

Tree Swallows

Tachycineta bicolor



Handsome aerialists with deep-blue iridescent backs and clean white fronts, Tree Swallows are a familiar sight in summer fields and wetlands across northern North America. They chase after flying insects with acrobatic twists and turns, their steely blue-green feathers flashing in the sunlight. Tree Swallows nest in tree cavities; they also readily take up residence in nest boxes. This habit has allowed scientists to study their breeding biology in detail, and makes them a great addition to many a homeowner's yard or field.

Tree Swallows winter farther north than any other American swallows and return to their nesting grounds long before other swallows come back. They can eat plant foods as well as their normal insect prey, which helps them survive the cold snaps and wintry weather of early spring.

The Tree Swallow is most often seen in open, treeless areas.

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/browse/shape/Swallows%20and%20Swifts>

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society,
P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS 66505-1932



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

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Upcoming Events

- May 5 - TUESDAY Board Meeting- 6:00 pm,
via conf call or Zoom. Contact a board
member if needed.
- May 9 - Sat. morning Birding 8 am,
Depart Sojourner Truth Park.
(physical distancing will be maintained)



Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

This month as we finish our visit with Lyall Watson's book titled, *The Secret Life of Inanimate Objects*, it may be well to bear in mind that through

history many learned people have declared that science had run its course. In one instance the famous Lord Kelvin is said to have declared around 1900 that there was no more to discover in physics; all that was left was to perfect the measurements. I was advised in high school that paleontology was, so to speak, at a dead end—all the possible varieties of fossils had been unearthed.

Mr. Watson, a credentialed and well-traveled biologist, was reminding the opposite—that science had much more to uncover. In doing so he proposed that one reason inanimate materials have “secret lives” is that we don't sufficiently recognize how we have affected the evolution of simple tools into complicated machinery that we benefit from but must service, and which may become capable of doing other than we want them to. Or be subject to failures that we can't control. Another aspect has been the way inanimates seem to act, often unseen, of their own volition in response to the influences of gravity and magnetism whose sources remain in essence secrets yet to be found.

That said, he then offered further possibilities, relying on the idea that there may be other furtive influences besides gravity, magnetism and the ones cosmologists, trying to better understand our expanding universe, are now seeking to comprehend in the outer universe. For example, one such extra power could cause inanimate objects to be capable of adopting affinities. He proposed that a certain machine might perform better under the management of A than of B, not because A was a better operator, but because by some unknown influence, the machine preferred or adopted itself better to A's style.

Whether you're willing to go that far with him or not, it's certain that we do leave our impress on everything we come in contact with (e.g.: fingerprints and traceable spoon, as mentioned

previously) and, beyond Watson, I've read that modern science is taking this concept and running with it. *The Economist* recently reported that a Scottish lady has been discovered capable of recognizing the pheromones emitted by persons suffering from Parkinson's, in one case nine months prior to a medical diagnosis.

On page 68 of its February 15th issue it told how people continuously shed in various ways a whole range of molecules that increasingly can be made to tattle on a whole lot of what the shedder has been eating and doing. This raises a whole range of legal and ethical implications, compounded by the fact that these molecules pass on their secrets to objects that they come in contact with. Similarly, to the way different minerals aggregate themselves into prettily colored stones. The article reports that an estimated two-thirds of the dollar bills in circulation carry traces of cocaine, which they can secretly transfer to your fingers.

To be inanimate does not necessarily mean to be inactive.

Incidentally, another approach to the concept of inanimate life can be found at a podcast titled “Everything is Alive” in which host Ian Chillag conducts in depth interviews with inanimate objects.

As May begins the *Eta Aquarid* meteor shower will be active to some degree the nights of the 4th and 5th while Venus continues its evening star performances, setting from late- to mid-evening as the month progresses. Mercury comes from behind the Sun to join it at mid-month, becoming visible a little more than a fist high 40 minutes after sunset. The two are closest the 21st, with a crescent Moon below them the 23rd, above them the 24th.

In the pre-dawn sky of the 11th-12th the Moon will be to the right of Jupiter and Saturn who will be being neighborly, and to the left of them on the 13th, with Mars starting to get in the picture from left of the Moon the 13th, and moving to be above the Moon the 15th. The Moon's other appointments, all available for evening viewing, include Leo's Regulus the 1st and again the 28th. It will be to the left of Virgo's Spica the 5th and above Scorpius's Antares the 7th-8th. It will be with the Gemini Twins the 26th, closer to Pollux than Castor.

There were hopes that a comet named Atlas might light up the mid-May sky but it has disintegrated approaching the Sun. But another called Swan might take its place. Will it hold together? Something to watch for.

The Moon will be full the 7th at 5a45, new the 22nd at 12p38.

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Close to Home

Dru Clarke



You know that life has taken an unexpected turn when you look forward to doing chores just to get out of the house. All the while you are hoping that the red cow has put off calving until a brighter, drier day dawns. And that the mud will finally turn back to soil to allow a brisk walk and not a slog.

The longhaired black cat comes home with dried green briar stems, brittle and thorny, caught in his belly and tail fur and does not appreciate my efforts in trying to remove them. But throughout the winter, green briar vines stay green, as if waiting to burst into new growth (and reach out and grab you) once the length of daylight is just right. A friend calls it 'wait a minute' vine. I like to pinch off the new tender tendrils in spring and toss them in a salad or just eat them right there. (Euell Gibbons is smiling.) Wild garlic, too, stays green, though the tips are burnt crisp from frost. We've a thriving patch under a naturally created bonsai elm that we started from exposed bulbs discovered at an excavated road cut. Non-native pussy willow buds erupted their fuzzy tufts in early March and the lilacs are holding their breath. My affection for pussy willow and lilac is deep: both graced our yard when I was a kid. And when I was working for a Russian-American education exchange program I took a long winter walk along the banks of the Don River and found, growing wild, pussy willow bushes. I sneaked some of the twigs back home with me and they still exist in desiccated form in a slim ceramic vase in our bedroom. The customs official did not bat an eye.

Today, (March 25), a flock of blackbirds – more than four and twenty, enough for two pies – chortled and tail-fanned from the highest limbs of one of our last ash trees, then, by some unseen signal, lifted off and tilted northward. A single male red-winged blackbird has been here most of the winter, and we

can only speculate why as we listened for his voice and waited for him to jostle for a place on a feeder.

Staying close to home – sheltering, as it were – is not unusual for us as we live rurally, remotely, with poor road access, engendering a tentative sense of security and isolation. But time has slowed and has allowed for more reflection, especially about prescient books and articles that predicted our current crisis. "Guns, Germs, and Steel," by Jared Diamond, and "Spillover," by David Quammen, are two that come to mind. Smithsonian magazine had a piece on the coming pandemic published in 2017. Not comforting or escapist reading material, but if you want scholarly and well-researched explanations for it, these are a good place to start. After I finish Louise Penny's latest.

Coming back from a short sojourn on a paved country road – a real treat, both for the blue sky and the solid substrate- in a dip we heard spring peepers who'd emerged during a brief warming time. It was impossible to suppress a smile. Another dip, and vernal pool, and more peepers. Our ubiquitous necromancer, the turkey vulture, spun a slow spiral above us. Irrepressible life.

Stepping off the porch this morning, I startled a phoebe who had been reconnoitering a nesting site in the eaves. Tiny, sky blue bluets, blooming now already for a month, shyly peek up from their beds on the lawn. I forget they are there until something – their bright eyes?- makes me pause and look down. No more than a few millimeters above the ground they are a small delight, imparting a bit of joy to an otherwise dreary moment. It's not so bad staying close to home

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Bluebird boxes/trails

Patricia Yeager

In October of 1989 Northern Flint Hill Audubon became interested in creating bluebird trails around the area. A bluebird trail is a row of bluebird houses placed far enough apart for each bluebird family to have its own territory (about 150 yards). This is done to replace habitat destruction from the practice of removing dead trees which is the bird's natural dwelling. The result of these trails across the nation likely saved the Eastern Bluebird but that is a story of its own. Here I want to tell you of the bluebird trails I know of in the area. I appeal to long term NFHAS members to fill in the rest of the story as to who did the work to start these trails and when they first were established.

It was about 15 years ago when I was shown one of the bluebird trails along the Cecil Best Trail in N.E. Park. There was mention of a trail at Pillsbury Crossing, one at Stagg Hill golf course, and another at Carnahan Creek Recreational area. At this writing, there are four of the seven boxes left at the Cecil Best Trail (so far this year one has a nesting bluebird), the Pillsbury Crossing boxes are gone, the Stagg Hill golf course boxes count about 15 (once had about 30) and the Carnahan Creek Trail has been restored with 13 boxes (one, so far, has a nesting bluebird with five eggs). History is lost about who started and maintained some of these trails, but it is known that our members have kept some of them going. Boy scouts had maintained the Cecil Best trail houses in recent years, and it was established by NFHAS members.

It is my hope that in writing this article a few of you may be inspired to adopt one of these historic blue bird trails. Bird house clean out and repair in March or early April is the minimum requirement. Checking on the bird houses during the summer can be part of the duties of maintaining a bluebird trail and logging the nesting success of each house is often the joy of a trail keeper.

This is my story of the Carnahan Creek Bluebird trail. As close as I can remember, it was about ten years ago when I was running my dog at Carnahan Creek Recreational Area when I noticed metal fence posts in the ground about 100 paces apart with sets of rusted nuts and bolts hanging on in some of them. Some still upright, some driven over, one had a piece of wood attached. They were sometimes accompanied by worn horse trail markers. In addition to an old horse trail, I realized that this must be an old bluebird trail. Perhaps this was one that NFHAS had established around 1990 and had since fallen to neglect. I found 12 posts driven into the ground and decided in the name of those who



Carnahan Creek Park Bluebird Trail

Bluebird boxes/trails

Patricia Yeager

came before and for the birds, the trail should be revived. I took this to the NFHAS board and Kevin Fay volunteered to make the needed bluebird houses (he continues to supply them, as needed, for this trail and others) and the board voted to fund any necessary other supplies. It has been a successful endeavor. Nesting successes have been about half tree sparrows and half bluebirds over the years. No records have been formally kept but casual observation around the houses will result in viewing an abundance of bluebirds and tree sparrows now until the end of summer. Thank you to Greg Wurst for maintaining this trail currently.

If you want to visit the Carnahan Creek Recreational Area and walk the trail, please do not open the bird houses as fledglings can escape too early and perish. The trail keeper(s) has this privilege because they know when the birds hatch and know to keep the door shut for two weeks thereafter. Directions from Manhattan: Take 24W to Hwy 13 and cross the Tuttle Creek dam. Continue approximately five miles and turn left onto Carnahan Creek Rd. (there are signs to Living Water Ranch at this turn). In 4.5 miles slow way down and start looking for a left turn onto Park Rd. (there can be oncoming traffic that is not easily visible- be cautious). Follow Park road to the Rules and Regulations sign and turn right. Park at the white restroom building at the top of the hill. From the women's side look toward the lake and you will see box number one. There are 13. One through four are about 100 paces apart. Number five and six are a bit farther. Number seven

is nearer the water and approximately 300 spaces from six on the other side of the hill. Boxes 8-13 are uphill, and the terrain is a bit rugged. You can see the restroom from box 12 and can return to the start that way or turn around at box seven should your knees not be up to the climb. Bug repellent around your ankles is a wise precaution.

If you want to be the keeper of one of these trails and continue the legacy let me know. If you know the history of these trails I would be interested or write an article for this newsletter and send to Cindy. Contact information is at the end of this newsletter.



So, You're thinking of building a birdhouse? (circa 1980s, author unknown)

Before you go any farther, let me tell you something. It's a very complicated task, precision engineering must be applied and a degree in ornithology or at least advanced biology is desired. A scientific approach must be taken to fulfill the desired goals of your project.

Do you really believe this? If you do then stop right now. Take your lumber back where you bought it; hang your hammer back up on the pegboard and run not walk to the nearest lawn and garden store and buy one of those "cute" plastic houses that will break the first winter and overheat in the summer.

The only thing I can say now is that if you're still determined to build your own then read on.

What is a birdhouse for? Why build one? How? Where to put it after you're done? A birdhouse is nothing more than a man-made structure that attempts to duplicate a cavity for cavity nesting birds. Natural cavities are in short supply due to habitat loss of dead or dying trees. Clear cutting of "all" dead timber for landscaping purposes so everything is as it "should be." The wrong size of cavity in the wrong neighborhood at the wrong height will only disappoint you and worst of all the birds it was intended for.

Probably more than any other reasons for building a birdhouse you feel you're doing something to make this earth a little better place to live and most of all you'll be tickled pink to see a bird living and bearing its young in something that you build with your own hands. That's why I and hundreds of other people build them, and I hope you'll enjoy building them too.

I don't mean to take anything away from the scientific community for they have done a marvelous job in doing the research to determine cavity dimensions, entrance hole sizes and the best locations to place the boxes. I have had the opportunity to personally talk with a number of the pioneers in bluebird house design as well as other "experts" in the field and I respect and admire their work. But many non-professional people have contributed to the knowledge we now have available and their work is just as important and respected; so what does all this have to do with your desire to help out our feathered friends?

Simple, anyone can build a birdhouse that will serve the purpose and benefit wildlife, "if" a few guidelines are followed.

A birdhouse is nothing more than a box, simple enough, right? But the size is the trick.

The cavity dimension I use for the birdhouses I build come from the pages of a publication I've used for years. The name *Home for Birds*, published by the U.S. Dept. of Interior, by E.R. Kalmbach and W.L. McAtee. In the publication is a chart of recommended cavity sizes, entrance hole dimensions and preferred habitat locations. There's a front, side, back, top, view of numerous designs that one can build. There are front opening boxes, side opening boxes, top opening boxes and even self-type boxes.

What type you prefer building is up to you. "Isn't it great having choice?" But remember the entrance hole sized is the critical factor. Why? Unwanted species for the wrong size cavity, that's why. Don't build a bluebird or downy woodpecker box with an opening that will entice a flicker. Flickers and red bellied woodpeckers just love to enlarge entrance holes leaving nothing but woodchips for the intended occupants.

The chart has been modified somewhat to keep things simple and that's the secret to success in birdhouse building. Some of the specific cavity dimensions are so close to each other for different species that the one to two-inch difference in cavity "depth" is insignificant. This isn't my opinion alone but from birdhouse builders and watchers with more accumulated years of sturdy that all the "experts" put together. Again, what is critical is entrance hole dimensions and floor dimensions. Keep that in mind always and the rest will come easily.

With this lengthy letter and modified chart are a few examples of boxes you can build Simple or complex the limit is your imagination and tool inventory.

A sabre saw will work just fine, a table saw a little better. A drill press is wonderful, but a cheap drill and spade bit will accomplish the same results. Your desire and motivation in building something for wildlife is more rewarding than building a "cute" or cosmetically perfect birdhouse.

I've built over 2500 bluebird houses and hundreds of other type of houses as well as bird feeders; and the first of those houses though showing the wear of time and rather crude looking when new, have housed many generations of birds and you know not one of them complained.

So, in ending this affair remember; Keep it simple but build it to last. Share the knowledge with others and most of all enjoy the simple act of creating something good and useful.

Species	Floor of Cavity	Depth of Cavity	Entrance above Floor	Diameter of Entrance	Height above Ground or Water(W)	Preferred Habitat Codes ³
	Inches	Inches	Inches	Inches	Feet	
House Wren	4 × 4	6- 8	4- 6	1-1 ¼	4-10	2,7
Chickadees	4 × 4	9	7	1 ½	4-15	2
Bewick's Wren	4 × 4	6- 8	4- 6	1 ¼	5-10	2,7
Titmouse	4 × 4	9	7	1 ¼	5-15	2
Downy Woodpecker ...	4 × 4	9	7	1 ¼	5-15	2
Prothonotary Warbler .	4 × 4	6	4	1 ¾	4-12,3W	3,5
Nuthatches ¹	4 × 4	9	7	1 ¾	5-15	2
Carolina Wren	4 × 4	6- 8	4- 6	*1 ½	5-10	2,7
Bluebirds	4 × 4	8-12	6-10	*1 ½	3- 6	1
Tree Swallow	5 × 5	6- 8	4- 6	*1 ½	4-15	1
Violet-green Swallow ..	5 × 5	6- 8	4- 6	*1 ½	4-15	1
Ash-throated Flycatcher	6 × 6	8-10	6- 8	*1 ½	8-20	1,6
Hairy Woodpecker	6 × 6	12-15	9-12	1 ¾	12-20	2
Great Crested Flycatcher	6 × 6	8-10	6- 8	1 ¾	8-20	1,2
Golden-fronted Woodpecker	6 × 6	12	9	2	10-20	2
Red-headed Woodpecker	6 × 6	12	9	2	10-20	2
Purple Martin	6 × 6	6	1	2 ¼	10-20	1
Saw-whet Owl	6 × 6	10-12	8-10	2 ½	12-20	2
Flicker	7 × 7	16-18	14-16	2 ½	6-30	1,2
Screech Owl	8 × 8	12-15	9-12	3	10-30	2
American Kestrel	8 × 8	12-15	9-12	3	10-30	1,4
Barn Owl	10 × 18	15-18	0- 4	6	12-18	4
Wood Duck	12 × 12	22	17	4	10-20,6W	3,5
Phoebe	6 × 6	6	(²)	(²)	8-12	7,8
Barn Swallow	6 × 6	6	(²)	(²)	8-12	7,8
Robin	6 × 8	8	(²)	(²)	6-15	7

*Precise measurement required, if diameter over 1 ½ inches then starlings may usurp cavity.

¹Brown-headed and Pygmy Nuthatches (1 ½), Red-breasted Nuthatch (1 ¼) and White-breasted Nuthatch (1 ¾) will all use the same box. However, the smaller opening sizes where appropriate may discourage use by House Sparrows

²One or more sides open.

³Preferred habitat codes. The numbers in the last column of Table 1 refer to the habitat types listed here:

1. Open areas in the sun (not shaded permanently by trees), pastures, fields, or golf courses.
2. Woodland clearings or the edge of woods.
3. Above water, or if on land, the entrance should face water.
4. On trunks of large tree, or high in little-frequented parts of barns, silos, water towers or church steeples.
5. Moist forest bottomlands, flooded river valleys, swamps.
6. Semi-arid country, deserts, dry open woods and wood edge.
7. Backyards, near buildings.
8. Near water; under bridges, barns.

The Dark Hawks

Dave Rintoul

All winter long I've been haunted by dark hawks. Not in the spectral sense, but in the familiar. I've spent time looking for them, photographing them, thinking about them, wondering about them, and even hanging out with hawk researchers to trap them and learn more about them. I've dreamed about them, which is unusual, since I usually never remember my dreams! Maybe I'm haunting them rather than the other way around.

I live in a part of the North American continent that has an abundance of Red-tailed Hawks in the winter. Harlan's Hawks, the darkest subclass (dubbed the "Black Warrior" by no less an authority than John James Audubon), come from the far northwest reaches of the range for this species, northern Alaska and the Yukon. That's a one-way flight of nearly 3000 miles if you take the shortest flight path, and even longer if you dawdle along the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains like these birds probably do.

We really don't know much about how they get from Alaska to Kansas and back every year; that's some of the research yet to be done by some of the folks I worked with this winter. But we do know that after they make that journey in the fall, many of them end up in exactly the same place where they spent last winter. For example, I have watched a small dark Harlan's Hawk (probably a male) claim a winter territory about a mile from my house every winter for the past 7 winters. This year he showed up on October 7; as I write in late March he is still there, although his departure could be any day now. He is so familiar that my kids gave him a name, Harley, and he is a fine representative of the Black Warrior class (see photo). All Red-tailed Hawks show variability in pigmentation patterns in every part of the body, but Harlan's Hawks are even more variable. One of the hawk researchers who visited here this winter is studying the genetics of pigment patterns in Harlan's Hawks. That's a daunting assignment. The tail of each Harlan's Hawk is unique. The distribution of colors in Harley's tail- mostly white, mottled with black and just a hint of the eponymous red- changes little from year to year, and I would likely know him anywhere. But he returns here.

There are a dozen or so others that I have haunted this winter and last winter and the winter before, each finding the same territory every fall and relinquishing it to the local hawks only after the snows start to retreat across the northern plains. Interestingly our summer-resident Turkey Vultures, also a dark shadowy presence soaring above the plains, return here just about the time that the Harlan's Hawks move out. These birds likely winter no farther away than Oklahoma, though no one knows for sure. (Somehow, working with vultures is even less popular than studying hawks.)

We always have dark birds in the sky here, even if they are different characters every season. This winter the departure of our dark northern hawks coincides with another, even darker, arrival. Coronavirus. The stealthy migration of this wingless pathogen, hitching rides in passengers on airplanes and cruise ships, has changed the world in a very short time, with more changes yet to come. The non-human world will probably not detect this arrival in the short-term, other than perhaps noting a decrease in human traffic as they go about their daily business. But humans, and their insatiable needs, influence much of the natural world today; there will be consequences, foreseen and unforeseen, that other creatures will deal with in the coming months and years. There are always consequences, and change is the only constant.



The Dark Hawks

Dave Rintoul

Our consequences, at least for the short term but probably longer, include hunkering down and avoiding other people who could potentially transmit the virus to us, or us to them. Social distancing is the newest oxymoron (coincidentally, the recommended 6-ft distance is approximately the wingspan of a Turkey Vulture). Everything is on hold, and time seems to have warped so that it seems to move both very quickly and very slowly these days. News comes at us in waves with no troughs.

And even if we want to shut our eyes and plug our ears to the unpleasant new reality, it remains reality.

Our social media world, often discordant even at the best of times, seems both newly fractured and cohesive. I have virtual friends who live in Alberta, and we are linked by these hawks as much as by social media. They await the spring hawk migration eagerly, and I will get news from them when “my” hawks become “their” hawks as they pass through to the Yukon and become their own hawks, which really is what they have been all along.

Connectivity comes at multiple levels, and even though hawks might seem to be excellent at distancing themselves from humans, these birds have helped us make connections despite the distancing edicts we now live under. On a globe that has not only shrunk with air travel but also expanded with nationalism and hubris, the international journeys of “our” hawks bring us together, adding to our appreciation of distance and, paradoxically, connections. We prepare for a time of unknown duration where we must stay at home while these birds are starting on a 3000-mile migration back to their natal ground. They have been there before and know the way. I envy them, since I seem to be both at home and adrift at the same time.

The arrival of this mutated virus, which may have made the leap from an illegally poached pangolin to a human being, is a stark reminder both of evolution and the destruction of the natural world at the hands of our species. We are ever so conscious of the movements of the virus in our world, but the underlying reality of our own invasion into the world of pangolins and their viruses is the background music we strain to hear. That music will only get louder. At the same time, this new coronavirus has no consciousness and no awareness of us. It only needs our movements to keep going, and our bodies as new hosts and new evolutionary laboratories. We are very obliging about those needs, even as we gain consciousness of their dangers.

Consciousness is a blessing, but also a plague. The lack of attention to human concerns by those in the non-human world is almost enviable right now; we yearn to return to that blissful nonconcern that the rest of nature has for us. In a 1969 song entitled “Eskimo Blue Day,” Grace Slick and Paul Kantner summed it up brilliantly:

Consider how small you are
Compared to your scream
The human dream
Doesn't mean shit to a tree

But consciousness also means that we can pay attention not only to this unique and devastating spring-time, but also to the unconcerned natural world of birds, their travels and their lives. My delight in birds and glancing involvement in their daily rhythm has not changed in this plague year. Haunting hawks gives me hope, as well as another social network where the distancing tomorrow will be followed, inevitably, by reunion and reconnection next fall.

Godspeed, Harley. Stay safe in your summer haunts, and we'll see you on the other side.



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The purpose of the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society is to teach people to enjoy and respect birds and their habitats. NFHAS advocates preservation of prairie ecosystems and urban green spaces thus saving the lives of birds and enriching the lives of people.

Also available online at nfhas.org

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PLEASE consider joining our NFHAS Board.

Contact Patricia Yeager if interested, and watch our website and newsletter for time and day of meeting.

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