

Tree swallows find new homes in Meadows

BY JIM WRIGHT

New Jersey Meadowlands
Commission

Waterfront housing in the Meadowlands has been going up at an amazing rate this spring, and occupancy rates are approaching 100 percent.

Welcome to the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission's Tree Swallow Nesting Box Program, an annual community effort that now provides housing for 175 tree swallow couples and their youngest offspring.

"It's simply amazing to see how readily these little birds adapt to nest in the boxes," says NJMC Naturalist Gabrielle Bennett-Meany, who has been involved with the program since 1998. "There is an instant satisfaction to putting up a nest box and seeing, within moments, a pair of tree swallows appear. It's an incredible sight."

Last week, Bennett-Meany and fellow NJMC Naturalist Michael Newhouse erected the boxes at Harrier Meadow in North Arlington and DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst. They will also be putting up the boxes in the Mill Creek Marsh in Secaucus.

The tree swallows have certainly benefited, but so have human beings.

"These birds zip around the marshes and feed on mosquitoes and other insects, which makes them extremely beneficial as a biological insect control," says Bennett-Meany. "And they are absolutely beautiful. The males have a metallic blue back with a hint of green and a pure white belly, while the females are a bit duller."

The program began nearly two decades ago, when former NJMC Naturalist Don Smith and a few



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NJMC Naturalist Gabrielle Bennett-Meany repaired this tree swallow nesting box at DeKorte Park last week.

others put up a handful of the small wooden nesting boxes in the marsh. He saw immediately that the tree swallows loved the boxes, and suggested that more be built. A local Boy Scout troop built 24 boxes the following year, and the program has kept expanding ever since, with all sorts of community groups and local companies providing the boxes.

For the tree swallows, the attraction is not about the pretty view. They have taken to the nesting boxes for one simple reason: They need a place to live. They traditionally nested in woodpecker holes in old trees and in other small enclosures, but have suffered a severe housing shortage over the years. With development came fewer old trees, and the swallows were forced to search for new kinds of homes.

"By building nest boxes and putting them in the marsh, we have a pretty good impact on helping the [tree swallow] population," says Bennett-Meany.

Setting the boxes on wooden stakes and sticking them in the



Tree swallows at a nesting box.

water along the edges of marshes is a key part of the program. By locating the nests over water, raccoons and other predators can't reach them, and other birds—particularly house sparrows—are far less likely to claim the nest boxes for themselves.

NJMC Communications Officer Jim Wright maintains the Commission's daily nature blog, meadowblog.net – featuring beautiful photography and the latest info on the region's abundant natural wonders.

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