

The San Pedro House is their nursery

Barn Swallows

By

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Barn Swallow on nest attached to side of San Pedro House

Visitors to the San Pedro House often enjoy seeing Barn Swallows dashing and wheeling through the air. People also can watch these birds build their nests and feed their young on the walls of the San Pedro House beneath the roof overhang.

Barn Swallows occur throughout much of the Northern Hemisphere. In North America, they

breed from southern Alaska and Canada southward to southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, northern Florida, states along the Gulf, and south to central Mexico. Most of the North American birds overwinter in Central and South America, but a few spend the winter in the extreme southern United States.

Most Barn Swallows return to Arizona in March and April, occasionally even earlier. The numbers of returning birds in Arizona peak from mid-April through mid-May, with stragglers arriving as late as early June. Pair formation and nesting activity begins soon after the birds return to their breeding localities. Approximately half of the first clutches are laid in nests built in prior years. The peak nesting period in Arizona is from approximately mid-May through early June. Barn Swallows sometimes construct nests as late as the middle of July, and in southeastern Arizona nesting activity may even continue well into September. Fall migration from Arizona usually begins in mid-July and steadily increases and reaches maximum numbers in late September through mid-October. During the fall migration, thousands or more of birds may aggregate and forage over irrigated agricultural fields and open water. The numbers of

migrants from Arizona diminish through November, but stragglers sometimes leave as late as December.



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Barn Swallow at San Pedro House

During the summer, these birds are common across much of North America. They occur in open or semi open land such as farms, fields, marshes, and near lakes or other water. People often notice them skimming low over the countryside to feed on a wide variety of flying insects, including flies, beetles, wasps, bees, winged ants, and true bugs. These birds also eat some moths, damselflies, grasshoppers, other insects, and occasionally feed on spiders and snails. Rarely, they feed

on a few berries or seeds. They mostly capture and eat their food while in flight.



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Female House Finch that has usurped a Barn Swallow nest at the San Pedro House.

These birds once nested in caves or overhanging cliffs. They have adapted well to humans and now build their nests mostly on human structures such as open buildings, beneath the eaves of structures, and the undersides of bridges or docks. Both sexes build the nest, consisting of a cup of mud and dried grass lined with feathers. In arid Arizona landscapes, the availability of mud for nests is a limiting factor on these birds. Barn Swallows frequently visit

the banks of the San Pedro River to obtain mud for their nests.

The female typically lays 4 to 5 eggs but sometimes as many as seven. The eggs are white and spotted with brown. Both sexes incubate the eggs for approximately 13 to 17 days and then feed the young. The young leave the nest about 18 to 23 days after hatching. The parents lead the young back to the nest to sleep for several days after fledging. They continue to feed the young for several days to a week after fledging. Family groups breakup entirely by approximately 2 weeks after the young leave the nest. There are one or two broods per year. At

the San Pedro House, House Finches sometimes takeover nests made by the Barn Swallows, and fights between the birds may occur.

Recognition. This is our most graceful appearing swallow and has a long forked tail and long pointed wings. Members of this species are easily recognized by the long, deeply forked tail, bluish black upper parts, and rust or buff colored underparts. The upper side is blue-black while the underside is whitish to orange. (Length 6.75 inches, wingspread 15 inches) The throat has a dark rufous color. Males and females are similar in appearance, but females are often duller in color.

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