

Learning Laguna Field Notes: Cliff Swallow

April 2009

Cool Facts

- When a Cliff Swallow has had a hard time finding food, it will watch its neighbors in the nesting colony and follow one to food when it leaves. Although sharing of information about food at the colony seems unintentional, when a swallow finds food away from the colony during poor weather conditions it may give a specific call that alerts other Cliff Swallows that food is available. By alerting other swallows to a large insect swarm an individual may ensure that the swarm is tracked and that it can follow the swarm effectively.
- Although the Cliff Swallow can nest solitarily, it usually nests in colonies. Colonies tend to be small in the East, but further west they can number up to 3,700 nests in one spot.
- Within a Cliff Swallow colony some swallows lay eggs in another swallow's nest. Sometimes the swallow may lay eggs in its own nest and then carry one of its eggs in its bill and put it in another female's nest.
- When young Cliff Swallows leave their nests they congregate in large groups called creches. An adult pair of swallows can find its own young in the creche primarily by voice. Cliff Swallows have one of the most variable juvenal plumages, and the distinctive facial markings may help the parents recognize their chicks by sight too.
- The beaks of Cliff Swallows are slightly spatulate (shaped like a spatula) which is very helpful for picking up mud and rolling it into balls for nest building.
- There are usually between 1000-1400 balls of mud making up each nest!



Description

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Size: 13 cm (5 in) | • Small bill. |
| • Wingspan: 28-30 cm (11-12 in) | • Wings long and pointed. |
| • Weight: 19-34 g (0.67-1.2 ounces) | • Throat dark. |
| • Small, long-winged stocky songbird. | • Tail square. |
| | • Rump pale. |

Rump orange. Throat and face chestnut. Dark blue-black on crown, back, and at base of throat. Underparts dull white. Cream-colored or white forehead; chestnut in some populations. A few narrow white streaks on back. Light brown collar around neck. Wings and tail drab dark brown. Bill black. Eyes black.

Sex Differences

Sexes alike in plumage, but male has a larger dark patch at base of throat on average.

Sound: Song a thin squeaking twitter. Call a soft "chur."



Summer Range: Breeds from western and central Alaska eastward to Nova Scotia, southward to southern Mexico, central Arkansas, northern Georgia, and New Jersey.

Winter Range: Winters in southern South America.

Habitat: Breeds in a variety of habitats with open foraging areas and cliffs or buildings for nesting. Avoids heavy forest, desert, or high mountains.

Food: Flying insects such as flies, beetles and mosquitos. Catches insects in flight, often high above the ground.

Nest: Nest is a covered bowl made of mud pellets, with a small entrance tunnel on one side. Lined with grass and feathers. Nest placed on a vertical wall, usually just under an overhang. It can take up to 2 weeks to build a nest.

Eggs: Creamy white with light and dark brown speckling. Clutch size: 1-6 eggs. Both parents incubate. Eggs hatch in about 16 days.

Condition at Hatching: Naked and helpless. (Altricial). First flight is about 20-25 days after hatching.

Conservation Status: Extreme coloniality makes population monitoring difficult and causes large variations in an area over time. Populations appear to be increasing.



A note about the nests on the Youth Annex building of the Sebastopol Community Center:

To avoid yellow jacket habitation of empty nests, The City of Sebastopol removes the mud nests every winter – well after the breeding season and before the next spring when the birds return. It is a federal offense to destroy a nest during breeding season.

The north side of the building is without netting and is available to the nesting colony. While the netting on the rest of the building is controversial, it was put up to protect the walkways, windows and equipment from bird droppings. Before the netting, some swallows ended up inside the building as they made nest above doors and windows.

Most information and photos from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website: All About Birds
http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Cliff_Swallow_dtl.html

Other reference:

UC Davis Cooperative Extension
<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7482.html>