

Notes

Parking Garage Swallows

George Fairfield

Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) occasionally place their nests in the most unlikely places. Bent (1942), when preparing his life history of the species, received a report of a nest on a moving narrow-gauge railway that carried passengers and freight over a two-mile portage in British Columbia. Another contributor told of Barn Swallows nesting for many years on a steamer running on Lake George in New York State.

Dr. W.B. Scott recently told me about the Barn Swallows that were nesting in the parking garage under the high-rise condominium building where he lives at 1000 King Street West in Kingston, Ontario. The swallows could gain access to their nests only when a vehicle entered or left the garage.

I visited the site on 19 June 2000. The building is on Cataraqui Bay on Lake Ontario in an area which appeared to be good habitat for Barn Swallows. The entrance and exit doors were 24 m apart on the west side of the building, and were about 3.7 m wide and 2.5 m in height.

I watched the doors from outside the garage at a point where I

could see both doors, as well as the nearby approaches. From 1000h to 1200h, I noted the times of all birds entering and leaving the garage, and flying close by. I also noted the times that vehicles were entering and leaving the garage.

The doors were opened and closed by a sensing device triggered by the driver from inside the vehicle, and were open for only a few seconds, just enough time for the vehicle to move safely through. The swallows demonstrated great flying ability at entering between a vehicle and the door frame, sometimes zipping through at the last second as the doors slammed shut.

In the two-hour period, I saw swallows enter the garage ten times and leave five times. They used both doors roughly the same amount. In that same period, the doors opened and closed a total of 34 times, or an average of once every 3.53 minutes. However, the 3.53 average gives a poor idea of the times available for the swallows to gain access to their nests. There was considerable variation in the vehicle traffic flow in and out of the garage. Several vehicles would go through in a fairly short period and then there would

be a long drought. The shortest period was less than one minute and the longest was 11 minutes. As the length of time between access opportunities increased, the swallows patrolled back and forth before the doors more frequently, and on one occasion, a swallow perched on a light over the garage doors, waiting for a chance to enter.

By keeping track of the swallows entering and exiting, and those flying around near the garage, I was able to calculate that there was a minimum of six swallows and three nests. This assumes that the birds were feeding young. If some were sitting on eggs, there may have been more. I did not search the garage for nests.

Discussion

It is not difficult to see the advantage of nesting inside the garage over more easily accessible nesting sites. The nests would be safe from American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*), and other nest predators. On the other hand, the birds must experience problems during the fledging and early flying periods of the young birds.

How did these birds initiate the habit of nesting in a situation with such limited access? Why would a bird take a chance on entering an opening that would immediately disappear?

The answer seems to be that the swallows established the habit of nesting in the garage at a time when the doors were always open. The assistant superintendent of the building told me that four years earlier the garage had undergone extensive renovations, and for one full nesting season the doors remained open. It is easy to see how the Barn Swallows, given their propensity for returning to previous nesting sites, would make every effort to gain access to the old nesting site in subsequent years.

Blom (2000) reported an even stranger case of Barn Swallows nesting in a garage, involving a factory in Denmark where “the birds would return from foraging and hover in front of the electronic eye, breaking the beam and causing the door to open, allowing them to get in and feed their young”.

Of course, the Kingston Barn Swallows did not have the advantage of being able to trigger the garage door opening device themselves, and had to depend on the drivers to gain access to their nests.

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Re-use of Nesting Material by Blue-gray Gnatcatchers

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On 15 May 1999, at 1010h, along the willows bordering the Desjardins Canal in Dundas Marsh, *Hamilton-Wentworth*, I observed a pair of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Poliophtila caerulea*) in the early stages of building a nest. The nest was situated about 15 m up in a Crack Willow (*Salix fragilis*), on a major horizontal branch, at its junction with another, slightly overtopping, major branch. At the time of observation, the nest consisted only of a base. Both adults participated in the building activities, tamping down and shaping the nest's base, and adding webs, feathers, and fine grasses. The most interesting aspect of the observation, however, was the source from which these birds were collecting some of their building material.

On repeated occasions, I watched the birds visit an old gnatcatcher nest near the new one. Because of the close proximity of the old and new nests, it is possible that the old nest belonged to this same pair, either in the previous year, or perhaps even earlier in 1999, but abandoned for some reason. This old nest was dislodged from its branch in a nearby Crack

Willow, probably by wind, but it was still hanging tenuously from that branch. The birds picked away at the remnants of the old nest, and carried the material back to the new nest.

The location of the new nest, in a major Y-shaped fork, is quite typical (Weston 1949, Root 1967, Peck and James 1987). The re-use of nesting material from previous nests by Blue-gray Gnatcatchers also seems to be a characteristic behaviour, and has been reported several times (Weston 1949, Ellison 1992).

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Mink Predation of a European Starling Nest

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Mink (*Mustela vison*) are well known as predators of many small animals, including birds. But, as a creature adapted to a semiaquatic life, they are not particularly noted for their tree climbing abilities, taking most prey on or close to the ground (Dunstone 1993). That they are able to climb at all should not be any surprise, as they are related to marten (*Martes americana*) and fisher (*M. penanti*), both of which are adept tree climbers (Peterson 1966). Peterson gives a rather cautious endorsement of the ability of mink to climb "as high as about 10 feet on occasion", but provides no reference for even this allowance.

A literature search on mink behaviour has failed so far to reveal their climbing ability. In fact, there are relatively few observations of predatory behaviour of this species in the wild, despite intense research worldwide (Dunstone 1993). Mink are relatively elusive and difficult to observe for any length of time in wild situations. Numerous feeding studies have been based on analysis of either stomach contents or scats, neither of which provide information on just where or how the prey was taken.

Mink spend much of their time foraging in the water for fish, frogs, crayfish, aquatic beetles, and muskrats. But they are opportunistic, able to exploit a wide variety of

prey in marshy and terrestrial habitats, including a variety of small rodents in particular, and other mammals to the size of rabbits, and birds to the size of coots and ducks (Chanin and Linn 1980, Eagle and Whitman 1987). Yearly, birds probably constitute about 5 to 10 percent of the food of mink, but at some seasons and places, may form as much as 50% or more of the diet (Hamilton 1940, Gerel 1967, Hamilton 1969, Day and Linn 1972, Chanin and Linn 1980, Wise et al. 1981). Mink are known to exploit eggs, nestlings, and fledglings in spring and summer (Melquist et al. 1981, Fournier and Hines 1998, Riley et al. 1998, Kirby and Sargeant 1999), and a variety of waterfowl in autumn, that have been wounded by hunters (Gerel 1967, Day and Linn 1972). Most of the birds taken are those associated with wetland habitats, as most of the mink activity is in or close to such habitats (Day and Linn 1972, Eagle and Whitman 1987). But, in view of the few observations of foraging activity in the wild, and the absence of records of above-ground foraging by mink, the following seems noteworthy.

Observations

About 0700h on the morning of 27 May 2000, as I was walking west-

ward along the 7th Concession of Brock Township toward the Beaver River, near Sunderland, Ontario, I looked up to see a long dark short-legged animal crossing the road and disappearing into the marsh. I frequently see mink in the area, and assumed that was what I saw. As I approached closer to the river a few minutes later, I saw two European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and a couple of Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*) scolding in the upper part of a large willow (*Salix* sp.) tree situated about 20 m south of the road. Two stems of the willow were dead and broken off. At first, I thought the starlings were chasing grackles that were trying to get at a starling nest. But, I soon realized that both species were scolding and diving at something on the far side of one of the willow stubs. Four more starlings approached the fray and added to the scolding, but took no other active part.

As I moved slightly farther along the road, I could see the tail of an animal hanging out of a cavity in the willow stub. The birds had been scolding for a short time as I approached, and it took a few more moments before a mink backed out of the cavity and descended the tree, carrying two half grown young birds. On the ground, it moved away through some brush, followed by scolding grackles right above, and starlings higher. It swam across the river and out of sight into shrubbery there. The birds did not follow.

Within two minutes, it swam

back across the river and climbed the tree again, entered the cavity and took another young bird to the ground. It then climbed back up to the cavity for a fourth young. It again swam across the river to the same area as before, this time also carrying two young birds in its mouth. In the interval while the mink was gone, the starlings were about the tree cavity, carrying food. One went to the cavity and looked in, but quickly left again. The mink soon returned, and climbed to the cavity a fourth time to retrieve a fifth young bird. The adult starlings followed it down the tree, scolding all the while. It disappeared into the bushes below, and I did not see it again.

I later measured the height of the cavity at 9 m above the ground. The trunk of the tree was essentially vertical, not leaning. The DBH of the trunk was roughly 50 cm, and at the cavity, the diameter was about 25 cm.

The mink, while perhaps not as adept as a squirrel, had little trouble ascending and descending the tree. It climbed head first, squirrel fashion, but seemed to be clinging to the tree more closely, and travelling somewhat more slowly, not scampering freely like a squirrel. The young starlings were probably at least a week old, without much feathering yet, but with quite large abdomens. It took the mink much longer to get two young birds in its mouth, the first time, than it did to grab one on each subsequent trip. Two probably represented a rather large mouthful to try to gather up, if

not to climb with. The mink was willing to make the extra trip to that height rather than try to carry two young down the tree a second time.

Discussion

Mink are generally considered to be territorial and at relatively low density, and are small with comparatively low energy requirements, and therefore likely to have little overall impact on bird populations (Dunstone 1993). But, given their demonstrated climbing abilities, and opportunistic foraging habits, a considerable number of young birds,

even when well above ground, may be subject to mink predation. If they will go to 9 m, there seems little to prevent them from going even higher, if they detect noisy young birds up there. However, they may be less inclined to travel along small branches to reach open nests well out from the trunk.

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