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Friday, Sep 30, 2005

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Posted on Fri, Sep. 30, 2005

The secret life of barn swallows

You probably thought things were pastoral out there on the farm but a new research report shows there may be all kinds of sexual escapades going on.

In particular, barn swallows, who pair up in the spring for mating, also are willing to engage in a little extramarital sex for the continuation of the species.

fooling around, apparently is not unusual.

Like many songbirds, half of all male barn swallows typically care for at least one young chick that was actually fathered by another bird, said Rebecca Safran, researcher in the Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology and lead author of the report.

Barn swallows, as the name suggests, like to nest in barns, building mud nests up high. They eat insects and are graceful flyers. They are a darker blue color with dark red or rust colored markings on their undersides.

After the barn swallows pairs in the study had laid eggs, researchers removed the eggs, causing females to produce again.

Before the production of the second batch of eggs, they gave some of the male birds darker red throats, breasts and bellies while others were left alone.

DNA testing on the offspring of both batches of eggs showed that the 30 females in the study remained socially paired with the same males, but also were sexually active with other males.

Male barn swallows with enhanced colors fathered more offspring in the second batch of eggs.

That suggests that vivid color on the males may translate to health, status or ability to raise young and may be why songbirds keep up appearance traits that are costly for males to maintain, Safran said.

The best males may spend more time preening and grooming to keep themselves healthy and appear more attractive.

Apparently, "the mating game is never over," Safran said.

How can we translate this information for young men who are interested in being in the mating game?

I foresee a run on brighter men's hair coloring.

Wally Spiers' column runs five days a week. Have a column idea? Call Wally at 239-2506 or (800) 642-3878; or e-mail: wspiers@bnd.com

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