

THE CLIFF SWALLOWS

David Kline

It was a good year for the cliff swallows at our farm. There were 192 nests along the eaves of the barn and a small shed. Approximately three-fourths of the swallows raised two broods of at least four young, making a total of 1344 young swallows fledged.

The cliff swallows first started nesting on the small shed during the 1940's. My father encouraged them by nailing wooden cleats along the eaves on which they could attach their mud nests. The colony stayed around 35 to 45 nests through the 1950's and 60's. Mainly because of limited space the colony didn't increase in size until around 1970 when some of the birds started nesting along the eaves of the barn where there was adequate room for them to expand. Another factor which might have kept the colony from increasing more rapidly was the presence of parasites. I became aware of this in 1976. There were around 50 pair nesting. It was about time for the first young to fledge when quite a few of them dropped to the ground before they were able to fly. I noticed they were ridden with lice. Then, following the fledging of the first brood, all the adult birds departed. When I knocked down the nests in the fall, they were loaded with lice. We then sprayed the nesting ledges with an insecticide. From then on, the colony has steadily increased.

In 1977, there were 59 nests. In 1978, they increased to 99 and in 1979 to 140. But during June of 1979, we had five days of cool, rainy weather in which the swallows couldn't find insects and as a result, quite a few adults perished. In the fall, we checked the nests and one contained 11 dead adult birds along with four eggs. Evidently they crowded into one nest for warmth.

In 1980 there were again 140 nests, a number we were well pleased with considering the devastation they suffered in 1979. Then of course this year, 192 pair. Next year 250 pair? We hope.

Following are a few entries from my journal during this past spring and summer:

April 17th: The first cliff swallows arrived today and promptly started building their gourd-shaped nests. We put up a lot more shelves for them to nest on this year.

April 28th: The cliff swallows are arriving in swarms. Nine completed nests now.

April 29th: Twenty-three nests today.

April 30th: Today there are already 41 completed nests. The weather has been ideal the last three days---sunny and warm. The pigs keep the mud stirred and the swallows are building complete nests in a little over two days. Fascinating birds, but the problem is I've got corn ground to get ready instead of watching birds. Hope to get the corn planted before the warbler migration.

May 22nd: The first cliff swallows are hatching. Egg shells on the ground below the nests this morning. More swallows still coming in. For some unknown reason, the house sparrows are no problem yet.

June 17th: The swallows are busy feeding young and it was quite evident today as I was mowing hay. Scores of cliff swallows along with barn swallows and purple martins were vying for the insects stirred up by

the mower and team

June 23rd: The late arrivals are almost finished with their nests. According to our latest count, there are 192 nests. Not quite the 200 pair I was hoping for, but still more than a 35% increase over last year. The first young have fledged.

July 1st: In the mornings, hundreds of young swallows perch on the spouting above the nests. Evidently the young return to their nests for the first few nights. Maybe until the female lays her second clutch?

August 2nd: The purple martins are gone. Surely it's not for lack of insects that the martins leave this early.

August 17th: The cliff swallows have all departed except a few pair still feeding young.

August 20th: The last cliff swallows have also left. If it were not for the cicadas, crickets and katydids life would be too quiet around here.

To us, the arrival and departure of the cliff swallows are special events. And the spring and summer wouldn't be complete without these beautiful and beneficial birds.

Editor's Note: This article was written by Mr. Kline in 1981 prior to an article which he wrote for National Wildlife Magazine (August-September 1982 issue). This article in National Wildlife is well worth reading. It contains many photos of the Kline farm, children and swallows.

In 1982 the cliff swallow nests increased to 209.



Snowy egret at OWR June 3, 1982, photographed by John Pogacnik.