Build a Home for Birds

(and Let Them Do the Decorating)

A barn swallow doesn't move into a birdhouse — it builds its own, out of mud, beakful by beakful. No mud, no nest; no nest, no baby swallows. This project supplies both halves: you bring the mud and the real estate, the bird brings the architecture. Everybody works — and once a bird moves in, your family gets a front-row seat to a whole life cycle.

WHO YOU'RE BUILDING FOR

Robins and barn swallows (and maybe a phoebe) are the easy guests here in Washington. They don't want an enclosed box with a little hole — they want an **open shelf**: a flat ledge with a roof over it, tucked under an eave. One shelf can suit any of them. About **99% of Washington's barn swallows now nest on human-made structures** — they've thrown in their lot with us. Building a shelf is just returning the favor.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- **For the shelf:** one cedar fence board (1×6, untreated — cedar shrugs off our rain), galvanized screws or nails, a drill, and a saw. One board makes one shelf; WDFW's free plan has the exact cuts.
- **For the mud station:** a shallow pan, tray, or a scraped-out dish in the ground, kept wet. A pinch of straw or dry grass mixed in is a bonus — swallows use it.
- **For watching:** a small clip-on camera or an old phone propped nearby — or just a window that looks out on the spot.

THE PROJECT, BY AGE

LITTLE KIDS

Run the Mud Kitchen

- Pick a spot in the open, not too far from where the shelf will go.
- Mix dirt and water to a thick, sticky mud — like cake batter that's gone wrong.
- Stir in a pinch of straw or dry grass.
- Keep it damp through the spring. Check it, water it, love it.

Sneaky science: *ask why a bird might want straw in the mud. (Same reason we put rebar in concrete — it holds the whole thing together.)*

BIG KIDS / TWEENS

Build & Mount the Shelf (adult on the saw)

- Cut the cedar board to the plan's pieces: floor, back, two sides, a little roof.
- Screw it together into an open-fronted box — a shelf with a roof and a lip.
- Score the inside back wall with a few knife scratches so the mud can grab.
- Drill two small drainage holes in the floor so a downpour doesn't drown the nest.

Sneaky science: *measuring is math, the roof angle is geometry, and "why cedar?" is a materials-science conversation hiding in a craft.*

GROWN-UPS

Mount It Right (this part matters most)

- Under an eave or overhang — sheltered, shaded, with a roof above.
- High up: 5 feet or more, well out of a cat's reach.
- Not over a busy doorway — swallows dive-bomb anyone who walks beneath their nest.
- Within sight of the mud station — a bird shopping for a homesite wants its building supply close.

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"You bring the mud and the real estate. The bird brings the architecture. Everybody works."

A WORD ABOUT TIMING (DON'T BE DISCOURAGED)

Build in June and you probably won't get tenants this week — swallows arrive in Washington in late March and house-hunt then, so the prime move-in window is late winter to early spring. But swallows often raise a second brood in July, so a summer build can still get lucky — and either way you'll be completely ready when the birds come scouting next spring. Think of June as setting the table before the guests arrive.

THEN COMES THE BEST PART: WATCHING

Once someone moves in, your job flips from builder to quiet observer. The golden rule is **watch, don't disturb** — no peeking into the nest, no hovering. That's where the camera earns its keep. Robins sit on their eggs about two weeks; swallows about the same; then a couple of frantic weeks of feeding, and the young fledge.

To turn watching into real science, log what you see with **NestWatch** (nestwatch.org), the Cornell Lab's nest-monitoring project. Your kids' observations become actual data researchers use — a child contributing to science with a notebook and a window.

ONE PROJECT, EVERY SUBJECT (FOR TEACHERS & HOMESCHOOLS)

Science: life cycles, habitat, migration, real data via NestWatch · **Math:** measuring & cutting; counting eggs and days · **Writing:** a daily observation journal once a nest is active · **Art:** sketch the nest, the eggs, the parents in flight · **Stewardship:** the big lesson — we can make the world more livable for something small.

Sources & free plans: Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, "Living with Wildlife: Barn Swallows and Cliff Swallows," wdfw.wa.gov (the 99%-on-structures figure and nesting behavior; free nest-platform build plans for robin, barn swallow & phoebe under "Woodworking projects for backyard wildlife"). NestWatch, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, nestwatch.org (monitoring protocols, classroom resources, and siting guidance).

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