

Every Picture Tells a Story

As a journey ends, a season begins

by Gilles Korent



Having begun their long journey from the deep south of the continent, they should be back here soon. I can't wait.

It is late March 2012 and the winter has felt long, especially for a nature photographer such as myself. While the winter season provides many magical photographic opportunities, the weather is also a limiting factor. The promise of spring heralds a whole wealth of more 'comfortable' possibilities.

Around this time every year, the search for my first Tree Swallow of the season begins. It has become a personal tradition that truly marks the arrival of spring for me. Enthusiasm usually compels me to begin looking way too early in the season; I often find myself out on several outings before I succeed.

Now it is mid-April, the days are getting longer, the snow is disappearing fast, and nature's cyclical renewal will begin within the next few weeks. The Tree Swallows could be here by now. I should visit my favourite shooting locations to set up and ... but wait. It's probably too soon to get my hopes up, just like it was at this time last year, and the year before that. I decide to take the drive to Bragg Creek anyways, just in case, but instead of my winter gear, clothes and snowshoes, my camera bag sits alone on the passenger seat. After a short stop at the coffee shop in the hamlet, I proceed west to explore the areas around Wintergreen Golf Course.

A few moments later, while crossing the Elbow River Bridge, I stop at the T intersection. Hold on, it's too early in the day! Even if the Tree Swallows have arrived, this cool temperature makes a sighting of them pretty unlikely. From past years' excursions, I recall that the best time is usually after 10 am, when the sun has warmed up everything a bit more.

After a short hesitation, I head in the opposite direction towards the West Bragg Creek recreation area. Now I am thinking owls. Since it is early in the day, there's a good chance of spotting a perched Great Grey. I have no such luck, and as 10 am approaches, I pack up and drive to my original planned destination, and the overriding reason for this trip.

A couple of hours pass without a single sighting, so I resign myself to the fact that the Tree Swallows probably haven't arrived yet and I should return home, without a single usable shot from the day.

My enthusiasm isn't diminished though, and as the end of April approaches, I gather all my gear and prepare to head out again – confident that this time I will succeed in achieving my goal. I decide to revisit the area around Wintergreen Golf Course and sure enough, soon after I arrive, I am welcomed by the energetic flight of a couple of Tree Swallows. They've arrived!

After briefly pausing to enjoy the moment, I scout around for a good location to set up, quickly spotting several nest boxes along the fences. Although nesting season hasn't started yet, the Tree Swallows typically begin exploring potential locations as soon as they return to Alberta, so I set up near one and wait.

Armed with my Nikon D300s, a Nikkor 500-mm lens, a tripod and a large hot chocolate, I take a deep, calming breath. It is mid-morning, and it's going to be a beautiful day.

Some playful Tree Swallows fly close by, landing on nearby posts and barbwire fences. I casually snap a series of impromptu photographs, but I have a particular pose in mind that I am keen to get. Then out of nowhere, a solitary Tree Swallow settles on the post directly in front of me to stretch its wings.

That's it! That's exactly what I'm looking for! One of the first Tree Swallows of the year relaxing after the very long return journey to Alberta. A perfectly appropriate pose.

After I capture the moment, I look up from my camera, smile at the Tree Swallow and think, "My friend, a well-deserved stretch after such a long flight. Welcome back."

Spring is here!

Tree Swallows can be found throughout Alberta for a large part of the year. By mid-August they have generally begun their migration to their wintering grounds along the Gulf of Mexico and further south. They return to their northern nesting grounds in mid- to late April.

Gilles Korent is a nature and wildlife photographer based in Calgary. A selection of his prints are available through special order at *Branded Visuals Inc.* in Bragg Creek, as well as via his website: www.wildlife-expressions.com