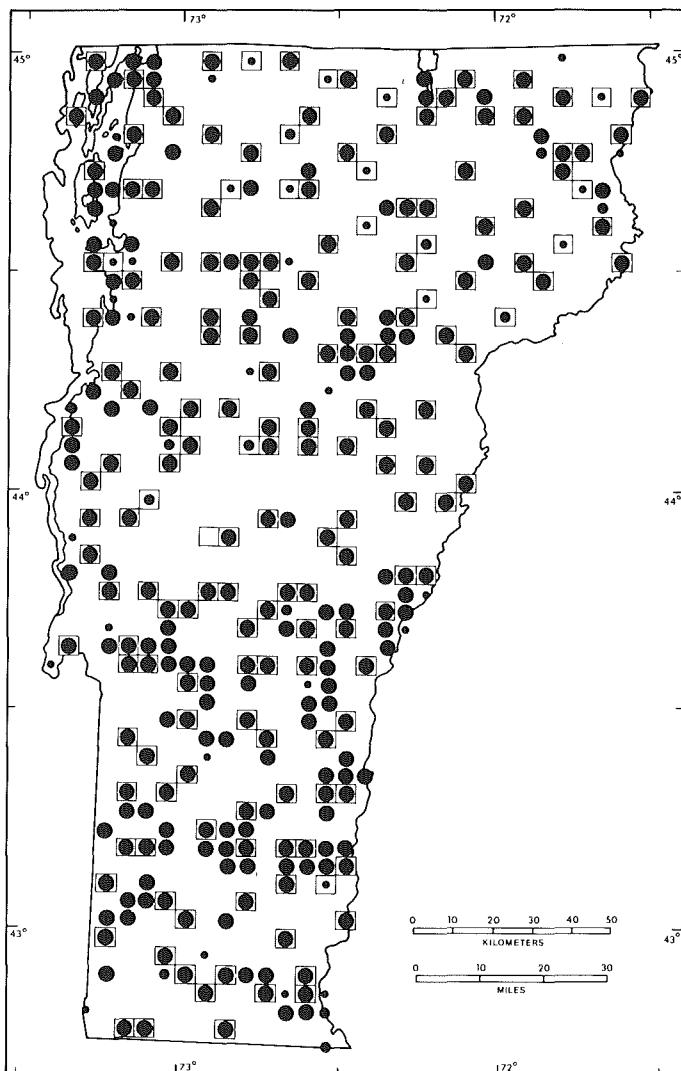
The Tree Swallow is the hardiest of Vermont's six species of swallows, moving north from its southern U.S. coastal wintering areas to its breeding grounds in Vermont in early April; it breeds in the northern and central United States and much of Canada. Occasionally early birds, perhaps vanguard scouts (J. KixMiller, pers. comm.), arrive in Vermont in late March.

Courtship by the Tree Swallow centers around the nest site. The male frequently gives a chirruping song and approaches the female with a hovering or fluttering flight. Both members of a pair also perform a bowing display at or near the nest. Swallows actively defend their nests from potential



predators by circling over and diving at intruders while uttering a sharp, clicking call (Stokes 1979). The nest, built by the female, is a collection of dry grasses or pine needles lined with feathers, 90% of which are white. Tree Swallows are sometimes observed flying low over a domestic duck and plucking a feather from its back (M. Metcalf, pers. observ.). Several pairs nesting near each other may compete for feathers. Nest building may take as long as a month, but average construction time is 2 to 3 weeks (Stokes 1979).

Egg laying usually begins as soon as the nest is completed. Clutch size usually ranges from 4 to 6 eggs (Bent 1942); the average of 186 Vermont clutches was 5.5 eggs. Stokes (1979) gave incubation (done by the female only) as 14 to 15 days. J. KixMiller (pers. comm.) has documented incubation at 12 to 14 days, and has noted that the male also sits on the eggs for brief periods. Egg dates for 213 Vermont nests range from April 25 to June 29. The young have a very short fledgling phase; they are strong fliers as soon as they leave the nest 16 to 24 days after hatching (Bent 1942). Nests with young have been recorded in Vermont from June 3 to August 1, and fledglings have been reported from June 19 to August 1. Tree Swallows have one brood each breeding season; later nesting dates probably represent renestings that occurred after failed first attempts, or delayed nesting by late-arriving birds.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 178 (99%)

Possible breeding: 13 (7% of total)

Probable breeding: 5 (3% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 160 (90% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	17
Green Mountains	53	98	30
North Central	19	100	11
Northeast Highlands	16	100	9
East Central	19	100	11
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9
Eastern Foothills	24	100	13

From late July to early September Tree Swallows gather by the hundreds to commence their fall migration; adults precede juveniles. In Vermont, the largest concentrations are found in the Champlain Lowlands, particularly around the marshes of Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area, where counts of up to 5,000 swallows have been reported (RVB, Fall 1982). During migration Tree Swallows often gather near wetlands, where they may roost by the thousands in cattails, reeds, or bushes over water.

The Tree Swallow has apparently been fairly common in Vermont since early human settlement. Its distribution today includes nearly all of Vermont, with the excep-

tion of the highest mountain elevations, where there are no beaver ponds. Tree Swallows often compete successfully for nesting boxes intended for Purple Martins and Eastern Bluebirds, a situation best remedied by placing additional boxes nearby, since the swallows will allow bluebirds to occupy other houses within their territory. As Vermont loses habitat to development, Tree Swallows are more fortunate than some species, having adapted to the man-altered environment and to using nest boxes.

MARION F. METCALF

NANCY L. MARTIN