



Creature Feature: Spring 2012

By Pat Raynock

Swallows and Spring

As I walk out to the barn to feed the animals on these early spring mornings, I look for signs that the Barn Swallows have returned to *Flower Field Farm*. I wait and wonder how many birds will make it back to the farm this year, hoping that their migration north hasn't proved too treacherous.



By I, Malene

While many farmers consider these birds as pests because they nest in the rafters of their barns and drop "guano" onto stored equipment, I happen to think they are one of the most interesting of the birds we see at the farm. Every spring, the birds migrate back here from their wintering quarters in South America. Although this little bird can migrate from as far south as Patagonia, hundreds of thousands can be seen wintering in the marshes and grain fields of northern Argentina. Imagine the instinctual drive and tenacity it must take to make this trek back and forth; and to wind up year after year in our barns and outbuildings, ready to breed and continue the cycle of life. One morning, I will hear their *chee-chee* call and chatty squeaks and I will look up into the barn rafters to see that the first of "my" birds has returned. Within a day or so of the early arrivals, the entire community will have returned, usually consisting of about 30 breeding pairs. Over the next few weeks, they will court and build their mud nests in all of the outbuildings and get busy with the task of hatching and raising their chicks.

The Barn Swallow is abundant and distributed around the world and it is found just about everywhere in North America below the Arctic timberline. Although it was a cave dweller in earlier times, it quickly adapted to nest building under eaves, bridges, and in open buildings. On warm summer evenings we thoroughly enjoy watching the aerial acrobatics of these elegant birds as they dive and soar for mosquitos in the evening sky. They are also a hoot to watch as I mow the fields; they circle the tractor and pluck insects that are thrown up into the air. They fly back and forth to their nests to feed the hatchlings with the treats the mowing provides - flies, beetles, wasps, and all sorts of "insectia". And, although the

birds do create some litter in the barns, we have no pesky summer flies in our barns because the birds clear them out to feed the voracious appetites of their chicks.

And, as for those nests, our Cooks Creek moistened clay soils are ideal for strong and sturdy nests. The birds will “swoop and scoop” some water and then make a dive to earth to add a pinch of soil, mix the two elements while in flight back to the nest, and sure as any potter, place the amalgam into just the right spot as they construct their nests. There are three common species of swallows in North America and although they may look similar in appearance, their nesting habits are quite different.

Barn swallows have a “half-cup” dry mud nest with the parents taking turns coming and going from the top of the nest, whereas Cliff Swallows will build a nest with a side entrance, and Tree Swallows rear their young in hollows of trees. Barn swallows can rear two clutches of 3-5 chicks in a single season.

By mid-summer, the first clutch of chicks is strong and fat, ready to take wing. What could possibly be cuter than looking up into the timbers to see five sets of little chick eyes staring back at you as they get ready to make their first flight!



By Mario Modesto Mata