Volume 28, Issue 1

When the Swallows Come Back

by Bradford Gray



the assorted cups and glasses in my kitchen cupboard is a shot glass that I purchased in the gift shop at the

Mission San Juan Capistrano. There is a picture of a swallow on it along with the legend "Just a Swallow." The shot glass holds 1.5 oz. which, it occurs to me, is about twice the weight of the adult cliff swallow (0.8 oz.) pictured on the glass.

The annual return of the (cliff) swallows to Capistrano is an event that is known worldwide, attracts thousands of visitors each year, and has been made famous by a 1939 popular song, "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano." There is even an annual Swallows Day Parade held during the Fiesta de las Golondrinas celebration. A good example of what ornithologists call breeding site fidelity, the swallows have been returning at the same time each spring for hundreds of years to build their jugshaped mud nests under the eaves and archways of the old mission. Traditionally, this has been on March 19th (St. Joseph's Day) but in recent years the swallows have been returning earlier, as early as late February.

There is really no longer any doubt that as the climate continues to warm, spring is arriving earlier and earlier, by as much as two weeks in some parts of North America. Some climatologists believe that if this trend continues, a point will be reached when winter, as we know it, will last only two months. To even a casual observer the signs of this phenomenon are obvious: trees are leafing out, flowers are blooming, and bees are pollinating the early blossoms, all far earlier than we are accustomed to. Robins, whose arrival used to be considered a harbinger of spring, are now classified by Mass Audubon as permanent residents as are bluebirds whose arrival date, not long ago, Mass Audubon listed as the third week of March. And this year red-winged blackbirds, always early arrivals, were reported by Mt. Auburn Cemetery as overwintering for the first time in the sanctuary's 200-year history.

Researchers who keep track of birds' migration patterns have noticed that, on average, migratory species have been arriving in North America in springtime about 2-3 days earlier each decade since the 1990s. The data would seem to indicate that birds are adjusting their migration timelines to coincide with the earlier hatch of insects on which they rely for food. The timing, however, is critical. If they leave too early, they may not have had enough time to bulk up with weight and muscle for the 6,000 mile trip north from South America. If they arrive too early, there is the chance of cold weather and false springs and insufficient food supply to recover from the long journey. Although the arrival of spring has advanced considerably, the average date of the last cold snap has not changed. If the migrants arrive too late, they may have missed the spring green-up when the food supply is most abundant and insects are still in their more nutritious larval stage. Interestingly, changes in migration timing seem to be greater for long-distance migrants

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Common Ground

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Email: We send out periodic emails with updates on events and activities. If you're a BCTrust member, you're already included. If not, please sign up online: bctrust.org/email/

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(those wintering in South America) who are arriving an average of 13 days earlier than for short-distance migrants (those wintering in Florida) who are arriving an average of 4 days earlier. It is almost as if the Florida birds somehow have a better sense of what the weather is like in, say, New England than do their counterparts in South America.

But we were talking about swallows. As it so happens, four of the five species of swallows found in Massachusetts (barn, bank, cliff and rough-winged swallows) are long-distance migrants wintering in South America and one, the tree swallow, is a short-distance migrant wintering in Florida. This difference is reflected in their spring

arrival dates in Massachusetts: April for the barn, bank, cliff and rough-winged swallows but March for the tree swallow. The explanation for this is that although all five species are insectivores, tree swallows can subsist on berries and seeds when insects are scarce and the other four species cannot.

Regardless of their spring arrival dates, a characteristic of all five of these swallow species is that they tend to migrate by day while most small songbirds migrate at night. It has been calculated that barn swallows fly about 600 miles per day just coursing back and forth capturing insects. Because they eat as they go and because they fly all day anyway, migrating in a straight line poses no more stress than their normal day-to-day living.

Massachusetts' Five Swallow Species

Tree Swallow. Steely blue-black above and clear white below. Length 5.75 inches; wingspan 12.5 inches. Tail not more than one-half length of wing, forked but depth of notch less than one-third its length. During the breeding season a single tree swallow will consume 2,000 insects per day. In addition to their own consumption, parents may feed up to 6,000 insects to their brood each day.

Barn Swallow. Dark iridescent blue-black upperparts and buffy cinnamon underparts and underwing linings. The tail is two-thirds the length of the wing, or longer, and forked for more than one-third of its length. This is the only native swallow that is truly "swallow-tailed." Barn swallows build their nests in barns, garages, sheds, and under culverts, bridges or wharves. In fact, it is rare to find a nest in a site that is not man-made. Welcome to farmers because they eat many crop-destroying insects, barn swallows will follow farm machinery (even riding lawnmowers) to feed on the stirred-up insects. Feeding on the wing, these aerial acrobats can consume 60 insects per hour.

Cliff Swallow. This is the swallow that returns to

(those Capistrano
tering every year.
Blue-black wings and
back, whitish underparts

with gray-brown sides and flanks.
Very short tail, slightly notched, less
than one-half length of wing. Nests in large
er. colonies that may number 800-1,000 birds. The
a cliff swallow's mud nest is gourd-shaped with a tubular
gland entrance on one side and is typically plastered under

the eaves of buildings, on the sides of barns, or under bridges, dams, or highway overpasses.

Bank Swallow. Chocolate-brown underparts and snowy white chin and underparts. Tail is about one-half length of wing and forked for about one-sixth of its length. Digs burrows into vertical banks of rivers or ocean-facing bluffs such as those on Block Island Rhode Island which are

virtually honeycombed with holes made by colonies of swallows. These tunnels may be five or six feet in length.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Of the five swallows found in Massachusetts, this is the only one I have never seen personally. It is described as having medium brown upperparts, dull white underparts, and dark brownish black wings and wing linings. Digs nesting burrows in the soil nine to twenty-eight inches deep.

Attracting Swallows to Your Property

The BC Trust's stated mission, of course, is "preserving and protecting Boxborough's undeveloped land," our fields, forests, wetlands, ponds, and the wildlife that inhabits them, including black bears and, yes, swallows.

Given their voracious appetite for flying insects, many of them undesirable to humans (mosquitoes, black flies, gnats, midges, deer flies, flying termites, no-see-ums) attracting swallows to your property is beneficial to both the birds and to the property owners. It should be said at the outset, however, that if you have your property commercially sprayed for mosquitoes, you won't have any swallows.

Unless you live near a river bank, or have a vertical rock outcropping on your property, you will probably not attract bank or cliff swallows. Even if you could, would you really want a colony of 800 cliff swallows in your back yard? It is perfectly possible, however, to attract barn and tree swallows to your property.

have a barn or shed, try leaving a door or window open during the barn swallow nesting season. You can also install nesting shelves six or seven inches below the ceiling. The shed on my property

has an open gap about four inches wide under the eaves. Although I have never had barn swallows, I often have Eastern phoebes who are fond of building nests on the shed's rafters. And, like swallows, phoebes also eat large quantities of flying insects.

I have had more success with tree swallows who will nest in bluebird nest boxes. (I have not verified this, but I am told that we have tree swallows nesting in boxes behind Blanchard Memorial School.) Plans for building bluebird nest

boxes can be found on the North American Bluebird Society's website (nabluebirdsociety.org). I have a bluebird house mounted on a pole in the middle of the back yard. Some years I

> get bluebirds and some years I get tree swallows; I am happy to have either. I am less happy when the house sparrows take over the box. Interestingly, I have read that house sparrows will not build in boxes suspended by a wire. I don't know why, but it seems to work. The first year I tried it I had tree swallows happily nesting in the suspended box.

Now that I have almost finished writing this article I think I hear that swallow shot glass calling to me from the kitchen cupboard. It has been patiently waiting for me all this time while I have been working.

Well, now that I'm done, maybe just a swallow.



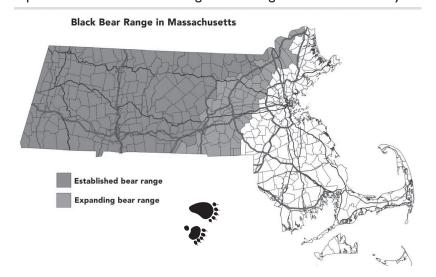


Black Bears Beat a Path to Boxborough

Annual Meeting Keynote: Coexisting with Black Bears in Massachusetts Report by Liz Caldwell and Rita Gibes Grossman

Following the numerous bear sightings this past Fall throughout Boxborough, it was only fitting that MassWildlife's, Meghan Crawford, joined us as this year's keynote speaker at our Annual Meeting held at Sargent Memorial Library on

the evening of March 27th. Ms. Crawford holds a unique role at MassWildlife as a Community Engagement Biologist. Her focus is to increase the public's understanding of wildlife in Massachusetts and she teaches residents the steps they can take in order to peacefully coexist with black bears and other wildlife in our state. She immediately engaged her audience with maps and graphs charting the state's historical trends related to our growing black bear population. Despite multiple bear hunting seasons, our state's bear population has been increasing since the 1970's and the population has gradually expanded eastward, including into Boxborough. She further



explained how MassWildlife uses GPS tracking collars to track bear mobility and presence throughout the state. Over the years, and as depicted in the map above, the black bear population has pushed eastward.

Continued next page

Following this historical background, Ms. Crawford educated the audience on the two-year life-cycle of the female black bear. The patterns of the female black bear are important to understand, as their patterns dictate the future of the black bear populations. She explained black bears mate between mid-June and July. Bears will den— different from hibernating— between mid-November/early December until early March and mid-April, with the timeline variable depending on food availability and snow cover. A litter of two to three cubs are born in the den, typically in January. Cubs will remain with their adult female for about 17 months. Understanding these patterns, we can know when to expect bear sightings in our communities; primarily spring, summer, and fall.

The conclusion of the presentation focused on information for Boxborough residents to consider regarding best practices for a peaceful co-existence between black bears and humans. Ms. Crawford explained the number one cause for conflict centers around food. Black bears spend the majority of their time in a constant search for food, and as human and bear habitats have merged, bears can become accustomed to accessing human food sources if they are not properly contained. Bird feeders, trash cans, and chicken coops were highlighted as common bear targets. The audience learned about important measures that can be taken to bear-proof chicken coops with electric fences and ways to secure trash with bear-resistant caddies



Photo by Heather Malakian

or simply keeping them in a garage or storage shed.

Unfortunately for the birders in the crowd, Ms. Crawford explained there is no bear- proof feeder, however she did offer resources (listed below), and tips related to planting native plants, shrubs, and trees to attract birds.

A big thank you to Meghan Crawford for her time and energy speaking to us at our recent Annual Meeting. And thank you to all our members who came out to the meeting- it was wonderful to see you!

Resources from MassWildlife

Black Bear Information Page: https://www.mass.gov/black-bears-in-massachusetts

Bird Feeder Alternatives:

https://www.mass.gov/info-details/create-a-bird-friendly-area

https://www.mass.gov/guides/native-shrubs-for-plantings-as-wildlife-food

Get to Know your BCTrust Board Members



Interview with Leah Wofsy

I. What makes BCTrust's mission powerful or meaningful to you?

I grew up in the woods of New Hampshire, learning about plants and animals through playing and being immersed in nature. I want

my own kids and other families to be able to have the same opportunity. By working to conserve and protect land, we are also investing in those future experiences.

2. What interests you the most/what is your special interest in the work of the BCTrust?

I am still learning where I can be most useful! I am excited to explore how we can engage more with families and the community. On my own property, I am waging a constant battle with all the invasive plants and am ready to jump in to learn more about how to manage those effectively and carry that into the BCTrust properties.

3. What are some of your gifts/prior leadership skills that you feel you bring to the board/greater community?

I am detail oriented and a creative thinker and am excited to learn more about the legalities and nuances of conserving land and help the BCTrust engage with the community in new and innovative ways.

4. What does success for the BCTrust look like to you?

Success looks like continuing to conserve land where possible and maintaining the land in its natural state. Success looks like providing opportunities for the community to experience the land and learn more about how to support conservation and land stewardship.

5. What motivates you to continue the work in your community?

Seeing the leaves appear each spring is the annual reminder that we are only borrowing this planet for the time we are here. It is our responsibility to leave no trace and leave it better than we found it.

Letter from the President

by Rita Gibes Grossman

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better. —Albert Einstein

As we look "deep into nature" the Boxborough Conservation Trust (BCTrust) continues its work to preserve and protect the properties with high value for water resources, forests, wildlife corridors, agriculture and all the natural services they provide including "resilience." In the lead article, Brad Gray describes the migration patterns of swallow species that breed in Eastern Massachusetts and how they are changing with the warming temperatures and shifts in seasons. How is the conservation community, including the BCTrust, responding? By working to conserve lands that are integral to the local ecosystem and that can help enable adaptation, or resilience, to the changing patterns in climate and weather.

How being in "nature," whether walking on the road or hiking a trail, improves our state of mind is well documented. However we share this natural habitat with wildlife, from butterflies and birds to black bears, and so this year's Annual Meeting keynote topic was black bears (see the article in this issue). Having these "new residents" in Boxborough requires adaptation to avoid creating anticipated food sources that attract bears and potentially dangerous close encounters with them. After many years of feeding birds from October through May, I sadly took down my birdfeeder and suet knowing the birds would be fine, and I would have to adjust.

Finally, for many of us who are significantly concerned about the drastic cuts to the very national institutions, both laws and agencies, that protect our lands and steward our national parks, protect our air and water quality and assure that we are pursuing a sustainable future, what can we do? "Think globally, act locally" (Patrick Geddes, 1915). "Think" and support the national advocacy organizations working on these issues and "act locally" by supporting our work, and the work of Sudbury Valley Trustees (SVT).

"Unless someone like you cares a whole lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." —Dr. Seuss, The Lorax

IN GRATITUDE

Blanchard Contests: Thank you to the coordinator Nicole Bouchard; 4th Grade Art teacher Brittany Martinez and to the judges: Kate Bell, Megan Connor, Snehal Kawalgika, Huimin (Amy) Chen, Jennifer Bauder and Gabriela Walsh. And, to every student who participated in this year's art contest. Congratulations to the winners! The BCTrust has sponsored the art contest at Blanchard Memorial School for almost twenty-five years.



Birchwoods in Patch Hill conservation area..

Outgoing BCTrust Board Members: For their many years of service, a robust thank you to Scott Bundy for 24 years, and to **Alex Kerin** who managed our website and database for 9 years.

BCTrust Members: Thank you to all our members who are making a difference with their support of our work.

Common Ground: Thank you to Lynn Horsky, designer; to Brad Gray, editor and writer; and to editors for this issue, Liz Caldwell and Becky Harris. Their volunteer time makes this publication possible.

BCTrust's Annual 4th Grade Art Contest

The Artists' Challenge:

Create your own original artwork in pencil, pen and ink or another single color media, reflecting upon this year's theme.

Each entry was judged for artistic merit, originality and how well it reflected the theme.

Coordinator and judge: Nicole Bouchard Tejeiro judges: Kate Bell, Megan Connor, Snehal Kawalgika, Huimin (Amy) Chen, Jennifer Bauder, and Gabriela Walsh.

Thanks to art teacher, Brittany Martinez.

The 2025 Theme:

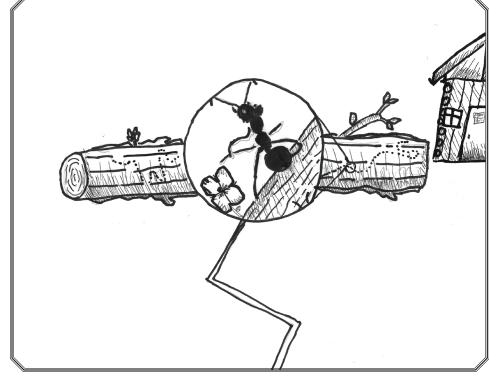
"Tiny Worlds: Small ecosystems that make a big difference"

Have you ever noticed everything that is going on in a decaying log, or spent time discovering all the life thriving in a vernal pool?

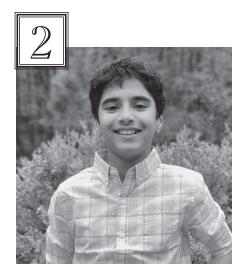
Have you marvelled at the feat of engineering done by a colony of ants or bees or wasps?

This year we asked artists to create a piece telling us the story of the smaller, often overlooked tiny natural worlds around us.





Andrew Shao



Yuvan Dakara

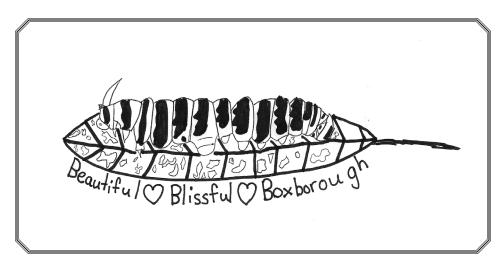


Leo Yantosca



Kora Melnik





Art Gallery of Contestant Awards continued on back page

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Thank you for your participation and contributions

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Francis and Sarah Bacon

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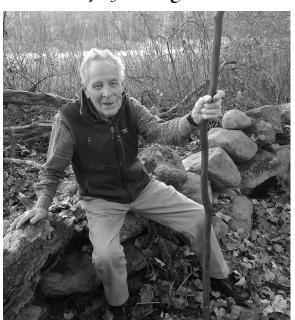
Leah Wofsy

Tara Zantow and Tim Blankenship

Carol Zimmet

Thank you BCTrust Members for your participation and contributions

In Memory of George C. Krusen, II-Farmer, Beekeeper, Good Neighbor, and Friend



Thanks to George Krusen's due diligence, *The Beaver Brook Valley Preserve* (the esker) was protected from further gravel harvesting to build I-495. From the mid-1960s -1970s he led the effort with others to engage the Nature Conservancy to acquire the lands for conservation.

Half Moon Meadow Brook, owned by Sudbury Valley

Trustees (SVT), was also conserved thanks to George Krusen's drive to protect the historical elements of this land.

He is deeply missed and his legacy will endure.





Preserving and Protecting Boxborough's Undeveloped Land

New Member Registration Form

The Boxborough Conservation Trust is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. We are actively seeking new members to join in the effort of preserving and protecting Boxborough's undeveloped land. Anyone may join. Regular (voting) members must be 18 years of age or older and must be Boxborough residents. All others are honorary members. Membership is on an annual basis.

There are several membership levels. All donations are tax deductible, to the extent allowed by law. \$30 Member \$250 Patron \$2500 Preservationist \$60 \$500 Family Sustaining \$100 Associate \$1000 Sponsor Other Name(s) (please print) Address (state) (zip) e-mail Please indicate how you would like your name(s) to appear in our membership listings, such as 'The Jones Family, or 'John and Jane Jones,' or if you prefer, you can just say 'anonymous.' Membership Listing: Please make your check payable to The Boxborough Conservation Trust, and mail it with this form to: **Boxborough Conservation Trust** 650 Massachusetts Ave. Boxborough, MA 01719 We will mail you a donation acknowledgment suitable for tax reporting purposes. Please contact your employer to see if they will match your contribution. Your comments and suggestions would be very much appreciated:

> Thank you for your support! You can find BCTrust at **bctrust.org** or on Facebook. 650 Massachusetts Ave. Boxborough, MA 01719; email: president@bctrust.org



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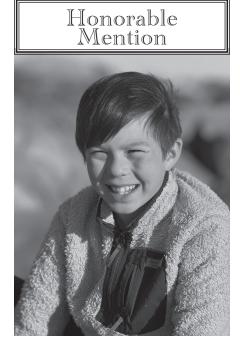
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BCTrust's Annual 4th Grade Art Contest, continued







Thank you to our BCTrust Land Stewardship Monitors!

Our volunteer stewards work with Karla Briggs and Dave Barnett to monitor and steward each of the BCTrust's five properties.

We appreciate your work and commitment:

Dr. Tim Foster (Elizabeth Brook Knoll)

Tom Bieber (Inches Woods)

Mike Parato (Shurtleff Woods)

Bob Levesque (Beaver Brook Valley Preserve)

Rich Grady (Grady Land)

Conservation Restriction (CR) Coordinators / Panek Land:

Liz and Brian Caldwell



Walkers on a new trail in *Perkins Woods*. The BCTrust helped facilitate and fund the acquisition of this recently purchased town-owned conservation land. (Trail access points: Sargent Rd., Littlefield Rd., and Rolling Meadow conservation land.)