

Barn Swallow

Hirundo rustica

Glistening cobalt blue above and tawny below, Barn Swallows dart gracefully over fields, barnyards, and open water in search of flying insect prey. Look for the long, deeply forked tail that streams out behind this agile flyer and sets it apart from all other North American swallows. Barn Swallows often cruise low, flying just a few inches above the ground or water. True to their name, they build their cup-shaped mud nests almost exclusively on human-made structures.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

When perched, the sparrow-sized Barn Swallow appears cone shaped, with a slightly flattened head, no visible neck, and broad shoulders that taper to long, pointed wings. The tail extends well beyond the wingtips and the long outer feathers give the tail a deep fork.

Color Pattern

Barn Swallows have a steely blue back, wings, and tail, and rufous to tawny underparts. The blue crown and face contrast with the cinnamon-colored forehead and throat. White spots under the tail can be difficult to see except in flight. Males are more boldly colored than females.

Behavior

Barn Swallows feed on the wing, snagging insects from just above the ground or water to heights of 100 feet or more. They fly with fluid wingbeats in bursts of straight flight, rarely gliding, and can execute quick, tight turns and dives. When aquatic insects hatch, Barn Swallows may join other swallow species in mixed foraging flocks.

Habitat

You can find the adaptable Barn Swallow feeding in open habitats from fields, parks, and roadway edges to marshes, meadows, ponds, and coastal waters. Their nests are often easy to spot under the eaves or inside of sheds, barns, bridges and other structures, lands, and agricultural fields.

Cool Facts

- Barn Swallows once nested in caves throughout North America, but now build their nests almost exclusively on human-made structures. Today the only North American Barn Swallow population that still regularly uses caves as nest sites occurs in the Channel Islands off the California coast.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 5.9 - 7.5 inches
- Wingspan - 11.4 - 12.6 inches
- Weight - 0.6 - 0.7 ounces

