



MONTEREY NEWS

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The Global Barn Swallow

The barn swallow is one of the most active insect and mosquito predators—fortunately well distributed around most of the world. It is very common everywhere across the continent of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and here in North America well into the north of Canada. It ranks in public opinion as one of the most essential species for insect control. In the fall, all the barn swallows migrate to the central and south Americas.

As in my illustration it is among the best flying predators as it swoops and dives, skimming across the water and high over fields to catch and eat in one graceful motion in flight.

Along the shore line of Buzzards Bay, the barn swallows favor finding nesting homes under buildings and overpasses, especially under the roofs of horse and cow barns. The coming of swallows to our shores has always been a natural sign of the arrival of spring. Under the overhead structures they build a cup-shaped nest out of grass and loose feathers using their own mixture of mud pellets to cement it in place. Over the years nearly half of these nests have been known to be repaired again and again.



They survive the passage of time, returning to the same places using their homing instinct. This instinct was memorialized in this popular love song from the 40s, “When the swallows come back to Capistrano, That’s the day I pray that you’ll come back to me.”

Ancient mariners painted their arms with tattoos of swallows as a positive omen of safe return after thousands of miles around the world. In medieval

culture the swallow was believed to be descended from the eternal spirit of nightingales. Today the swallow is still depicted on postage stamps in many old-world countries and has been the national bird of Austria since 1969.

— George B. Emmons