

96 new homes go up in Wetzel housing

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By now most everyone knows that new townhouses will be constructed between upper Wetzel and the golf driving range. It has also been announced that much of Wetzel will eventually be leveled to make room for even more new townhouses.

What most people don't know is that two very special homes for 96 very special families have already been constructed near the Lower Wetzel Gate. They are not military families but they have a right to reside in these homes inside the Wetzel fence. They are swallows and they are protected by German law. These swallows comprise the biggest colony of House Martins, as they are known in Germany, to be found in the Birkenfeld area.

“Wetzel Housing features about 250 nests constructed by the House Martins; however, since some of the buildings at Wetzel will have to be demolished in the future to make way for new townhouses and considering the fact that the House Martin is protected by law, specific compensation measures are required for these birds,” said Dominic Mutinda, environmental division chief. “Putting up these houses is our compensation for these protected birds,” said Mutinda.

Each house accommodates 48 individual dwellings and according to Mutinda, they are possibly the first-of-kind to be constructed within the confines of a U.S. Army Garrison in Europe. The artificial nests attached under the two-and-a-half by two-and-a-half meters structure that is mounted on an eight-meter pole resemble the mud ball construction that swallows create on their own.

The two dwellings constructed in Wetzel Housing are located in the field to the left as you depart Wetzel Housing via the Lower Wetzel Gate.

“It should provide an interesting experience, especially for the younger children, to see so many swallows flying in and out as they bring in food for their chicks,” said Holger Vogt-Altena, a contractor working with Baumholder's environmental branch.

Know your Martins

House Martins are a summer visitor. The Common House Martin, sometimes called the Northern House Martin or, particularly in Europe, just House Martin, is a migratory bird of the swallow family which breeds in Europe, north Africa and temperate Asia; and winters in sub-Saharan Africa and tropical Asia. It feeds on insects which are caught in flight, and it migrates to climates where flying insects are plentiful. It has a blue head and upperparts, white rump and pure white underparts, and is found in both open country and near human habitation.

Both the scientific and colloquial name of the bird are related to its use of man-made structures.

It builds a closed cup nest from mud pellets under eaves or similar locations on buildings usually in colonies, but sometimes fouling below nests can be a problem.

Although House Martins sometimes build nests in inconvenient locations, such as on overhangs directly under a doorway, remember it is illegal to destroy or interfere with an active nest. Interfering with a Martin's access to an active nest or knocking it down may result in heavy penalties or fines.

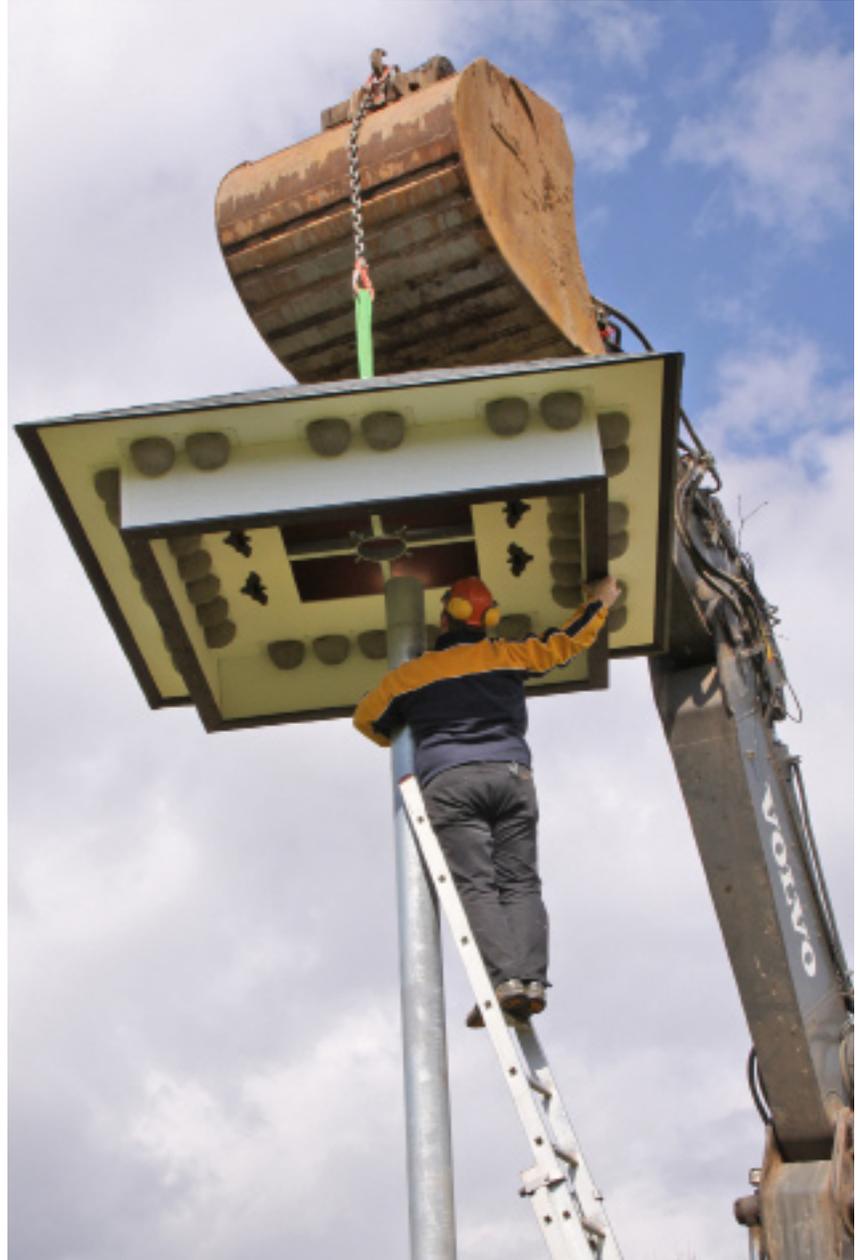


Photo by Ignacio “Iggy” Rubalcava

An excavator is used to lower a swallow's house as Oliver Wegner, a subcontractor with the firm Gibs Geologen & Ingenieure, guides it into place atop an eight-meter pole.