

Cliff Swallow *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*



Folk Name: Eaves Swallow

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Open water, fields

The adult Cliff Swallow is an unexpectedly colorful swallow when it's examined while perched in good light. Its forehead is pale buff, the sides of its head, its neck, and its throat are shades of darker chestnut, and its rump is a pale buffy orange. Its back, wings, and the top of its head are steel blue. It is known for its short, square tail.

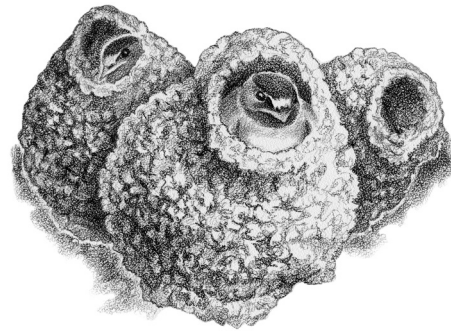
In 1917, North Carolina's T.G. Pearson shared this explanation of why the Cliff Swallow was once widely known as the Eaves Swallow in the eastern United States:

The Cliff Swallow and Barn Swallow that formerly built their nests on exposed cliffs now seek the shelter of barns and other outbuildings for this purpose....The Cliff Swallow builds its gourd-shaped mud nest under the eaves and hence is widely known as the Eaves Swallow. No rest of any kind in the form of a projecting beam is needed, as the bird skillfully fastens mud to the vertical side of the barn close up under the overhanging roof. In such a situation it is usually safe from all beating rains. The Cliff Swallow has exhibited wisdom to no mean extent in exchanging the more or less exposed rocky ledge for the safety of sheltering eaves.

Historically, the Cliff Swallow was only a migrant in the Carolinas. It nested in the North, in the Central states, and in the West. At the turn of the twentieth century, this little bird was hailed as a hero in the South, and at the same time, it was widely persecuted in the North. In the South, these migrants were credited with helping to control the voracious boll weevil which was threatening the region's cotton industry. On May 14, 1907, *The Charlotte News* reported: "As many as 47 Boll Weevils have been found in the stomach of a single cliff swallow."

In the North, however, it was widely believed that Cliff Swallows were responsible for spreading parasites to humans, and thus their nests were systematically destroyed. *The Charlotte News* reported:

The cliff swallow whose curious pouched-shaped mud nest used to be a common sight under the eaves of barns and outbuildings throughout the Northern States, has now been entirely banished from many localities under the mistaken impression that they are undesirable neighbors because of certain parasites which infest their nests. These have been



supposed to be bedbugs, and hence the nests have been destroyed and the birds driven away. This is an error for, although related to the above objectionable insect, these swallow parasites are peculiar to birds and are not feared by man.

A century later, the breeding population of the Cliff Swallow in much of the northeast is still low today.

In the 1960s, ornithologists confirmed that the Cliff Swallow had extended its breeding range southeastward into the Piedmont of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. They were first found in South Carolina nesting at the Lake Hartwell Dam in 1965. Cliff Swallow nests were found under the High Rock bridge on Tuckertown Lake in Rowan County during the Spring Bird Count in 1967. This swallow quickly expanded breeding in both states primarily along major river corridors. By the summer of 1987, Harry LeGrand, Briefs for the Files editor in *The Chat*, speculated that Cliff Swallows were "likely nesting at most large Piedmont lakes in the Carolinas." By 1995, nests had been found in most counties in the Central Carolina region.



Cliff Swallow. (Jeff Lemons)

The Yadkin-Pee Dee River system is considered as one of this species' major breeding expansion corridors through the Carolina Piedmont and Coastal Plain, and by 2012, there were an estimated 1,700 active nests along it. In the Central Carolinas, highway bridges over water are the most common site for a colony. But occasionally colonies have been confirmed here on bridges over roads. One colony can consist of 20 to 50, or perhaps a hundred mud nests, which they may reuse and expand year after year.

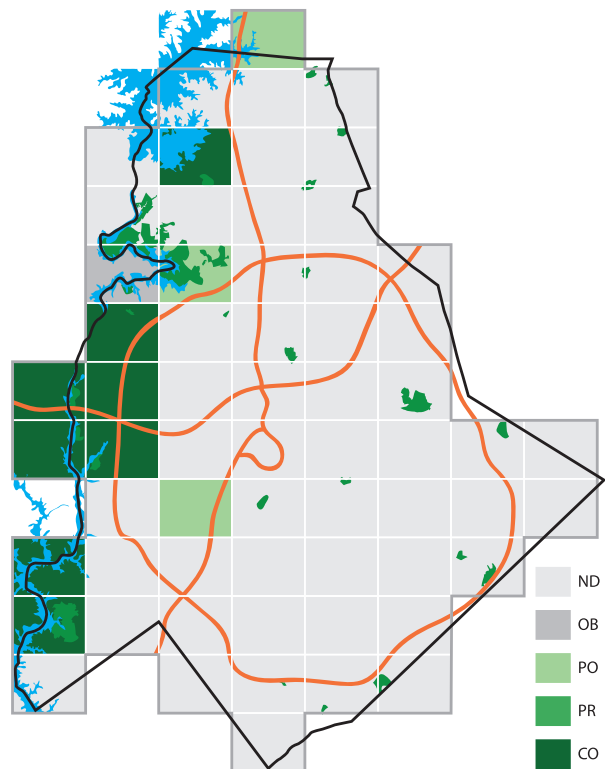
The Cliff Swallow arrives in the Central Carolinas in the middle of March and most have departed south by mid-September. We have no records of this bird from

October through February. Our earliest spring arrival is a bird reported at Catawba College in Rowan County on March 15, 2012. Our latest fall date is 20 September. Cliff Swallows winter in South America as far south as Argentina. Flocks of 150 to more than 200 birds have been periodically reported in the region.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County BBA documented three local nest colonies built on bridges that were not over a body of water. Around 2010, Kevin Metcalf found a colony of Cliff Swallows nesting on a bridge that spans I-485 just north of the Charlotte airport and on a second bridge not far from it. On June 7, 2014, Taylor Piephoff found another nesting colony near there on a third bridge that crosses over a set of railroad tracks.



Gaston County birds collecting mud to build nests (above—Lee Weber). Cliff Swallows catching insects mid-air and returning to their nests under a section of I-485 bridge (below—Gary P. Carter).



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/0, CO/8)