

Fostering Tree Swallow Nestlings

When you check boxes containing young you may notice that one or more nestlings is significantly smaller (see below) or larger than its nestmates. Smaller nestlings may get plenty to eat from their parents and grow well, provided the food supply and weather are adequate. However, if feeding conditions are poor the parents may not be able to meet the needs of all their young, and smaller ones, which can't beg and display as effectively as larger nestlings, can fall further behind and may eventually die of starvation.

If you do find broods with odd-sized nestlings you may elect to let nature take its course. But there are two other options. You can hand-feed smaller nestlings extra food, hoping they catch up to their nestmates, but this must cease when nestlings reach the 12-day handling limit (see [Hand-Feeding Tree Swallow Nestlings in the Field](#)). Or you can foster extra-small or extra-large nestlings into other nests whose nestlings are their own size. We prefer to foster when possible because it reduces or eliminates nestling size disadvantages, and human involvement is minimal.



What is fostering?

- Fostering is an attempt to reduce the negative effects of size differences in broods, either by moving an extra-small nestling from its original nest into another nest so it has a better chance to survive and fledge, or by moving an extra-large nestling so the nestlings remaining in its original nest have a better chance to survive and fledge.

What characterizes a good foster nest?

- **Foster nests must have nestlings the same size as the one to be added.**
- Ideally a foster nest will have fewer young to begin with, so another mouth to feed will not strain the parents' ability to provide. We only foster into nests containing 3, 4 or 5 young to begin with.

Won't adding or subtracting nestlings upset the parent swallows?

- No. Experiments have shown that Tree Swallow adults will not desert when their brood sizes are changed, will not reject small nestlings from other nests, and will provide them the same care they give their natural young.

At what age should nestlings be fostered?

- It's best to foster Tree Swallow nestlings when still young, before irreversible developmental damage due to poor nutrition has occurred.
- We prefer to move nestlings between 3-5 days post-hatch, but they can be moved as late as 12 days old.
- Nestling older than 12 days should not be handled or moved!
- See this page for aging nestlings:
<http://www.treeswallowprojects.com/cgrowth.html>

How To Foster Tree Swallow Nestlings

- Identify donor broods that could benefit from relocation of extra-small young or extra-large young to other nests where all young are equal to the nestling being fostered in size.
- Locate potential foster nests, ideally with relatively few young to begin with and whose young you believe are the same size as ones to be added.
- Carry the nestling to be fostered to the new box.
- Compare sizes to make certain there is a match.
- If the nestling to be fostered does equal the size of the other nestlings, gently place it in the cup with its new nestmates and wish it well.
- If the nestling does not equal its potential new nestmates in size, return it to its original nest and try to locate another foster nest. If none can be found consider supplemental hand-feeding until it is 12 days old.