

Wildlife Express

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Swallows

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The Swallow Family

Have you ever been near a river or lake and suddenly noticed many small birds twisting and turning above you? These are swallows hunting for insects hatching from the water. They are expert flyers. If you watch them, you will be amazed by their aerial acrobatics.

Swallows are found worldwide, except in the coldest places. They are a family of birds made up of about 86 different species. In North America, you can see eight of these species with six of them spending the summer in Idaho. Measuring five to seven inches in length, swallows have broad, rounded heads. Their beaks are small, but don't let that fool you! The mouth behind that beak is large. This large mouth is the perfect tool for swallows to catch their food. They are aerial insectivores. This means that they catch flying insects right out of the air. That large mouth is like a net that the swallow uses to catch its food.

Swallows eat a wide variety of flying insects. What they eat depends on what is hatching or swarming. A list of swallow prey includes flies, flying ants, wasps, bees, beetles, moths, butterflies, crickets, mayflies, dragonflies, sawflies, true bugs, caddisflies, mosquitoes, grasshoppers, leafhoppers, and many more.

Catching food in mid-air is not easy. To help swallows do this, they rely on their long, slender, pointed wings. These wings allow the birds to twist, turn and dive with incredible speed and maneuverability (ma-new-ver-a-BIL-a-tee). They drink and even take baths while flying! Swallows feed above water or land. Wherever insects might be flying, swallows are sure to be nearby.

Some swallow species such as violet-green and cliff swallows feed mainly over land. They will follow flying insects to higher altitudes than other swallows. Barn, tree and rough-winged swallows prefer to hunt over water or fields. They usually fly at lower altitudes.

Swallows build different nests, depending on the species. These are called nesting strategies. Each gives the birds different advantages. Bank swallows build burrows in sandy banks along rivers or streams. These sand banks attract many bank swallows, and the birds form a nesting colony. A strategy tree and violet-green swallows use is nesting in cavities. These can be old woodpecker nests, crevices in trees or buildings or a nest box. The third nesting strategy is building mud nests. Barn and cliff swallows are well-known for their interesting mud nests. Barn swallows make a mud cup that they stick to the side of buildings, bridges or cliff faces. The gourd-shaped mud nests of cliff swallows are easy to recognize. Like the nests of barn swallows, cliff swallow nests are often found on man-made structures. Cliff swallows nest together in colonies. Some of these colonies can be quite large with up to 6000 nests! Colonies give the birds protection from predators. Lots of eyes keeping watch, helps the rest of the birds stay safe. Cavities and burrows make protected places for laying eggs and raising babies.

Watching swallows is one of the pleasures of summer. Next time you find yourself along the water, enjoy their incredible aerial acrobatics.

Meet Idaho's Swallows

Bank Swallow



- Lives near streams and rivers.
- Adults dig nest burrows in sandbanks using their wings, feet, and beaks.
- One of the most widely distributed birds in the world.
- Called sand martins in other countries.

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Barn Swallow



Barn Swallow

- Idaho's largest swallow, almost seven inches long.
- The only North American swallow with a forked tail.
- Will make 1200 trips to gather mud for building its nest.
- Cobalt blue on the back with orangish-brown on the chest and belly.

Photos: CC-BY Catherine Zinsky





Cliff Swallow



Jan Maguire
PHOTOGRAPHY



- Has a square tail.
- Colorful swallow with a blue back, chestnut throat, white forehead patch, and a buff-colored rump.
- Young birds that have recently left their nest gather together in a group called a creche (kresh) where the adults continue to care for them.
- Nest together in large colonies.

Top Photo: CC-BY Jan Maguire @ Flickr Creative Commons

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Northern Rough-winged Swallow

- Named for rough barbs on the leading edge of a male's outermost primary flight feather, on each wing.
- Its Latin species name means "saw feather."
- Nests in cavities. Uses natural crevices and burrows as well as human-made structures like gutters, drainpipes or holes in walls.
- Plain dusty-brown in color.



Tree Swallow



- Iridescent blue-green on back with white underparts.
- Cavity nester that readily uses nest boxes.
- Winters farther north than other swallow species.
- Eats berries which helps it survive winter along the southern coast of the U.S.

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Violet-green Swallow



- Beautiful iridescent green and purplish back; white underparts; white on the face and on either side of the rump.
- Lives only in western North America.
- Cavity nester.
- Recorded flying 28 miles per hour.



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Grabbing Lunch



use a method called sallying. They hunt from a specific perch, watching carefully for flying insects. When they spot one, the flycatcher flies out to grab the insect in mid-air before returning to its perch to eat. You can sometimes hear the flycatcher's beak snap as it grabs the insect.

Swallows riff on sallying, using a similar hunting technique called hawking. While they are also grabbing insects from the air, they do so on the wing, not starting from a perch. A hunting swallow grabs the insect in its large mouth and eats it as it flies, before chasing after another insect. Many insects hatch from flightless larvae into flying adults. Any sort of insect hatch off water or land means dinner time for swallows. Their wings are adapted to making the twists and turns swallows need to grab a meal out of thin air.

When you want a snack, what do you do? You probably open the fridge or pantry and grab what you want. For birds, getting a bite to eat is a bit more complicated. If you are a hawk or owl, you must find your food and then safely catch it. Ideally, the prey animal is not aware that the hawk or owl is around and it's an easy catch. But sometimes, the prey animal gets away, leaving the raptor hungry.

Many birds that eat invertebrates use a technique called gleaning to find food. These birds carefully search for food by checking under leaves, probing into cracks and crevices in bark or rocks, or scratching on the ground. When they find some food, they pluck it off and eat it. It's kind of like choosing from a buffet, but with a little more work required to get your meal.

Birds that eat flying insects have another way of capturing their food. Flycatchers





You Are What You Eat

Catherine Zinsky

Birds eat many different things. From insects to plants to other birds to fish and more, birds eat just about anything. Science groups animals in many different ways, including by what they eat. These groups have special scientific names. You already know some of these names. How about carnivore, herbivore or omnivore? Like scientific names, these words for groups of animals often come from Latin words.

The suffix “-vore” comes from the Latin word “vorare.” This means “to devour.” The prefix *carni* means meat. Put them together and you have carnivore, a meat-eater. *Omni* is Latin for all or many. An animal that eats many different things is an omnivore. How about a plant eater? *Herb* refers to plant, so an herbivore is an animal that eats plants.

Sometimes, these labels can get very specific. An insectivore is a kind of carnivore that

eats insects. Swallows and many songbirds are insectivores. A carnivore that eats fish is called a piscivore (*pie-sa-vore*). Frugivores are herbivores that eat fruit. A granivore is an herbivore that eats seeds. Ever heard of a hemovore? In Latin, “hemo” refers to blood. So, a hemovore is an animal that eats blood. Next time you swat a mosquito, you can say “take that you hemovore!” Have fun creating names for animals based on what they eat. You and your friends just might be pizzavores!



Photo: CC-BY Catherine Zinsky

Winging It

When you watch a bird fly, you might think that all bird wings are the same. In fact, they are quite different. The shape, length and width of wings allows birds to fly in many different ways. For example, a songbird like a robin has different wings than a red-tailed hawk. And the hawk has very different wings than a Canada goose, which has very different wings than a swallow.

Different birds use their wings in different ways. Take a red-tailed hawk. This raptor often soars high up in the sky. Its long, broad wings allow the hawk to take advantage of rising warm air, called thermals. The hawk can soar on the rising air for a long time as it looks for food. Soaring allows the hawk to save energy because it doesn't have to flap its wings.

On the other hand, have you ever seen a robin soaring high up in the sky? Of course not! Robins have short, broad wings that are good for flying through trees, not soaring. Birds like quail and grouse have short, rounded wings. Their wings

help them make their explosively quick get-aways. But you will never see a grouse soaring high in the sky. And you will never see a red-tailed hawk fly away as quickly as a quail.

Swallow wings are long and slender. They are built for speed and agility, letting these birds make amazing acrobatic turns in the air. This lets swallows chase and catch flying insects. Their wings also allow them to drink while flying. If a robin tried that, it would find itself taking a swim!

Hummingbirds have very specialized wings. These tiny birds are the only birds that can fly forward, up, down and backwards. In fact, they are the only kind of bird that can fly backwards. Hummingbird wings also allow the bird to hover in front of a flower. Have you ever seen a robin, red-tailed hawk or swallow hover? Even if they cannot, their wings are adapted to allow them to do the kind of flying they need to survive. Next time you spot some birds, watch them fly. You will see that bird wings really are amazing!



Swallows in Story, Legend, and Celebration



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In many cultures, animals play important roles. Some are thought to be messengers of the gods. Others provide lessons that guide the behavior of people. Positive and negative traits are said to be represented by animals. They are even thought to predict the weather.

Swallows have been linked with loyalty, cheerfulness, and patience. The ancient Romans believed that swallows were the souls of children that died at birth. Seeing a swallow brought hope and renewal to grieving families. In ancient Greece, swallows were linked to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Seeing a swallow brought good luck and happiness. In parts of Africa, swallows were believed to be sent by tribal ancestors to bring comfort to the living. According to some

native American peoples, barn swallows were responsible for bringing fire to Earth by stealing it from the sun.

Swallows are also the focus of a famous celebration in San Juan Capistrano, California. In 1776, a mission was established by a Spanish Franciscan priest. The mission priests noticed that cliff swallows returned to nest every year around March 19, St. Joseph's Day. The birds built their mud nests under the eaves of the mission. Over time, the celebration of St. Joseph's Day also became a celebration of the Return of the Swallows. It is still celebrated today. The swallows are seen as a welcome sign of spring. Their return and the celebration have made this community famous.

It's Summer!



It's May and school is almost out. How are you going to spend your summer? Why not plan to spend a lot of your summer outside? Put on some sunscreen and a hat, grab your water bottle and head outdoors! Idaho has great places to explore in your own backyard and neighborhood as well as in forests, parks, and wilderness areas. Get your family or friends and plan some fun outdoor activities. Time outside will help you stay healthy and relaxed plus help you become more creative and observant.

Here are a few ideas for summer fun:

Go fishing

Take a hike

Go camping

Paddle a canoe or kayak

Ride your bike

Build a sandcastle

Go swimming

Climb a tree

Float a river

Build a fort

Watch bugs

Have a picnic

Play in the sprinkler

Draw with sidewalk chalk

Shoot hoops in your driveway

Lie on your back and watch the clouds

Stay up late and look the stars

Get up early and watch the sunrise

Keep an outdoor journal

Pitch a tent in your backyard
and spend the night

Build a bird feeder or nest box

Play kick-the-can with your friends

Plant vegetables or flowers

Draw or paint outside

Go bird watching

Read a book outside

Become an outdoor photographer

Ride your scooter

Visit a nature center

Go on a night hike

Roast marshmallows over a campfire

Keep a summer wildlife list

Go berry-picking

Play marbles

Have a great summer of outdoor fun!





Fill in the feathers

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to: victoria.runnoe@idfg.idaho.gov or Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707