

# Temporary Care Of Nestling Tree Swallows

Situations may occur to cause persons to feel they should rescue Tree Swallow nestlings. However, please be aware that holding native birds of any age in captivity for any reason, even humanitarian, is illegal in both Canada and the United States unless you are trained and licensed to do so.

Care you give must be *temporary* until the bird can be given to a wildlife rehabilitator.

To find wildlife rehabilitators near you use either of the links below:

<http://wildliferehabber.org/>

[http://wildliferehabinfo.org/ContactList\\_MnPg.htm](http://wildliferehabinfo.org/ContactList_MnPg.htm).

**Attention: Give the rehabber a copy of the RELEASE GUIDELINES below!  
It has information he or she needs to know.**

But *before* taking any action or contacting a rehabilitator, please consider the possibilities below. The nestling may not need human assistance at all.

## Does the Nestling *Really* Need Help?

**Is the nestling in or below a box whose nest appears torn apart?**

- Possible Explanation: The box has been *predated*.
- Action: Try to reconstruct the nest and replace the young. Then watch for 2-3 hours to see if parents return to care for them. If they do, fit the box with predator protection. However, parent Tree Swallows usually desert predated nests, and *if no parents return the remaining young will need to be rehabilitated*.

**Are there nestlings in a box begging but no parents are coming to feed them?**

- Possible Explanation: Has there been *bad weather*, with several cold, wet and/or windy days in a row? If so parents may be having a difficult time foraging, and may be away from the box for long periods trying to find food.
- Action: Please observe for 2-3 hours at least, to *be absolutely certain young in the box are not being attended*, before taking nestlings to be rehabilitated.

**Have all nestlings fledged (flown from the box) but one?**

- Possible Explanation: Sometimes one nestling is smaller than its nestmates and may not fledge (fly from the nest) when the others do.
- Action: If it is still being attended by its parents leave it alone. (Don't be fooled by gray-plumaged juveniles, which may flutter around but do *not* bring food to nestlings in boxes). If you've observed for 2-3 hours at least, and no *adults* have attempted to feed the remaining nestling, it will probably require rehabilitation.

**Are nestlings 12 days old or younger being cared for by parents but one of the brood is significantly smaller than the others?**

- Possible Explanation: The small nestling may be a “*brood reduction*” nestling that is less developed because it hatched a day or more after its nestmates.
- Action: Consider *fostering* it into another nest (See [Fostering](#)). If no suitable foster nest is available consider *hand-feeding* the nestling in the field until it is 12 days old (See [Hand-Feeding](#)).

**Is a nestling on the ground, one that cannot fly strongly enough to stay airborne?**

- Possible Explanation #1: The box may be heavily infested with *parasitic mites* that have tormented the nestling so much it jumped out to escape them.
- Action #1: Approach the box quietly and look for tiny speck-like creatures crawling around the entrance hole (see below). If you do find mites you must [treat the box for mites](#) asap, *before* attempting to return the nestling to the box.
- Possible Explanation #2: If there are no mites the nestling might have been *startled* by someone or something and jumped out as an escape response.
- Action #2: In both cases block the entrance with a sock or rag for 10 minutes after returning the nestling to the box. The nestling may stay inside, but if it continues to jump out it will need to be rehabilitated, because parent Tree Swallows rarely care for young unable to fly well.



**Are adult Tree Swallows present, flying in front of the box but *refusing to enter* to feed live young you know are inside?**

- Possible Explanation: The box may be heavily infested with *parasitic mites* that the parents want to avoid, even if it means abandoning their young.
- Action: Approach the box quietly and look for tiny speck-like creatures crawling around the entrance hole. If you do find mites you must [treat the box for mites](#) asap or the nestlings inside will almost certainly die. If there are no mites are the nestlings sticking their heads out the entrance when the adults come near? If so, the adults may actually be passing food to the nestlings on the fly, without entering the box. This is common parental behavior for feeding older nestlings, and not cause for worry.

**Does the nestling appear injured?**

- Action: If you are able to handle the nestling, examine it gently. If it has obvious major *physical trauma* such as broken wings or legs, or if it has significant damage to its head or eyes, it may be past the helping point and should be left alone or euthanized by a rehabilitator or veterinarian. If injuries appear minor it should be rehabilitated.

# Guidelines for Basic Temporary Care

If after careful consideration you have determined a Tree Swallow nestling will need rehabilitation in order to survive, and you must hold the nestling until it can be turned over to a rehabilitator, here are some suggestions for its temporary care. These are based on guidelines established for Chimney Swifts and Purple Martins, two other insectivorous species whose needs we believe are similar in most ways to those of Tree Swallows.

## Housing

### You will need a small container.

- A shoebox with air holes will do for a short time, but a simple plastic container of the type sold in pet supply stores to house small animals is much better.
- The container should be roomy enough for older nestlings to flap their wings without hitting anything, but small enough so you can reach in easily to grasp the nestling and remove it for feeding and hydration. You do *not* need a large flight cage.



- Never place the container in direct sunlight or where it is exposed to cold air.
- At night cover the container with a cloth, but allow for some air circulation.

### Cover the container floor with clean cloths.

- Don't use loosely-woven cloth such as bath towels or terry which could entangle a nestling's claws and twist its legs. And don't use newspaper or paper towels - they can be slippery and don't provide warmth.
- Rumple the cloth floor-covering to create nooks for nestling to snuggle in.
- Change cloth when soiled.

### A heat pad may be needed.

- Small nestlings whose feathers are not well-developed may require added warmth.
- Heat pads should be placed under the container, never inside where they could burn the nestlings, and pads should always be set on low.
- It might be best to put pads under half the container so the nestling could move to avoid overheating.

## Hydration

**Rescued nestlings must be given fluids asap, *before any food is offered!***

- Tree Swallow nestlings that are found on the ground or that are known from continuous observation not to have been fed for hours are almost certainly dehydrated, a potentially fatal condition.
- Regular Gatorade is much better than plain water for hydration. Make sure it is at least as warm as room temperature – never use chilled Gatorade to hydrate a bird.
- 2-4 small drops of Gatorade should be given every 15 minutes for several hours to ensure rehydration is complete, *before feeding is attempted.*
- This link shows hydration of a Purple Martin; use the same method for Tree Swallows: <http://purplemartins-r-us.com/hydration-purple-martins-a-26.html>
- Note that drops are given one at a time and are placed on the *top of the bill tip*. *Fluid should never be allowed to run into the bird's nostrils and must never be placed in a bird's throat!*
- Small irrigating syringes or droppers used for hydration are sold in drug stores.
- Do not put a water dish in the container! It will not be used and could chill the nestling.

## Hand-Feeding Tree Swallow Nestlings

**Temporary food for nestling Tree Swallows:**

- Tree Swallow parents feed insects to their nestlings; so should you.
- *Don't* ever try to feed seeds, fruit, berries, or earthworms to Tree Swallows.
- **Mealworms**, which are actually flour beetle larvae, are an acceptable temporary food, and are available at most pet stores.
- Mealworms are easily kept in plastic containers with small ventilation holes in the lids.
- Add an inch or so of flour mixed with crumbled bran flakes for the mealworms to eat and burrow in. For moisture place slices of raw white potato on top of the food.



## Hand-Feeding Tree Swallow Nestlings (Continued)

- Mealworms can be kept refrigerated so they won't mature into beetles.
- More information regarding mealworm culture can be found at the bluebird web site Sialis: <http://www.sialis.org/feeder.htm>.
- **Please note:** If you will be keeping a nestling for more than a day or two you should buy some **water-soluble vitamins and minerals** used for cage birds. **Mealworms alone are not sufficient for longer term feeding.**



### Preparing Mealworms for feeding:

- In a small container add water-soluble vitamins and minerals to water at the rate according to the directions on their packages. Any of the mix you don't use at a feeding can be kept refrigerated for the next one.
- Pour some of the water mix into another container, deep enough to cover a mealworm. Let the water mix warm to room temperature.
- As the water mix is warming drop in the number of mealworms you expect to feed at the meal, usually from 2-5 depending on the size of the nestling.
- Let the mealworms absorb the water for 15 minutes or so. Mealworms prepared this way will give nestlings hydration, nutrients, vitamins and minerals all in one package.



## Hand-Feeding Tree Swallow Nestlings (Continued)

### Hand-feeding Tree Swallow nestlings:

- Wash your hands before and after each feeding.
- Feeding is best done in a small closed room such as a bathroom.
- Gently grasp the nestling in one hand.
- Since a Tree Swallow nestling seldom begs when hand-fed, you usually will need to *gently* use a fingernail to open its mouth by pushing down its *lower* bill.



- Insert a prepared mealworm head-first into the back corner of the nestling's mouth. At this point a swallowing reflex usually occurs and the bird gulps the mealworm down with bobbing motions of its head and neck.
- You can use blunt-edged tongs or forceps to feed if you prefer.



- Let the nestling rest a minute before offering another mealworm. Then repeat the process until the nestling wants no more, which it shows by shaking its head and spitting food out. Don't force a nestling to eat if it clearly doesn't want to.
- Each feeding usually consists of from one to five mealworms, depending on the size and hunger level of the bird.
- Hydrate with a few drops of fluid after feeding is completed.

## **Hand-Feeding Tree Swallow Nestlings (Continued)**

### **How much and how often should nestlings be fed?**

- Smaller nestlings will eat fewer mealworms but must eat often. Expect to feed small nestlings 2-4 mealworms every 30 minutes from dawn to dark.
- Larger nestlings should eat more mealworms, as many as they want per feeding, but the time between feedings can gradually be increased to  $\frac{3}{4}$  hr., and then to 1 hr. as they near fledging and release size.
- These web pages have illustrated information on Tree Swallow nestling development:  
<http://www.treeswallowprojects.com/cgrowth.html>  
<http://www.treeswallowprojects.com/coldyng.html>  
<http://www.treeswallowprojects.com/cfledge.html>

## **ATTENTION!**

**Print a copy of the Guidelines for Releasing  
Rehabilitated Tree Swallows  
(See Below)**

**Give this to the person who will rehabilitate your  
nestling to help insure a successful release.**

# Guidelines for Releasing Rehabilitated Tree Swallows

It is possible the person who will rehabilitate your nestling may not be familiar with the optimum time and place for releasing a Tree Swallow once rehabilitation is complete.

**Please give this set of instructions to the rehabber when you turn over the nestling. It would be a shame if all the time and energy of rehabilitation went for nothing because the bird died due to a poor release.**

## Determining Readiness for Release:

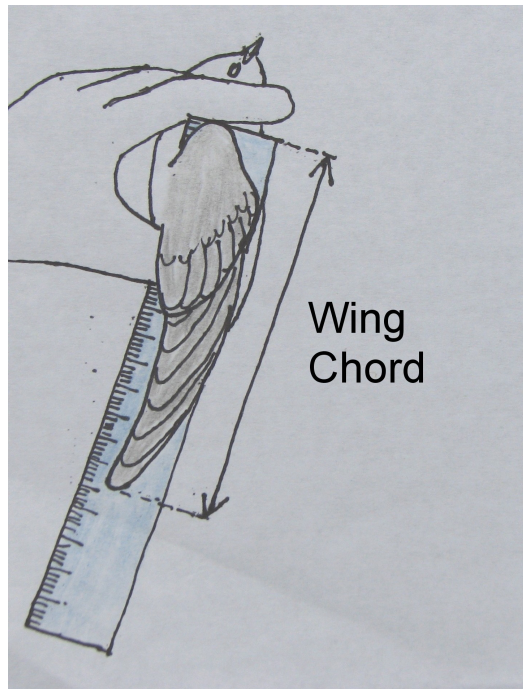
- Unlike many birds **Tree Swallow nestlings must be able to fly strongly and skillfully from the moment they leave the nest. They must not be released until they can!** Their feathers must be long enough, their flight muscles must be strong enough and their metabolisms mature enough to accomplish this because they must be totally self-sufficient from the moment of release – there are no parents waiting to feed or care for rehabbed nestlings.
- The photo below shows how Tree Swallow nestlings look shortly before fledging. Notice their folded wings are long, almost as long as adult swallows’.





## The Importance of the Wing Chord:

- Measuring a nestling Tree Swallow's "**wing chord**" is one way to determine its readiness for strong flight upon release.
- Wing chord is the distance from the carpal joint (wrist) to the tip of the longest primary feather, when the wing is folded and not flattened (see below).



- **Don't release a Tree Swallow until its wing chord is at least 95 mm**, and every extra millimeter increases its chance of survival.
- Also, there should be no sheath material left at the base of the bird's flight feathers.

## Other Considerations for Release Readiness:

- A Tree Swallow nestling should show behavior changes as it nears time to fledge.
- You should observe it beating its wings rapidly while standing.
- It may peck at the sides of its container as if wanting to get out, and it may move about its container restlessly.
- Of course no bird should be released if it is not in good health. Any obvious injuries should be healed and it should be alert, open-eyed, and responsive to its surroundings.
- If there is any doubt regarding a Tree Swallow nestling's readiness for release please wait a bit longer until there is certainty. Swallows released prematurely usually die.

## Where to Release:

- Tree Swallow nestlings being rehabbed will probably not be ready for release until late in the nesting season, after most adults and newly-independent juveniles have already joined flocks and moved away to large wetlands prior to migration.



- Tree Swallows become extremely social after nesting, forming flocks of hundreds to tens of thousands.
- Ask experienced birders where to find the nearest post-breeding Tree Swallow flocks. Be ready to travel some distance, because **rehabbed nestlings should be released within sight of one of these flocks**, ideally one in which swallows are actively feeding.

## When to release:

- It's best to release a young swallow in the morning so it will have plenty of time to fly about, feed itself, join flock activities, and go to roost with the flock in the evening.

## How to release:

- Hold the swallow gently but securely for a minute or two, giving it plenty of time to look around and listen.
- Open your fingers slowly with the swallow in your palm.
- The swallow may simply sit in your hand at first. Don't rush it. Let the bird take off on its own when it's ready. Do not toss it upward into the air!
- Don't be surprised if it calls loudly, drawing a crowd of other swallows which appear to drive it along. This is natural behavior when Tree Swallow nestlings fledge.
- Watch carefully. If it doesn't fly well and goes down, try to retrieve it. Do not try to release it again at this time. Take it back for additional maturation – several more days at least – before attempting to release it again.