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## **TWO CAVE SWALLOWS AND ONE NORTHERN ROUGH- WINGED SWALLOW ON THE DECEMBER 2002 MACON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**

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On 14 December 2002, during the annual Macon Christmas Bird Count (CBC), Walt Bowman, Nancy Gobris, Ty Ivey, Larry Ross, and I observed two Cave Swallows (*Petrochelidon fulva*) at the Macon Dump in Bibb County, Georgia, between 1500 and 1530 hours. Our team also noted one Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) at the same location. Around 0800 hours, Ty Ivey, Walt Bowman, and Nancy Gobris found a Northern Rough-winged Swallow at the Macon Water Treatment Site, about 2.5 km (1.5 miles) from the Macon Dump. Because it was possible that our team saw the same individual swallow twice, we reported just one Northern Rough-winged Swallow within our CBC data.

We entered the Macon Dump shortly after 1500 hours. The weather was overcast, with a strong westerly wind and cold temperatures. The CBC low temperature on 14 December was 4 C (40 F) and the high was 8 C (46 F). I first noticed a swallow over the lake from our moving vehicle. I saw the light rump and believed it was a Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*). As we watched the swallow with our binoculars, we began to consider the possibility of a Cave Swallow. At this point we noticed two other swallows, a second *Petrochelidon* and a Northern Rough-winged Swallow. We observed the swallows flying over a 12-ha (30-ac) man-made lake, at the base of the dump, at a distance of 15–30 m (50–100 ft). Nancy Gobris mentioned that one way to differentiate a Cave from a Cliff Swallow was the forehead. So



at first I concentrated on seeing the contrast between the crown and the forehead, and I watched the birds for 3-5 min. When I retrieved my notebook from our vehicle, Nancy Gobris had *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (Sibley 2000) opened to the genus *Petrochelidon*. When I saw the picture of the Cliff Swallow with the dark throat, I immediately realized that the birds had light throats, meaning the two *Petrochelidon* sp. were Cave Swallows. I went back to my telescope, but I could not find the birds again. I began sketching and taking notes of what I had seen (Figure 1).

I recorded a “light forehead” and a “dark nape and cap” (my sketches reveal that I actually meant “crown” when I wrote “nape”). In addition, I saw “light between back and crown patch.” I also noted the “buff throat and rump.” My notes included “white speckles (molting?) on mantle.” I did not know if white on the mantle was an identification clue or not at the time. The two *Petrochelidon* sp. seemed “fatter or wider than the Rough-winged Swallow,” when seen flying away. The overcast sky conditions kept me from noticing much additional color. I followed the swallows at first through my Leica 10 x 42 BA binoculars, then with my Leica Televid 77-mm spotting scope as the birds flew over the lake, rapidly changing positions.

Before making my final determination, I wanted to eliminate the possibility of the potential Cave Swallows being immature Cliff Swallows with light throats. When I looked at Sibley’s (2000) illustrations, I noticed that juvenile Cliff Swallows have a dull brown or partially white throat, not a buff throat. Later, I also realized that the “white speckles” I observed on the birds’ mantles are found only on adult Cave Swallows and Cliff Swallows. The white feathers were not a sign of molting as I had thought. Immature *Petrochelidon* spp. have uniform brownish backs. Thus, the white speckles (actually stripes) on the birds eliminated the possibility of immature Cliff Swallows and the buff throats of the birds eliminated the possibility of adult Cliff Swallows. In conclusion, the key features identifying the two Cave Swallows were the buff throat and rump, and the distinctive contrast between the dark crown and light throat (absent on a Cliff Swallow). After the sighting, Ty Ivey described his impression of the birds to me by e-mail. He noted that the “black mask through the eye” was the “only exhibited darkness in the face and throat.”

One Cave Swallow was also reported from Augusta on 14 December 2002 (Beaton et al. 2003). Documented sightings also occurred on 14 December 2002, at Wassau Island (Bill Blakeslee, personal communication). Our 14 December 2002 sighting was accepted by the Georgia Checklist and Records Committee in 2003 (Bill Blakeslee, personal communication) as Georgia's second state record. On 15 December 2002, this species was found at the Altamaha Wildlife Management Area (WMA; Beaton et al. 2003).

A major influx of Cave Swallows occurred on the East Coast during the late fall-winter period, 2002. In November and December they were found as far north as Connecticut (ABA 2003a). Reports continued into January 2003, in North Carolina.

Brinkley and Lehman (2003) noted that a "powerful storm system" and a "cold front" brought the Cave Swallows from Texas into the Northeast. More cold fronts later pushed the birds to the Atlantic Coast, where over 200 were tallied in Connecticut alone. Cave Swallows were reported in November from Ontario to Virginia. The swallows gradually moved south, as evidenced by the November 2002–January 2003 sightings in North and South Carolina.

All of these sightings were of the southwestern subspecies of Cave Swallow (*Petrochelidon fulva pelodoma*; ABA 2003b). It is interesting that only four Cave Swallow reports came from inland areas (Great Lakes region not considered). Two of these reports were from Pennsylvania, one from Augusta, Georgia (previously mentioned), and the last from Macon, Georgia (our sighting). While the birds we sighted were not identified to subspecies at the location, my sketch and notes of the "buff throat and rump" and "light between back and crown patch" suggest the lighter colored subspecies, *P. f. pelodoma*, not the Caribbean, *P. f. fulva*.

At the Macon Dump we observed a Northern Rough-winged Swallow with the Cave Swallows. We assumed the Northern Rough-winged Swallow was the same bird seen by three of our team members earlier in the day at the Macon Water Treatment Site, because the dump and the treatment site are close to one another. The Northern Rough-winged Swallow is a common summer resident and an accidental winter visitor in middle Georgia – four birds were recorded on the Rum Creek WMA and Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)

CBC in Monroe County, 20 December 1993 (Johnson 1998, Beaton et al. 2003). Because the Northern Rough-winged Swallow is common in Macon during the summer, I identified it quickly, eliminating Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) because there was no hint of green in the plumage. My original notes record it as “warm brown over entire bird” (Fig. 1). Northern Rough-winged Swallows are whitish underneath. However, taken as a description of my sketch that shows the bird from above, the bird had warm brown upperparts. Interestingly, I observed that the Rough-winged Swallow flew closer to the water than the two Cave Swallows.

Northern Rough-winged Swallows apparently lingered longer than usual in the East during Fall 2002, for an unprecedented “flock of about one hundred” was found at Niagara Falls in mid-November (ABA 2003a). This sighting was about one month later than other records of such flocks. A Cave Swallow also was observed at Niagara Falls with the Northern Rough-winged Swallows (ABA 2003a).

### Acknowledgments

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Figure 1. Author's sketches and field notes of Cave Swallow and Northern Rough-winged Swallow observed in Bibb County, Georgia, 14 December 2002.

