

Are Tree Swallows Predators of Bluebirds?

By Leif Marking

Tree Swallows are definitely ambitious nest box competitors of bluebirds and often gain occupancy because they are better aerial acrobats, and frequently they gather as a foursome or more to engage in ownership activities. I fully realize that Mother Nature has a "survival of the fittest" plan that favors stronger individuals, but until this nesting season I have not regarded the swallows as predators.

The following observations were recorded for nest box number 10 located on my farm beside a field road between grassland and cornfield. Bluebirds have occupied that box previously and again this mid April they were building a nest. On 4/24/09 three bluebird eggs were recorded along with the adults. On 4/29 the eggs were missing, but the concerned adults were present. The nest seemed undisturbed, but there was considerable wetness in the bottom of the nest cup suggesting the eggs were broken.

A pair of swallows occupied a nearby perch, and the bluebirds were foraging insects in the bare ground corn field. I assumed the swallows were in control of the nest box since there were a few feathers present and the nest material was redistributed, but on 5/08 the bluebirds had refurbished the nest cup. Then on 5/15 there were no bluebird eggs, but on 5/22 there were 4 swallow eggs in the nest cup. Apparently the swallows destroyed any eggs present and deposited their own eggs. Those eggs were gone on 5/29 so I removed all nesting material. Several pair of swallows were present so naturally I suspected inter specific nest box competition. The bluebirds had apparently abandoned the area.

Tree Swallows quickly built a fragile nest and 5 eggs were present on 6/12 and 6/19. They had hatched by 6/26, but on 7/03 they were all dead with no apparent disturbance in the nest. Most likely the 10 day old chicks died of starvation in abandonment for no obvious reason. However, this ridge top location is perhaps six miles from any aquatic environment that offers sufficient flying insects for the swallows to feed their young. I concluded from these observations that Tree Swallows can be predators of eggs of bluebirds and also eggs of their own species.