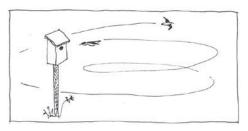## Bird in the Box

Tree Swallows

We enjoy looking at birds, and we entice them closer to our house, our orchard. They are inspiring, beautiful, sometimes understated, and, amazingly, they can fly. Here at our homestead we have knocked together a few nesting boxes, some ducksized, some smaller. The building plans are often titled "for Bluebirds," but there are other birds that are cavity nesters. They look for a little dark hole into a tree trunk, or box. Over the years, we have had Bluebirds, Chickadees, House Wrens, all sorts of mice, and Tree Swallows in our boxes. In the bigger one in the swamp we've never had a Wood Duck, but once a little Screech Owl moved in.

We folks get blindered by our intentions, sometimes. I will build a nestbox for Bluebirds. Now I will see Bluebirds around here. The result of this boxed thinking (sorry) is that when we see a bird that is blue we feel fulfilled. When we realize that this is a blue bird, not a Bluebird, we may be so unnerved as to take regrettable action. But the bird we see, too beautiful to name like all of them, is blue-green above, with pure white underparts, including the throat right up to the bill. This is a Tree Swallow. In Latin it was once called *Iridoprocne bicolor*. The species name is easy: two colors, white below and indescribable iridescence above. That genus name, *Iridoprocne*, is a good attempt. *Irido* means rainbow, which is iridescence, refracted sunlight. But *Procne* refers to the woman in Greek mythology who was turned into a swallow for her own safety and escape after she and her abused sister were about to be offed by the brutal and rapist king of Thrace, Procne's husband. He had been very bad to Procne's sister Philomela, but the sisters took a gruesome and maybe worse revenge. The details of this myth do not belong in a story about birds. We may think of birds as awful bullies when they are taking over a nestbox we built for some other bird, but the animals are nothing compared to us, I promise you. For badness, both in myth and in past and present history, we get the prizes.

Emphasizing the good things, as my old pappy used to advise, here is more on the Tree Swallow, now called *Tachycineta bicolor*. These name changes are confusing to us civilians, but the taxonomists have their reasons. I don't think, in this case, it was about dodging the gory Greek story in which two ladies turn into birds at the end.

More likely it was because someone observant and principled determined that these birds were very like another kind of swallow found out west, and the two should be in the same genus *Tachycineta* , which means "fast mover." That western cousin is the Violet-Green Swallow and has been called a "fast mover" since I bought my first field guide. In those days, the Tree Swallows were beautiful Greek women, capable of significant family carnage. Now they join the Violet-Greens and fly fast.

They do this every day in our orchard, swooping, dipping, diving. Earlier in the summer they would light on the bicyclewheel bean trellis for love and twittering. Once, when I hadn't seen them for a few days, I risked a look in the box. Three eggs, one of which had hatched into a sort of pink and gray blob. I touched it and it was warm, so probably a living thing. Screwing the box back tight, I worried I might have altered the course of evolution, or at least doomed these little birds. No such thing, though. The parents went back to tending them very soon. Since then I have read about a Cornell ornithologist who has been "farming" Tree Swallows for decades. One thing this involves is his opening many boxes and scooping out all the little "altricial" babies (helpless, blind, and without feathers) so he can put tiny bands on their legs. The kids survive, the parents seem not to mind, and this way we can find out if the same birds come back year after year. We may also find out where they spend the winter, if anyone is catching them down there to look at their bands.

Tree Swallow live on insects, mostly, so they can't spend the winter in Monterey where it's so cold. They do take a chance on an early Massachusetts return, though, sticking to the coast, because they are able to eat the bayberries that grow there. In March they can find the berries from the previous year, so they show up then in Plymouth sometimes, and on Cape Cod. They can also stay late over there, until 19 November, because the new berry crop stays on the bushes. Here in the highlands, we won't see Tree Swallows until the middle of April. If we get a cold wet spell then, our birds will head for coastal bayberries for a few days, then come back when the sun comes out, to swoop around our orchard, grabbing insects on the wing.

Tree Swallows often fly low over lakes and rivers, finding good hunting there. They also skim their bodies against the surface for bathing and then rise quickly, shaking off drops of water.

Tree Swallows flock up for migration, sometimes in the hundreds of thousands. They gather in the marshes along the shore and then fly very high to head south along the coast. Edward Howe Forbush, a former Massachusetts state ornithologist, describes such a flock over the marsh near Indian River in southern Florida.

"A huge black cloud drifted rapidly in from the west, and as it came over the marsh it began to roll and gyrate as if tossed about by strong, erratic winds. Then we knew that it must be a vast flight of birds. As the mass veered about over the center of the marsh, there shot down from near its center a long black tongue, forming a column which, when it reached the reed-tops, spread out with a terrific roar of wings until the whole phenomenon resembled a great black cloud connected with a black sea by a water-spout of equal blackness, and down this spout the cloud itself discharged into the marsh. When the last of the birds were down, I waded far into the marsh until I came to the edge of the roosting flock, and found the tops of the reeds covered with Tree Swallows." (Forbush, *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States*, Norwood Press, 1929.) — Bonner McAllester