Bank Swallows Make a Home at Algoma

It was late May, and Algoma Steel’s Material Storage and Reprocessing team was preparing to ship a load of granulated slag to a customer. While inspecting the slag, Mark Seeler, Superintendent of Material Reprocessing, noticed a large number of small, agile birds with sharp triangular wings, darting to and from the slag deposit. Out of curiosity, Mark reached out to Fred Post, Manager of Environmental Control, described the birds and explained that they appeared to be nesting in the slag deposit.

“It appears we have started a bird sanctuary”, Mark quipped.

When Fred’s team - Corey Jackson and Chris Graham - went out and visited the site, they thought the small birds might be Bank Swallows, and decided to call the Ontario Ministry of Environment Conservation and Parks for more information about the birds, and how best to handle the situation. Bank Swallows are listed as a threatened species provincially under Ontario’s Endangered Species Act, and federally under the Migratory Birds Convention Act, and the birds are protected from activities that are likely to impact the species or damage their habitat.

In the meantime, the Material Reprocessing team did what they could to draw material from another area, well away from where the birds were nesting. As a means of keeping the swallows safe, they tried to discourage more birds from nesting in the commercial piles by stacking slag on a continual basis to prevent a welcoming cliff face from forming.
The greater challenge was that soon boats would be making the journey to Algoma to replenish their supply of granulated slag. Spring marks the beginning of construction season, and concrete manufacturers had long since placed their orders.

More than 80% of the by-product materials generated from Algoma’s integrated steelmaking process are recycled, either internally or by other consumers. Granulated slag is a by-product of steel manufacturing and is used to make concrete products. When used as a direct substitute for Portland cement, granulated slag reduces the carbon footprint of a cement. It is recognized by LEED (the global green building certification program) for its importance in sustainable construction and is common in LEED-certified buildings.

Algoma’s reputation as a reliable supplier is important to the company and its employees, for competitive reasons and because the company values its relationships with its many long-term customers.

CEO, Michael McQuade, acknowledges that in order to leave the swallows undisturbed during the nesting season, a number of alternatives were evaluated and the difficult decision to delay shipments was made in discussion with the customer.

“The way our team handled this situation says a lot about who we are and what we strive to be as a company.” He added, “This was all about good people making responsible decisions, and I’m proud of them. The way we handle a decision like what to do about Bank Swallows is part of the standard by which we are judged and by which we measure ourselves.”
- Michael McQuade, Algoma Steel CEO

In natural habitats, erosion and stream banks often offer vertical faces where Bank Swallows can nest, but Bank Swallows also like to nest in places like sand and gravel pits. They prefer a newly eroded vertical face for nesting even if it means digging a new burrow every year, which they do with their feet and beaks. Interestingly, the birds get along well with the normal use of adjacent roads, so Algoma Steel’s granulated slag piles probably looked ideal.

The Bank Swallows have now left their nests and flown south for the winter. For future nesting seasons, there are other suitable habitats on Algoma’s site – ones that are not committed for commercial purposes and that could be restacked to create a permanent habitat for Bank Swallows.

Says Fred Post, “that solution would be ideal, ensuring the continued supply of granulated slag to our longstanding customers while giving the swallows a safe home where they can thrive. We would love to see that happen. While this hasn’t been the easiest challenge to solve, the Bank Swallows are our neighbours now, and we are happy to have them.”