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TREE SWALLOWS REBOUNDING IN THE MEADOWLANDS

New data show that an innovative nesting box program and community participation have helped these tiny birds to flourish once again

LYNDHURST, N.J. – Tree swallows are thriving in the Meadowlands once again, thanks to an innovative nesting box program. And the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission now has the data to prove it.

With a huge boost from local scout troops, families and other groups, the Meadowlands Commission has erected some 250 nesting boxes in marshes throughout the 30.4-square-mile district.

This year, with the help of GPS devices, the Meadowlands Commission naturalists kept track of tree-swallow activity in all of the nesting boxes. They found that more than 60 percent were occupied by nesting pairs, with 610 eggs laid and 485 nestlings successfully fledged as of July 15.

“We knew tree swallows were nesting in these boxes, but until now we had no idea just how effective the boxes are,” said Robert Ceberio, executive director of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission. “We have more breeding pairs than we expected, and they are producing plenty of offspring.”

Tree swallows are a popular bird, not just for their iridescent beauty and graceful speed, but also because they are voracious insect-eaters. It has been estimated that a family of tree swallows can eat hundreds upon hundreds of midges, mosquitoes and other insects in a day.

The birds arrive in the district in April, raise their families, then migrate to Florida and points south again in midsummer. Each nesting pair has a clutch of two to eight eggs.

The nest-box program began nearly 20 years ago when a Meadowlands Commission naturalist put up a few nesting boxes for the six-inch-long birds, which have slowly been losing places to nest as the region gets built-out.

The program has grown into a major grassroots effort. For the past six years, the Meadowlands Commission has conducted workshops that have enabled families and groups to build the nesting houses from kits – and then donate them to the tree swallows.

“The response from the community has been tremendous,” said Ceberio. “The great thing is, many of the groups really get into it. Girl scouts from Ridgefield decorated their boxes with crayons. One Cub Scout Troop stenciled scout insignias. And a group of adults with developmental disabilities created boxes so beautiful that we hate to stick them in a marsh.”

But building the nesting boxes is just the beginning. After putting the boxes on poles along the edge of marshes throughout the district over the past two decades, commission naturalists are now engaged in a labor-intensive effort to record the activity in each of the 250 boxes every two to three weeks. They use GPS devices to determine which locations have the most breeding success. The naturalists hope to expand the program by another 50 to 100 boxes next year.

The Meadowlands and its more than 8,000 acres of urban wetlands are prime habitat not just for tree swallows. The district provides a year-round or seasonal home for more than 260 avian species, many of them threatened and endangered.

Like the tree swallow, many of these imperiled birds breed in the Meadowlands. They underscore its importance, both as a magnet for birds and as an indispensable habitat for other species whose population has been dwindling.

Nine high-resolution jpegs can be sent to you by e-mail. Contact Jim Wright at the e-mail address at the top of the first page.

Nest inside the box

Nestling

Tree swallow at box

Using the GPS

Removing a nest box roost

Tree swallow on phragmites with food

NJMC naturalists approaching nesting box by boat

Leaf-decorated nesting box (1)

Bamboo-decorated nesting box (2)