

My Chattering Friends

by Edward Wollenberg, retired Supt.

In a mysterious rite of spring, today, March 19, thousands of swallows will descend on the Mission San Juan Capistrano. In keeping with tradition there will be a daylong Fiesta de las Golondrinas [Festival of the Swallows] at this 200-year-old Franciscan mission.

A centuries-old legend has it that flocks of migrating swallows, flying 6000 miles from Argentina, pay homage to St. Joseph by arriving en masse at Capistrano on his feast day.

So, the swallows have returned to Capistrano, and shortly will also make their appearance again in the Midwest.

For years we did everything imaginable to get purple martins to take a lease at the confines of the Innsbrook Country Club. Needless to say, I had plenty of expert advice from the members, who are so knowledgeable in every phase of country club operations, from agronomy to financial wizardry and, including, ornithology.

We contacted many of the so-called martin experts, including cities like Griggsville, Illinois — which is titled, "The Purple Martin Capitol of the Nation". We erected martin houses, strung wire from one house to another, and did everything the experts suggested. All to no avail.

It was a few years after abandoning our efforts and hopes of luring them to our area when, while entering the cart shed one morning I heard a strange "peeping" noise. There, on the joist of the cart shed were two swallows — midget cousins of the purple martins — greeting me in a cautious way. I was ecstatic, to say the least, and welcomed them with open arms. I watched that first pair build their nest alongside a 2 x 6 rafter

high in the peak of the roof.

Their nests may not be the most beautiful, but they are striking examples of bird patience and industry. The mud used for these nests to cement it together was brought in beakful by beakful, with an occasional strand of grass incorporated with the sandy mud. And I have to believe that their "building" is more efficient in terms of material than is the work of most human bricklayers.

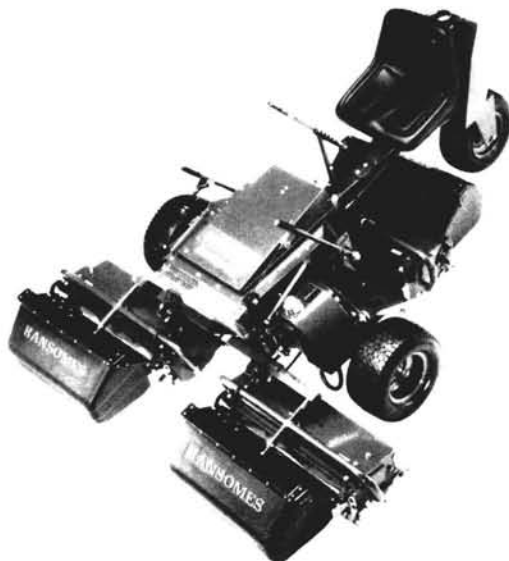
When I retired a few years ago they had multiplied to at least 100 or more, and seemed they brought all their kin after the first years of occupancy. We never saw a single purple martin, but I could not have asked for a better substitute.

To me there isn't a more graceful bird in the air than the swallow. They seem to have such a sense of fun, and have often seen two of them appearing to be playing tag, or competing in aerial acrobatics and playing what seemed like follow-the-leader tactics. They seem to enjoy showing-off for anyone who will be an audience.

They are generally quiet and orderly, but if you take the time to listen they will chatter with you and at you all day long. My grandmother used to sing a little ditty in German to me that went something like this:

Frau Swalba ist ein zwitscherer
Sie zwitsch den gansen longen tag
Und wann sie niemand horen willt
Zwitsch sie fur sich allein
Das zwitscheren, das zwitschotcheren
Den gansen longen tag

Which, literally translated, means:



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(My Chattering Friends cont'd.)

Lady Swallow is a chatterer
She chatters the whole day long
And when no one wants to listen to her
She will chatter to herself
That chatter, that chattering
Goes on the whole day long

Yes, they are very verbal, once they get to know you.

They eat a tremendous number of insects, such as gnats, moths, flies, leafhoppers and the ever annoying and pesky mosquito. I have seen the cushions on the golf carts literally covered with dead insects in the morning, which I assumed dropped from their mouths in feeding their young up in the nests. In the book, "Gardening Without Poisons", Beatrice Hunter reported, that a single swallow devours 1000 leafhoppers in 12 hours.

We seldom think of swallows as companionable birds, such as robins, we choose to nest close to human habitations. Yet, the swallows prefer to nest inside a building, and if there is any choice they seem to pick one which is used constantly by human beings. For instance, our old and obsolete pumphouse at Innsbrook, offered many good places for swallows to nest, and had enough openings to admit a whole flock of them, and is located by the creek which should supply an ever abundance of accessible mosquitoes for their diet. But not one pair ever took up residency there.


The pumphouse is quite a distance from any other buildings and nobody hardly ever goes there anymore. The swallows chose, instead, the cart shed and the equipment building, where there is a lot of action every day. In fact, one pair built a nest in our shop above the shop lamp just 10 feet from my office.

And in the morning, those that had been locked out the night before, were perched on the roof waiting for you to open the buildings. Those that were locked-in would greet you on their way out. And until you went outside again, there was seldom a bird on the roof; two minutes after going outside there were a half dozen waiting and talking to you.

I recall an incident when my daughter and grandson, Gabe, while visiting from California, dropped by the club so I could give Gabe a ride on the golf cart as I had promised him. They said when they walked into the cart shed all chattering stopped, as they were cautiously "checked out". When I entered a few moments later, they greeted me with their usual exuberant and enthusiastic chatter, seemingly, giving approval to the strangers that were my guests.

Are they messy? Yes, they are. But only their children, and they are "potty" trained a lot faster than we humans train our kids. The baby swallows do not mess in their nest, and hang their little "you-know-what" over the edge of the nest, and anything obstructing the line of gravity is going to be "put upon". My chairman suggested at one time, that maybe we should have a Pest Control outfit come in and spray the interior of the building to discourage their nesting. My reply was, "Unless this is a direct order, I will clean up after these enjoyable critters. It gives me more pleasure to do, then the human messes I have been periodically subjected to and demanded to clean up for you humans."

Since retiring I miss a number of things, and the wonderful chattering and acrobatic swallows is one of them. Whether they are still tenants at Innsbrook since I left I do not know. I certainly hope so.



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