Barn Swallow Fatalities Due to Mono-filament Fish Line

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Due to the new trend "steel type" farm barns, which now cause a shortage of nesting sites for Barn Swallows (Hirundo rustica erythrogaster), the swallows are now using picnic shelters at Cook County, Illinois Forest Preserve sites.

These buildings are steel beam hip-roofed. The ridge pole has a flange six inches wide making an excellent nesting site. Despite all the picnickers, one to three nests are found in these shelters.

On 5 July 1983 I banded three young in one of the nests. On 23 April 1984 while knocking the old nests down, I came upon the above nest. In it I could see what looked like a bird in the nest. Since no Barn Swallows had arrived as yet, I preceded to knock the nest down. As I looked over the fallen nest I found a dead HY swallow with band #1650–17388, that I had banded previously. This bird died in the nest because the un-banded leg was tangled around the mono-filament fish line. Part of the line was embedded in the mud of the nest, thus restricting the bird from leaving the nest.

A popular fishing hole was near this shelter, where the swallows may have picked up the discarded fish line as nesting material.

I would suggest banders, banding nesting swallows to recheck each nest at a later date, if the site is near a fishing hole.

A New Marking Technique for Birds

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A variety of methods are used to mark birds for individual identification. Among the most widely used techniques are the use of colored plastic leg bands and/or the "painting" of a bird's plumage. Each of these techniques has limitations. For example, colored bands are difficult to distinguish at long distances and are often hidden from view by a bird's plumage. Paint (i.e., "magic marker" or airplane dope) rarely persists for more than a week or two because the birds preen it out or it is washed out by rain or other precipitation. While involved in a study on the winter behavior of Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) I developed a marking method that I have found to be both highly visible and persistent. This technique is similar to one described by Dickson et al. (1982, J. Field Ornithol. 53:420–421) but is modified to make it more permanent. The procedure for applying this mark is as follows:

1. Trim the upper tail coverts to expose the proximal portion of the rectrices.
2. Take three centrally-located rectrices and cut the barbs from the proximal portion of each rachis.
3. Take about a 2–2.5 inch piece of colored tape and place it centrally under the trimmed portions of the three rectrices.
4. Fold one end of the tape over the top so the tape is face-to-face and then fold the other end over, trimming any excess tape.
5. Using a needle and thread, sew through the rachis of each rectrix in such a way that the two ends of the thread end up close enough together so they can be tied together.
6. Apply a drop of cyanoacrylate (i.e., "Krazy" glue) to keep the knot from unraveling.
7. If desired, place a number or some other distinctive mark on the tape with a permanent marking device.

This technique differs from that described by Dickson et al. in that the tape is placed around three rectrices rather than one, the tape is placed on the proximal portion of the rectrices rather than the distal portion, and the tape is firmly attached to the rectrices with the thread. These modifications make it very difficult for the bird to remove the tape.

I have found this to be an excellent marking technique for several reasons. Perhaps most importantly, the tape (especially white or yellow tape) is extremely visible. Further, if the tape is numbered a very large number of birds can be individually marked. Also, by using different tape colors, it is possible to rapidly identify birds captured and marked in different areas, birds of different age classes, and so on. An obvious drawback to this technique is that it is not permanent, lasting only until the next molt. I have found this to be an effective marking technique for both Cardinals and Red-bellied Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes carolinus*) and believe that it could be used on a variety of other species.