

Local Nestbox Users | Swallows

IDENTIFICATION

Both Tree Swallows and Violet-green Swallows readily use nestboxes, and can be confused for Western Bluebirds. They can be distinguished by their shape, behaviour, and flight patterns. Their nests of woven grass can be hard to tell apart from bluebird nests before they are complete. Like most songbirds, male swallows are more vividly coloured than female and juvenile swallows.



Tree Swallow
Tachycineta bicolor

- Iridescent deep blue back, wings, and head
- Dark “mask” extends below eyes
- Bright white belly
- Short, slightly forked tail
- 5.75 inches long



Violet-green Swallow
Tachycineta thalassina

- Iridescent green/purple back and wings
- White of face extends above the eyes (no “mask”)
- Bright white belly
- Short, slightly forked tail
- 5.25 inches long
- Bright white rump patch visible during flight

Swallows are small, streamlined songbirds with long, pointed wings and a forked tail. Their bills are very short and flat. When swallows perch, their bodies may appear round as they settle onto their feet or they may be stretched out. In either case, their long wings, which extend past their bodies, are a clear way of distinguishing swallows from other birds when they are perched.





BEHAVIOUR

Swallows are migratory. They arrive at their breeding grounds on BC's west coast in February and begin to migrate south for winter in August. Both species are highly social, forming large migratory flocks and often nesting close together.

Tree swallows have a variable, high-pitched, watery or gurgling call and will also make a ticking sound during courtship. Violet-green Swallows have a high-pitched, rapid, chittering call.

Swallows spend most of their time in the air, performing aerial acrobatics as they dive and turn while hunting flying insects, their primary food source. Swallows often cruise low, flying just a few inches above the ground or water, but also forage at heights of 60m or more. This hunting and flying behaviour makes them easy to distinguish from bluebirds, which make short flights from low perches to the ground, or from perch to perch, as they feed on ground-dwelling insects.



Photo: R Shelling, GOERTS

HABITAT

At all times of the year, Swallows prefer open areas near a body of water, such as a lake or wetland. During the breeding season, Tree Swallows and Violet-green Swallows can be found in habitat very similar to that of the Western Bluebird: large, open fields and meadows with a few standing dead trees or nestboxes to nest in. Because their habitat overlaps very closely with the Western Bluebird, swallows can be competitors for available nest cavities; however, the three species have been known to co-exist peacefully with nests in close proximity and, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Violet-green Swallows have even been observed feeding and defending the nests of Western Bluebirds.

NEST ID

Tree Swallow and Violet-green Swallow nests are virtually indistinguishable: both species build a shallow nest of grasses lined with soft, downy feathers.

Swallows will have 1-2 broods per season, with 3-8 eggs in each. Eggs are small and bright white, with a slightly pointed end.

Swallows are very desirable nestbox occupants. Just like bluebirds, swallows have been in decline due to habitat loss, competition by introduced species such as House Sparrows, and the widespread use of insecticides.



Photo: J Daly, GOERTS

Native species' nests are protected under federal law and should not be disturbed. Do not open boxes or remove nests during nesting season.

Learn more about swallows, see photos, hear their calls, and more at Cornell Lab of Ornithology's All About Birds (www.allaboutbirds.org/guide).