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News Update



The colors on this male North American barn swallow, a deep chestnut and iridescent blue, were not enhanced by Arizona State University researchers. ASU

Tail feathers shake for a little color

By Emily Gersema, Tribune

October 7, 2005

Do colors turn you on? The bolder the better for female barn swallows. A team of scientists from Arizona State University and Cornell University are finding that the finicky females are more likely to be faithful if their mates' plumage is bold and rich in color.

Among humans, judging someone based on their appearance could be considered "lookism," a form of discrimination. But in the natural world, it's one method that birds and other animals use to choose a mate. It helps them pick out the best genes to pass on to their babies.

The North American barn swallow is a songbird that weighs less than a pound — small enough to fit snugly in your hand.

These little creatures swoop around a lot, spending most of their lives in the air.

The males have a deep chestnut color on their underparts and have longer tail streamers than the females. Their upperparts are a steely, iridescent blue.

The birds tend to nest inside barns or sheds and they live in areas as far north as Alaska and Canada, and migrate as far south as Central America.

The scientists who led the bird study, published last week in the journal Science, tested their theory about the importance of appearance among swallows by removing the first set of eggs laid by 30 pairs of swallows. This forced the females to mate again.

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But before letting the birds go through a round of speed-dating, the researchers captured some of the males and painted their throat, breast or belly with a brown marker to enhance their feathers. The rest of the males were either left alone, or painted with a clear marker to ensure the results were unbiased.

Socially, the females paired with their original mate. But sexually they became active with the other touched-up males.

By checking nests, scientists found that the males touched up with the brown marker were the biggest hit with the ladies, fathering more offspring than the ones whose colors were unchanged.

The bold were the most beautiful among these barn birds.

"If you make one less colorful, she might instantly see him as a big fat loser," said Kevin McGraw, an ASU researcher who helped assess which shades of feathers were most appealing. "If she was given a less attractive male, (she thinks,) 'He's not as good as I thought he was, so I'm going to look at other birds to pass on better genes to my young.' "

Even though they cheated on their mates, the females stood by their man.

"We didn't see any divorce," McGraw said of the couples. "They put a lot of value in that early season decision."

Attractiveness is something we humans can relate to, since, like our feathered friends, we preen in front of the mirror to look our best when looking for love or trying to impress our partner.

"Bathing is good," said Dax Howard, 19, of Phoenix. "It's always nice when your date looks good."

But Howard, a freshman at ASU, said he isn't sure that humans compare very well with swallows in mating matters.

"I don't know if colors would be one factor in play for human beings," he said. "Sometimes it turns me off more than it turns me on if a girl puts too much effort into looking good."

McGraw discourages us from trying to relate too closely to swallows.

"If anything, it reminds us maybe that we've got to take good care of the mates we've invested in so far," McGraw said.

For the study, McGraw worked closely with ornithology researchers Rebecca Safran, a former Cornell scientist now at Princeton, and Cornell researchers Irby Lovette and Colby Neuman.

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