



Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

General information

- Cliff Swallows are colony nesting birds. In New England, they are almost always found nesting under the eaves of buildings where they build their bottle-shaped nests out of mud. They are often found near farms, where they forage for insects over fields and pastures and where mud is handy. Cliff Swallows migrate from South America to North America to breed every spring. Here for only four months, they fly back south after raising their young.
- Swallows are very aerodynamic and graceful in their swooping flight and are fun to watch as they feed on insects. People often confuse Cliff Swallows with other swallows, like Barn Swallows or Bank Swallows. Cliff Swallows are dark iridescent blue above, buffy below, with a chestnut neck and a white forehead patch. They have short, square tails and a light orangey rump patch. Barn Swallows nest inside barns and have a forked tail, and Bank Swallows are brown and white, and nest in burrows in river banks, road cuts, and gravel banks.

Cliff Swallows are in trouble!

- Birds like swallows that forage in flight are called aerial insectivores and many of these birds are in decline. Cliff Swallow populations reached a peak in New England in the early to mid-1800s. In the mid to late-1800s their numbers started to decline due to regrowth of forests, the introduction of the non-native House Sparrow, and the decline of agriculture. In the 1970s, Cliff Swallow populations in New England started declining precipitously. We don't know all the reasons why, but factors in addition to those listed above may be pesticides and climate change. As a result, Cliff Swallows were recently proposed as Threatened in New Hampshire and are slated to be listed in other New England states as well.

The good news is that you can help Cliff Swallows!

- It is very important to leave their nests alone while they are nesting! Since we don't know what is causing their decline, we can at least help them when they are here for the four short months it takes

(over)

them to raise their young. Educate others—let them know about the importance of helping Cliff Swallows and not disturbing their nests.

- If your house or barn is adjacent to an open field with water/mud available, you just might be able to attract Cliff Swallows. Recent experiments in Massachusetts have shown that in the right setting (open fields and/or large water bodies near your property) putting up artificial Cliff Swallow nests, providing mud for nest building, and even playing their breeding calls can attract breeding Cliff Swallows to new sites. The benefits are worth the effort; since they feed on flying insects they are natural mosquito control! Plus the joy of watching their graceful flight on a summers evening has no rival!
- If you think you have the required habitat for Cliff Swallows and want to try to attract them, please contact Mara Silver at (mnsilver2@verizon.net).

If see you Cliff Swallows in flight during the nesting season, a colony may be nearby—it's worth investigating further. Please report sightings and known colonies by entering the data as specifically as possible into eBird, a global bird sightings database (<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/>). If you cannot use eBird, sightings should be emailed to Mara Silver (mnsilver2@verizon.net) or Drew Vitz at Mass Wildlife (andrew.vitz@state.ma.us).