

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

CLIFF SWALLOW

Petrochelidon pyrrhonota

Family: HIRUNDINIDAE

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

B343

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common to abundant spring migrant and summer resident throughout the state; virtually absent in late fall and winter. Found in a wide variety of habitats from grasslands and similar open areas into open forests up to 2600 m (8500 ft), but more common at lower elevations. In deserts, restricted to areas with water. Uncommon migrant over the Farallon Islands (DeSante and Ainley 1980), and rare over the Channel Islands (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Mostly eats insects caught in extended, gliding flights. Occasionally eats berries (Bent 1942).

Cover: Requires open habitats with sheltered locations for nest attachment. Frequents meadows, grasslands, shrublands, pastures, croplands, open bodies of water.

Reproduction: Makes nest of mud pellets; often attached to human-made structure such as eaves of house, barn, other building, bridge, or other sheltered vertical surface. Also attaches nest to rock overhang or cliff, and occasionally to trunk or branch of tree (San Bernardino Mts.) (Dawson 1923, Bent 1942).

Water: Drinks freely from quiet waters (Airola 1980). Needs a source of mud nearby for nest construction.

Pattern: Frequents open habitats with sheltered, vertical surfaces for nest attachment, and a source of mud nearby.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Arrives in mid-February from South America. Numbers increase greatly through late March. Remains common until mid-September. By October, most have departed again for South America. There are only a few records in the state between October and January (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Home Range: Emlen (1954) reported a foraging radius around the nest of 3 to 6.5 km (2-4 mi) in Wyoming.

Territory: Emlen (1954) found only the immediate vicinity of the nest defended.

Reproduction: Nests from April into August with peak activity in June. Pair nests colonially; nests often so close they touch. Lays 3-6 eggs (usually 4-5); incubated for 16 days

mostly, or only, by the female. Altricial nestlings tended by both parents until fledging at about 21-24 days. Nestlings may return to nest for a few days after fledging (Harrison 1978). May raise 2 broods (Bent 1942).

Niche: Eggs infrequently subject to predation by snakes and small mammals. Adults occasionally caught by predators (Wilkinson and English-Loeb 1982). House sparrows usurp nests, sometimes destroying developing eggs and young. Nest used as roost in winter by several species (Bent 1942). Swallows very sensitive to a sudden drop in temperature for an extended time. These cold periods kill the insects on which swallows are dependent and can cause massive die-offs, especially in early spring.

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