

## **SWALLOW SONG!**

At our school, we have many “Welcome Swallows”. These are handsome little birds that are glossy black on the back & wings, fawn underbelly & a rust chest & face. They have button beady-black eyes & flit around grassy areas or spot-lights for insects.

They often build mud nests around the pool & under the buildings & are the victim of over-curious or vandalistic children. One nest was flicked down with a towel, the 4 babies (just skin & barely opened eyes) were passed on to me. I generally like to replace birds (or anything) with the parent, as they care for them best. I have made false nests out of low plastic pot-plants, refilled them with the original nesting material & wired & screwed them back in position with babies inside. The parents of course regard these with huge suspicion, but the calls of the babies overcome this & within ½ to 3 hrs are back feeding them with great success. I have saved 3 nests this way. (Some people I feel are too quick to remove young from the parent vicinity, & if given an option will continue to look after them). This little group of 4 however was knocked down on a Thurs, passed to me on a Friday, I had them all weekend before I could find the child who could tell me where they came from on Mon & by then the parents had given them up as lost.

So... the fun began. They lived in a low pot-plant nest on my bedside table under a lamp. I tried all sorts of tweets, chirps, whistles, titters etc to get them to respond; no luck. I accidentally made a “Kiss lip-smack” sound at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> day & 4 little heads gaped furiously for 2 seconds. So with a soft-pointed ‘beak’ shaped from a paddle pop stick (swallow-size) I began to shove ‘insectavore’ (mashed bug powder) & mince dipped in water into these little mites. Within a week, they fledged little pin feathers, each one a day behind the other, ( as they continued with all their milestones), as the parents must lay an egg a day or so, so there is always an oldest to youngest order. Conveniently, they turn & poo out over the edge of the nest from barely a week old.

### **FLIGHT:**

One thing about swallows: they LIVE ON THE WING. They catch food, fly for fun & even scoop drink on the wing. Unless you have a huge walk-in-double-doored aviary, be prepared to give up a room in your house. (Just cover everything in sheets:- poo goes everywhere!)

After about 3 weeks with very new feathers that they were very proud of & preened continuously with a little help from me & a toothpick to get the quill ends off, they sat on the edge of the nest & flapped a lot.

Eventually the oldest was game enough to fly to my hand 6 inches away with a lot of whistling encouragement. He was terribly excited & rabbited

on for 10 mins about it. Within the week they were all doing short flights from nest to hand / head, bedpost. So, time to learn to catch food.

### **HUNTING:**

When feeding at this stage, it is important to make sure you move (wiggle) the mince food everywhere, so they are attracted to moving targets. It is important to 'chatter' to them: make sounds, whistle, chipper etc, as they are very social & intelligent & need encouraging with sound to learn things.

A ranger friend said he had raised swallows, but to an aviary & they'd never learnt to catch on the wing, Len Beikoff explained how slow fruit flies are an easy start. So, I would leave a bucket of rotting fruit & vege in the yard, sneak up & whack a lid on it to trap the flies etc. & bring it into the room. Take off the lid & the very slow fruit flies you get round bananas etc are great. Get the bird on your finger & follow a slow fly with the bird, right in range of their face. They naturally want to peck at moving things. Repeat for all birds. Once they realise this is yummy, increase the distance between the bird & the bug. The urge becomes too great & they conquer the fear of jumping & leave your finger to fly at the bug. (Usually crashing, so try & give them your other hand a distance away to aim for ) In this way, they all learn to catch on the wing. Always teach them hunting when they are HUNGRY, it makes them pay attention more. Finish off after live prey with mince mix dinner.

I conveniently had a horse & would catch flies off his legs in a coke bottle every day. I'd come home & let them go, & at first, you have to get the bird on your finger & teach it to go for the bigger, quicker prey, but within a week, every fly was snapped up in a couple of minutes on their own, swooping all over the room. Same goes for moths & bugs caught at night under a light.

The swallows also need to recognise what prey looks like 'at rest' on a wall or ceiling or leaf as well as on the wing. They need to know the shape of a spider, moth, fly, bug when it is just sitting, so make sure you show them. (Against a fly screen is good). They are actually scared of big ones!

They like a high place to sleep (curtain rail & a tree branch in a pot plant).

Make sure they learn to always do this, as they need to learn to go high up to roost at night for protection. (They naturally want to –but provide a place)

**DRINKING:** Swallows have a large wide mouth, which they scoop up bugs & water with on the wing. I put a huge piece of plastic on the floor with a shallow tray of water. (Stacker-crate lid). At first, introduce them to the water on your finger. These 4 would all line up on my arm like kids

at a water slide. I would dabble my fingers to make a sound & they would all excitedly take turns at sliding down my fingers & gaping at the water. Then they began to 'dip' ....anywhere & everywhere. This is a belly-flop skip they should do across the water. At first they don't know where to do it, & practise on the bed, floor, pillow, anywhere but the water. You get them excited to do this by dabbling your hand in the water & splashing. Sit them around the edge, & they'll jump in themselves after a few days. Still always still wet the mince mix to be sure they get enough water everyday.

### **FLIGHT & RELEASE:**

At this stage, leave little bits of mince / insectavore around the area, so they also learn to pick up stuff themselves from the floor when walking. You will need to open the rest of the house from 5 weeks to 2 months for big flights every day. Make sure all the windows & doors are shut. They need to hone steering & stamina skills & strengthen their wings for a good 2 – 3 weeks before release. They ALWAYS fly straight to your head, or a high place.

One nice spring day, we sadly but bravely took them outside. 2 sat on my hand & just sunned themselves, but the older 2 looked at that big, huge sky which went on forever, and just took off, spinning & weaving & ducking, & being where they should have been. I took the other 2 to the back door & tried again, & eventually had to hoist them off. They too dived into the sky, not believing the space they had.

We see a group of 4 swallows fly over very high at dusk some days, where we had never noticed any in our area before. I like to think it's them... in their big, wide sky.

Deb Bowen-Saunders.