

Springhouse Ink

The *Springhouse* Editorial Office in Junction is no stranger to wildlife.

We don't advertise the office as a sanctuary and don't even feed the birds, but we've encountered a snake in the basement bathroom, wild Asian jumping worms on the patios, birds and mud daubers nesting beneath our awnings and now are fighting a battle with a large deer mouse that raids the kitchen after lights-out. One would think two dogs and two cats would deter rodent visitors, but this mouse eludes even these normally uncompromising predators.

The spring flooding came and the water stuck around for a few days, but no harm was done in our area. The historic flood of 2011 pretty much destroyed all the flood-prone properties of Gallatin and Saline counties. Some of our backroads were covered and the dual culverts at Old Stoneface's driveway were washed away, still awaiting repair. Around here, the basement sump pump got quite a workout, but we were not impacted by the rains measuring about a foot over the course of a weekend.

The water dried up, summer-like temperatures moved in and we had an Eastern Phoebe pair construct a nest of moss beneath the awning. We enjoyed watching the pair feed bugs to their ravenous young before the young fledged. Then either the same pair or a different opportunistic pair returned a couple weeks later, remodeled the nest and raised another brood. The bird sits on her clutch not 4 feet from where I type. These birds are polite and catch bugs. They don't mess on the glass, so I don't mess with them. Conversely, the Barn swallow pair seem intent on proving the cynical adage "Good fences make good neighbors."

These Barn Swallows began their investigations innocently enough. When the weather is fair, our garage door remains open. With the main door up and smaller back door propped open with a muddy boot, the garage becomes a large pergola with shade and pleasant breezes for outdoor sitting. The swallows added a natural touch, perching on the chain that controls the main door's locking mechanism. The swallows

would land on the chain and soon became accustomed to human foot traffic through the garage.

It took a few days before I made the connection between a growing pile of mud and grass on the concrete floor and the arrival of the Barn Swallows. Directly above the pile of mud was the center knob that controls the locking device with a drooping portion of the chain hanging beneath it. This chain's links had been stuffed with slimy mud and grass. The swallows were using that bit of chain as framework for a hammock-like nest.



It was obvious this situation was going to become problematic. For one, it was inevitable if the birds succeeded in their goal then my days would be occupied scraping dried bird manure from the concrete with a razor blade. For another, a nest built on the door meant the door would have to remain open throughout the brooding season. Closing it would mean dumping eggs or baby birds on the ground, where death was assured — if not from the fall then from the cats. The garage door remains open much of the summer, but if leaving for an extended stay we want to be able to close it for security.

Rattling the birds' proposed chain nesting site resulted in more wet mud splashing to the concrete. When the swallows spotted me messing with their handiwork, they protested with squeals and circuitous flight patterns around my head. Not realizing the industrious spirit and adaptability of the species, I took an old piece of green weed trimmer line and tied it around the chain. The plastic line took on the appearance of a tall, scary man with small head above broad shoulders who lunged with each breeze.

My plastic man deterred the birds for a while, but next outside venture revealed fresh mud crammed into the chain's links. I brought out a wind chime that clangs too loudly for regular outdoor display and tied the chime set to the chain. It didn't take long for chimes' ringing to become more aggravating than the birds, so I tied my plastic man's "arm" around the metal tubes to dampen their ringing. The bird's moved their activities away from the chain and into the door's south side, stuffing mud and grass into the metal door's lip.

There is no way to be sure the birds were to blame since no one witnessed it, but there were small bite marks in the ditch's fresh crawdad mounds. A Native American artist had told me crawdad mounds were traditionally used for pottery. The crawdad saves human digging to reach the raw clay and saves it being polluted with top soil and vegetable matter. Humans need only reach down and pluck these small, hollow towers for a bit of straining and mixing with water — and crushed mussel shells for those wanting extra stability — for raw pottery materials. Form your cup or bowl and cook them at a hot campfire and you have handmade pottery. It will not last as long as today's cookware, but is free and serviceable for a time. It appeared as though Barn Swallows also had learned this trick and continued to fly into the garage with bills full of soft mud mixed with my lawn clippings to construct their nest.

Pink streamers clothes-pinned to the garage door flapped at the mud-mouthed, squealing swallows and when they got wise to that they reached their nesting site to find it stuffed with packing paper. So they moved a foot down from that spot and when that spot became stuffed with paper they moved further. Next, they began mortaring the wadded packing paper.

Adjacent to the *Springhouse* property is barn infrequently trafficked with a door perpetually open. Beside those are two grain silos with hatches left open. Any of these three structures would make fine Barn Swallow habitats, but these birds would not move their targets from the *Springhouse* garage.

For a few days the garage maintained an eccentric appearance with a neon green man gripping a chime, hot pink ribbons blowing outward with each puff of breeze and brown, muddy paper hanging from the door. Still, the birds came. Waved arms and shouted epithets elicited equally primitive behavior from the pair and one day two birds became five. They had enlisted reinforcements.

Consultation with family and friends resulted in such brutal suggestions as badminton or tennis rackets, battery-powered mosquito zapping rackets, pellet guns that could result in the birds' demise and me not only committing the crime of killing a protected songbird, but also losing the mosquito mitigation benefit of having Barn Swallows on the property.

It was time to exercise the nuclear option. I hit the lighted button and the garage door rumbled closed.

The translucent, yellowed door blocked the birds and blocked the breeze. No smells of newly mowed grass or fresh rain blew through. We smelled engine oil in idle lawn equip-

ment. On that fiberglass door the silhouettes of Barn Swallows danced. Within was cobwebs, heat and greasy air trapped in jaundiced light. While swallows swooped in the sun, the pergola had become a crypt.

The garage door remained closed for several days. We opened it at night once the birds had gone to roost, and we enjoyed the frog, toad and cricket calls and firefly sparkle. One morning I noticed a half-formed Barn Swallow nest, affixed directly to the brick, a foot above our garage door. That nest is now completed, protected by the overhanging soffit and gutter. A bird sits in the nest when people are not underneath. When people emerge the swallow pair continue to scream in irritation and circle our heads, but the garage door is open again and these birds do not fly inside. After a month of conflict, it appears we have reached a compromise.

Go fetch the mosquitoes, you swallows and bats, and earn your keep. We'll leave your nests alone and our presence may protect your young from predators. Just keep a close eye on your babies. We can't guarantee their safety from the cats should they fall, but if the nest is strong they may fledge.



Solar eclipse

The Saline County Historical Society's Saline Creek Pioneer Village and Museum in Harrisburg hosted the River-to-River Trail Society's annual National Trails Day celebration June 3.

Historical Society President Mark Motsinger led us through the museum, settlement era cabin, school, church and barn and showed us the vandalism the museum has endured. The most obvious damage was in the Charles L.

Blackman Blockhouse where 13-year-old girls had undertaken a remodeling effort with paint. Enshrined in the wood is the bare footprint of a teenager with an admiration arch. The frame of one bunk is now red. Another is blue. The floor is a Jackson Pollock-style mess of spilled paint.

Paint vandalism of a new structure is bad enough, but the teen trio also built a fire in the Aydelott Barn that burned through the floor. Neighbors reported that fire during Harrisburg's Holiday Lights Parade and firefighters extinguished it before fire took the barn.

The group also heard an update on a grant application to remark the entirety of the River-to-River Trail with plastic signs in most areas and wooden signs in wilderness areas.

Gallatin County High School teacher Lindsay Adams spoke about the Aug. 21 total solar eclipse that many in southern Illinois can enjoy from their own yards.

Adams answered a question Springhouse has had for

some time. We intend to look at the eclipse without the safety of eclipse-viewing glasses. While we were planning on a series of phone calls to area optometrists to gauge the amount of eyesight damage we could expect, Adams solved the problem with her presentation. Her advice was an epiphany. When the eclipse reaches totality, all may remove their glasses and stare at the moon-blocked sun with the naked eye. Not only will our eyes be safe from damage, but so will our camera sensors.

Eclipse viewing glasses allow us to examine the sun while in the partial eclipse stage. We can also make our own camera filters to record the partial stage using a shallow cardboard cylinder with polymer solar filter film taped to it. We've found Online 4-inch-by-4-inch solar filter film going for \$3. The film is also available at the Southern Illinois University-Carbondale Craft Store.

Those wanting the full eclipse experience will want to be on an exposed hill because during totality there will appear to be a 360-degree sunset. During that moment, birds may exhibit roosting behavior and night creatures may emerge

prematurely. For our area, we expect mosquitoes to awaken and coyotes to arouse for that 1 minute, 36 seconds of totality at our area along state Route 1. You can determine your own property's eclipse viewing prospects at the Web site: http://xjubier.free.fr/en/site_pages/solar_eclipses/TSE_2017_GoogleMapFull.html

While others flock to Carbondale and Makanda or Hopkinsville, Ky., where the time of totality will be nearly 3 minutes, we intend to sit in the yard in lawn chairs and enjoy our abbreviated eclipse in peace and quiet with a couple of cameras at the ready. Those in the area without a planned viewing spot are welcome to join us, but only if they agree not to talk too much. This will be a day for observation, learning and wonder. If we mess up in our observation of this event, we are lucky enough to have another chance in 2024.

Whatever the outcome, Aug. 21 is sure to be an adventure and on that note:

The Adventure Continues...

Brian DeNeal photo

River-to-River Trail Society President Eric Johnson purchases solar viewing glasses from Gallatin County High School teacher Lindsay Adams during National Trails Day on June 3. Adams and her students are participating in a national eclipse videography project sponsored by Southern Illinois University. Some students will be stationed in Paducah, Ky., and others will be at Pope County School campus in Golconda. For their efforts in helping to create the planned 90-minute video the school will get to keep the video-equipped telescope they will be using.

