

Springtime Bird Frequently Asked Questions

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Springtime is when birds are preoccupied with mating, nest building and rearing young. Along with these activities, some species have a variety of behaviors that seem to be odd, annoying or even frightening.

Q. Why are woodpeckers beating on my house?

A. Woodpeckers are familiar birds that get their name because they usually feed on tree-living, wood-boring insects. In the spring, male woodpeckers mark their territory with a rhythmic pecking sequence, known as drumming. In addition to establishing territories, drumming also attracts female woodpeckers. Drumming is predominantly a springtime activity that will stop once nesting behaviors begin. Woodpeckers do not hurt themselves with this activity. Drumming seldom results in damage to wood or metal surfaces other than possible paint removal.

Woodpeckers can do more damage to wood-sided homes when they are feeding for insects or excavating nesting cavities. Exclusion methods are best because they are consistently effective. Place lightweight, plastic bird-type netting or use metal sheathing over damaged areas.

Q. I have birds repeatedly banging into my window. Why are they doing this? Will they hurt themselves?

A. In the early spring, male birds are trying to establish territories for nesting sites. Their behavior results in attacking other male birds that are invading the territory. When a male bird flies into a window, it is trying to attack another male bird, which actually is a reflection of itself. A bird may knock itself out by this repeated window attack; therefore, cutting down on the reflection on the window will prevent these window attacks and injury to the bird. Placing a sheer cloth or crinkled plastic wrap in select places on the inside of the window will help cut down on window reflections.

Q. Swallows have been trying to build a mud nest above our door. How do we discourage them?

A. Of the eight swallow species in North America, barn swallows and cliff swallows sometimes come into conflict with people because they regularly build mud nests attached to buildings. Cliff swallows nest in large colonies of up to several hundred pairs; however, barn swallows tend to nest as single pairs. Four basic conditions are needed by nesting cliff and barn swallows:

- 1) a fresh water source for drinking.
- 2) an open habitat for foraging.
- 3) a supply of mud of the proper consistency for nest building.
- 4) a suitable surface for nest attachment beneath an overhang or ledge.

Assuming that nothing can be done about these first three conditions that are needed to nest, the best control tactic is altering the suitability of the attachment site. There are several ways this can be done (*see figures 1 and 2*).

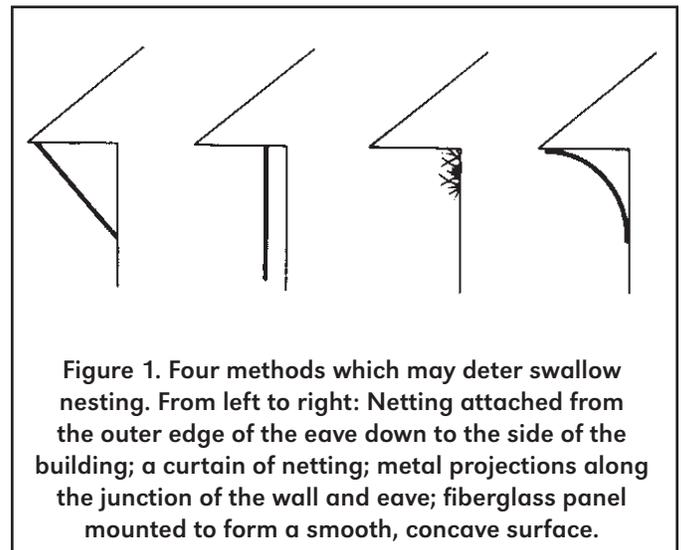


Figure 1. Four methods which may deter swallow nesting. From left to right: Netting attached from the outer edge of the eave down to the side of the building; a curtain of netting; metal projections along the junction of the wall and eave; fiberglass panel mounted to form a smooth, concave surface.

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Know how. Know now.

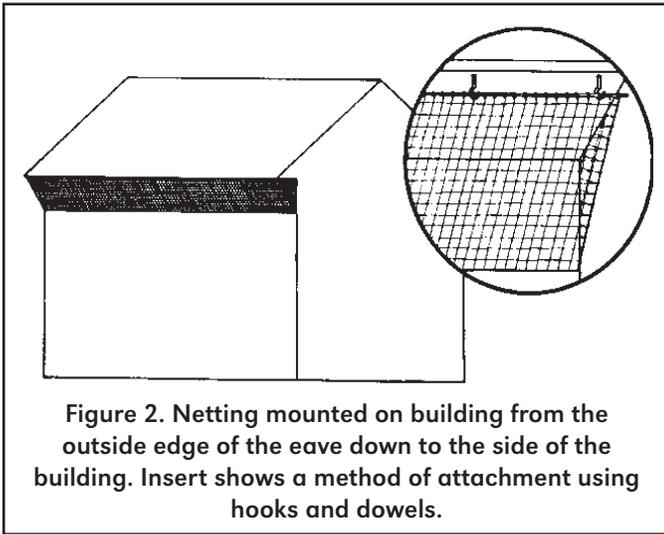


Figure 2. Netting mounted on building from the outside edge of the eave down to the side of the building. Insert shows a method of attachment using hooks and dowels.

1) Removal of a rough surface of a wall and/or overhang makes a site less attractive for swallows. Wood, stucco, masonry and concrete surfaces are favorable surfaces for nest attachment. Nests are rarely attached to metal. Cover attachment surfaces with slick surfaces like glass, Plexiglas® or sheet metal.

2) Install netting over the attachment area or hang strands of monofilament fishing line from the eaves so the swallows will bump into it.

3) Install metal projections along the junction of the wall and eave.

4) Install a concave surface under the eaves.

Nest removal should be initiated at the first sign of nest building because it is illegal to remove nests with eggs or young. Nests can be washed down with a hose. Persistent swallows may attempt to rebuild nests several times before abandoning this effort.

Frightening swallows is not effective. Repellents are not effective. An adhesive repellent used for roosting birds (Tanglefoot®) may actually improve nest adherence. The

use of toxicants, trapping and shooting are against the law; swallows are classified as migratory insectivorous birds under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.

Q. Grackles are putting droppings in my bird-bath (swimming pool). Why?

A. After their young hatch, grackles become very tidy in order to prevent predators from finding the nest. Fecal matter from the young birds is covered with a sac-like membrane which enables the adults to dispose of the waste easily away from the nest. Birdbaths and swimming pools are an attractive disposal site because the water reduces the smell from the fecal matter.

Q. Blue jays and swallows have been attacking our cat and have even swooped down on us! Why are they doing this? How can we protect ourselves from these dive-bombing birds?

A. Birds are very territorial when they have a nest of babies. When a cat, dog or human comes anywhere close to their nest, they see a predator that is a threat to their babies. This dive-bombing behavior is an effective scare tactic meant to drive predators away from their nest of young. Until the baby birds are on their own, you may want to stay away from the nest site. This may mean using other entrances around your house or areas in your yard. Dive-bombing is very effective, although the birds are unlikely to hurt you. Wearing a hat or carrying an open umbrella over your head may make you feel safer.

Q. My children found a baby bird that fell from a nest. Will the parents abandon the bird now that we've touched it?

A. Birds have a very poor sense of smell. The parents cannot smell human scent so the best thing is to put the baby bird back in the nest. The parents should take care of their baby again.