# Tree Swallow

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

## the swift, aerial feeding tree swallow

Swallows, like their cousins, the Purple Martins, have adapted to aerial feeding. They are graceful flyers and catch the main staple of their diet, insects, in their bills mid-flight. They are also the heartiest of the swallows; they winter further north than other species and are the first to return to their breeding grounds. They make a dietary switch to winter-hardy berries in order to survive the early spring cold spells they face by returning north so early.

| **Interesting Facts:** | |
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| **Family:** | Hirundinidae |
| **Scientific Name:** | *Tachycineta bicolor* |
| **Location:** | Tree Swallows are common throughout the northern and central parts of the United States, extending south into Nevada and New Mexico in the west. They are also prevalent in Canada and Alaska. Their preferred habitat is open or semi-open areas near woods and water. Marshes and wetlands are ideal. |
| **Migration:** | They migrate in large groups to the extreme south in the United States, as well as Mexico, the Caribbean and further south. |



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| **Nesting:** | Tree Swallows are cavity nesters, and will use your man-made nest boxes if natural cavities are unavailable. They often compete with other cavity-nesting species for nest boxes. They construct a grass nest within the cavity and line it with soft feathers. The female lays 4-6 white eggs, and incubates them by herself for 14-15 days. Males may have more than one mate. Fledglings leave the nest after about 21 days. Tree Swallows have up to two broods in one season. |
| **Diet:** | In summer, their diet consists almost entirely of insects, which they obtain in the air during flight. After breeding season, they gather in large groups at the edges of swamps and riverbanks to feed where the insect population is still plentiful. Before migration, and also during the cold spring months when they return north, they will also eat berries and some seeds. |
| **Size and Color:** | Tree Swallows are 5" - 6" long with upperparts iridescent blue and underparts bright white in stark contrast. Upperparts may appear greenish in fall and winter. Adult females have a brownish forehead. Immature females have mostly brown upperparts, mixed with varying amounts of iridescent blue. Females can keep their immature coloring for up to 2 years before their plumage looks like an adult's. They have a small bill and a forked tail. |
| **Special Characteristics:** | They are aerial feeders. Immature females sometimes replace adult females that die during nesting season. After breeding season, they are known to roost in large groups. They gather by the thousands near a marshy area, encircling the sky. Then, they descend gradually, in small groups, upon cattails and small trees. |
| **Attracting:** | Though they do not visit feeders, you may be able to attract tree swallows to nest in your yard with a proper nest box, in the proper location. They will use a bluebird nest box, placed about 5 to 20 feet off the ground, with the entrance hole facing east. |



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