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## Tree Swallow Behavior at Lyman Woods

by Richard Hospers

Lyman Woods in DuPage County has 12 new Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) houses. Not only do these houses provide a nesting cavity for Eastern Bluebirds, but also for Black-capped Chickadees (*Poecile atricapillus*) and Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) as well. As a member of the DuPage Birding Club who has done Spring Bird Counts at Lyman Woods for six years, I noticed bluebirds there on many occasions. However, there were no nesting boxes for them, so in the fall of 2000 I put up 12 Peterson Boxes on one-inch electric conduit pipes with PVC sleeves for predator control.

I believe Tree Swallows are as beautiful as bluebirds and welcomed them to Lyman Woods the spring of 2001. You only have one chance each summer to observe Tree Swallow nesting behavior because they are single brooded. Bluebirds can still use the boxes for their second or third brood after the young swallows fledge. I had experienced the Tree Swallow "dive-bombing" flights at McKee Marsh and The Morton Arboretum (DuPage County) when I came too close to their nesting box. I was a stranger. At Lyman Woods I became a keeper.

Bluebird monitors know that bluebirds tolerate your presence. There are some reports of bluebirds with food in their bill sitting on the hand of the monitor and feeding their babies after the box was opened. This lack of fear is especially true if you have a few boxes near your home and visit them frequently.

What about Tree Swallows? Are they always crazy kamikaze defenders of their nesting box? I had four active Tree Swallow boxes at Lyman Woods the summer of 2001, and this is what I have observed. First, I must explain how I approach the nesting boxes. I give them ample warning of my approach by talking

to the birds. When close, I tap on the side while standing behind the box so the parents in the box can exit the hole without seeing a threatening face in their line of flight. During the nest-building stage, all the Tree Swallows avoided me by perching some distance from the house or by taking flight when I approached.

After they started to lay eggs, each pair of adults had their own unique way of responding to me. This would seem to indicate that their nest-defending behavior is not innate but determined by environmental influences. Tree Swallows don't defend a territory; they defend their nesting site. One pair actually responded to my talking by coming half way out of the opening and watching me or by sitting on top of the box quietly with constant eye contact. I could clean out brush six feet in front of the box and it didn't disturb them at all. Another pair had always been furtive in their response to my approach, quietly flying away when I talked to them. During the last week of May, my partner and I tapped on the side of this box and neither one of the parents flew out. The box is above eye level. After we opened the box, my partner reached in expecting to take out a hatchling and we were amazed when she took out one of the adults. No fuss or struggling. It was so calm.

I usually monitor bluebirds in the afternoon because they lay their eggs early in the morning. Sometimes the female bluebird will not leave the nest if she is laying an egg. This was not the case with the female Tree Swallow. She had hatchlings.

A third pair of Tree Swallows was completely different from the two mentioned above. When I talked to them on my approach they became extremely excited. They would zoom out of the box and circle above making threatening dives at my head. The flight