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On the wing

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: A swallow's nest has an approach path away from my kitchen and breezeway, but it's still open to the gardens that they ply for insects. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

The shed roofs are alive with the sound of scrabbling.

Early in their construction, I had thought to close the corrugations with gobs of spray foam. Condensation forms on the underside of the steel and runs into the corrugations, occasioning mold. Or worse, it rains down on what's below.

Fortunately, I never got around to sealing up these little arches. They became nesting sites for barn swallows who, unperturbed by the daytime heat on the sheet metal, launch out of my roof at the insects circling the fields and garden beds.

I didn't have swallows until I had shed roofs, and it got me pondering how to passively incorporate beneficial critter housing into one's own. Squirrels in the attic are not included in this consideration.

The changes I've made on land have brought new reptiles, insects and birds. I arrived with several illustrated books to help me document habitat transformation, but haven't needed them very much until year No. 3. Perhaps the swallows had been attracted by the insects flying in newly opened spaces.

Swallows eat up to 60 bugs per hour. Come for the bugs, stay for the corrugated shed roofs! Bats have taken up under the shed roofs as well. They like the flashing where I neglected to tack it down properly.

Bats eat up to 600 mosquitoes an hour, which I believe when they come to rescue me. At dusk I can hardly work for all the mosquitoes around me, but the bats start circling in parabolas with me as their center. My head-lamped face is the centerpiece of their buffet.

In a post-COVID world, it occurs to me that this intimacy has a downside. Climate change and habitat destruction have been blamed for placing humans in closer proximity to wild animals, and this proximity can lead to diseases that jump the species barrier like COVID-19 did.

More specifically, recall that pigs can share everything from anthrax to tuberculosis. Whether raising animals or living in their vicinity, we are exposed to pathogens.

I reassure myself that this is going to happen if you keep the company of critters. He who lays down with dogs gets up with fleas! When bats were nesting in one of my outbuildings, their roosts were a

foot from my toaster oven. Obviously, that had to change.

Keeping balance and distance between creature habitat and one's own is a dynamic process. I've written here about hügel mounds: hillocks of decaying wood covered with soil, used for planting. I used to place them near my habitation.

It turns out that rodents love to nest in them. Before I had a chance to bulldoze them, I realized that ground-dwelling pollinators inhabit them as well. This spring I watched bees tunneling out from my hügel. (These should not be confused with the paper wasps who nest in piles of exposed brush adjacent to water.)

In a year, the dirt settled around the wood, discouraging rats. The hügel is now home to ground bees who pollinate in their front yards, just as the swallows forage for bugs in the fields adjoining their corrugated nesting tubes.

I weedwhack long grasses just before hot spells. The swallows wait for them to dry before gathering them for their nests. After the initial weeks of eyeballing each other for trustworthiness, we've settled into an understanding.

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