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THE WHITE-THROATED SWIFTS ON SLOVER MOUNTAIN

By WILSON C. HANNA

WITH ONE PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

THE last of December, 1907, found me with a strong desire to find and secure the nest and eggs of the White-throated Swift (*Aeronautes melanoleucus*). This may seem to be an early date to begin to make arrangements, but to tell the exact truth this was not the first time that I had had such a fanciful desire. It was during one of the nice warm days in the above mentioned month that I became convinced that some of these most interesting birds had made their home on Slover Mountain.

Slover Mountain, a land mark of the San Bernardino Valley, is an isolated hill of solid limestone situated about a mile southwest of the busy little city of Colton. It rises to about 500 feet above the floor of the valley, this being about 1500 feet above sea level. Old Slover has always been famous as a look-out point for residents of the valley and no tourist has seen the valley properly without the view from Slover. During the past twenty years this old hill has been the seat of ever growing commercial activity, and with large cement works on two sides of the hill, marble works, lime kilns, quarries, etc., one would scarcely expect to find it the home of the White-throated Swift. The continual blasting in the many quarries and the many holes on the hill have made it so dangerous to visitors that few would care to risk the ascent even if they could obtain permission from the California Portland Cement Company to do so. One of the treacherous places has proved to be a boon to the swifts, and it is with the swifts in this old abandoned quarry on the highest part of the mountain that this article is to deal.

The old quarry is noteworthy not only as being the home of the White-throated Swifts, but as the quarry from which the rock was obtained in the early nineties to manufacture the first Portland cement west of the Mississippi River, and the removal of rock from this quarry consumed the very highest point of the hill. When the cement company abandoned this quarry about 1896 for more accessible workings a couple of hundred yards away, they left a narrow gulch about twenty to thirty feet wide, one hundred and twenty-five feet long, and with two almost perpendicular faces of limestone, as much as seventy-five feet high in some places

on the south face. There are of course, as in other quarries, a few crevices and cracks in the face due to water and to the blasting, and it was in these cracks in the solid rock that the swifts selected sites for their homes.

During the past eighteen years I have been a frequent visitor to all parts of the mountain, but it was in the summer of 1904 that I first noticed the swifts. In 1905, 1906, and 1907, I occasionally noticed them flying above the mountain, sometimes hundreds of them. In December, 1907, while inspecting the old quarry on the top of the hill I decided that the south face would prove to be interesting to an ornithologist and from that time my hours of leisure on Sundays were spent in the quarry. Some days I would find the birds circling about the top of the mountain, making an occasional swoop with bullet-like speed thru the gulch, where their peculiar harsh notes were re-echoed and re-inforced by the rock walls, thus making one expect to see birds much larger than the swifts. Sometimes these rapid swoops would end in the cracks, about ten feet from the floor, in the south face. I say *in* the cracks instead of *at* the cracks, for their aim almost always was so true that the two-inch opening did not seem to cause them to slow up. Some of my visits were not so pleasing to me, for upon several occasions I could find no signs of the birds, while upon other trips I could hear the birds "in the rocks" but could not make them come out. When April, 1908, came around I was convinced that I was observing the correct place; but I did not see any possibility of securing eggs or of even seeing them, for the seams they favored were either so crooked or extended so far that nothing could be seen no matter where the rope was lowered.

During April, I was called to the East, so told the quarryman, Mr. J. J. Matthews, about the birds and asked him to keep his eyes on them when on that part of the hill, because he might be rewarded by finding a nest. Mr. Matthews became very much interested in the quest and as he was an expert in rope climbing a more desirable assistant could not be hoped for.

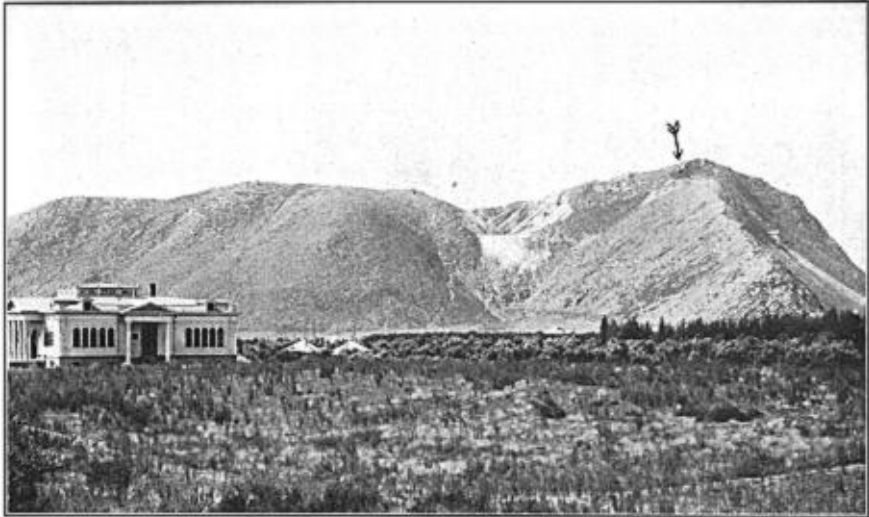
When I returned early in May, Mr. Matthews informed me that he had found a nest of "those rare birds" and better yet that the nest could be seen from the crack in the rock, and best of all that he thought that we would be able to secure the nest by some hard work. This was encouraging news, and armed with permits from the California Portland Cement Co., and the State Board of Fish Commissioners, we made plans to observe the nest regularly and secure some eggs if possible. A walk to the top of old Slover and a rope climb proved to be good exercise, after working hours. The fact that there was so much work connected with the observations made me admire the White-throated Swifts even more than I had before.

Nest no. 1 was reached by throwing a rope from the top of the quarry to the ground and then climbing up the rope from the bottom and working along the face by means of friendly crevices. If the rope had been lowered directly above the nest we would have been several feet from the face and could not have worked to advantage. The nest was about eighteen feet from the floor of the quarry and forty from the top, and was situated in a crevice from one to three inches in width, about four feet long and extending back about two feet. The nest was only about one foot from the face and was firmly glued between the two walls, probably by means of saliva, but some of the weight may have been supported by a few projections from the rocks.

Judging from the rate at which nest no. 1 progressed after we first saw it, we think it was started about April 15. It seemed to be almost done on May 1, but it continued to be improved upon day by day and on May 16 we observed the first egg. More improvements were made during the next few days and on May 19 there were two eggs, and on May 22 another. During most of these observations

no swifts were in sight, but on one occasion a bird was in the crevice and remained there during our examination of the nest. The nest was visited May 23, but the bird was on the nest and would not flush. On May 24 there was another egg and as there were no more on May 28, we decided it was time to secure the nest and eggs if possible.

The first thing to be done was to cut some notches in the rock for a foot-hold, so that we would be able to steady the rope while removing the nest, for of course it would not do to take any risks. The next thing to do was to cut away the rock from below until we could get a hand under the nest. This was accomplished little by little on all of our trips so that on May 28 a half-hour of work was sufficient to get the rock out of the way. The bird was poked off the nest with a stick after several attempts to "shoo" it off, and the nest cut away from the rock with a long stick in the form of a chisel. The nest and eggs were removed from the crevice, placed in a box and passed to Mr. Matthews on the ground by means of a string. As I stood there and observed the nest and four eggs I realized how



SLOVER MOUNTAIN AS IT APPEARS FROM COLTON, CALIFORNIA; ARROW POINTS TO PLACE WHERE WHITE-THROATED SWIFTS WERE NESTING

lucky I was to secure the eggs of the White-throated Swift and how many ornithologists would envy me.

The nest was composed of straw, feathers, waste, and cotton, without any special lining. There were no sticks or twigs in the composition and it seemed to get most of its strength from the large feathers. It was not artistic or strong but with two solid walls of rock to support the sides it probably would last for more than one season if the insects, with which it was overrun, did not injure it. The dimensions of the nest were one inch deep inside and two inches deep outside; $2\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ inches inside diameter, and $3\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ inches outside diameter. The four eggs are pure white in color, narrowly elliptical in form, one end being slightly smaller. The eggs taken by me are very uniform in size and measure in inches: $.83 \times .55$; $.81 \times .56$; $.83 \times .55$; $.81 \times .56$. Hence the eggs are a little smaller than those described by Mr. Walter E. Bryant in the

September *Nidologist* for 1894, which measured .87×.53; .88×.53; .88×.52; .86×.50.

Nest no. 1 and the set of eggs are now in the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology of the University of California.

Nest no. 2 was discovered June 15, when by moving a rock hanging to the face of the quarry, a crevice was exposed where several feet back in the solid rock out of our reach a nest with three young birds could be seen. I think the birds were a week or ten days old at this time, and they seemed to be of different sizes and without feathers. The birds were feathered on June 25 and on June 27 the nest was empty. The nest was located about fifteen feet from the floor of the quarry and fifty or sixty feet from the top.

Nest no. 3 was also discovered on June 15. Four feet of decomposed rock were moved and a crevice in the solid rock exposed. Several feet back in the crevice we could see part of a nest on a shelf and hear the young. We could see parts of the feathered birds on June 25; but on June 27 the nest seemed to be empty.

Probably there were at least twenty-five pairs of birds nesting in one large crevice in the solid rock, but it extended so far that it would have been impossible to secure the nests or even get a glimpse of them.

I believe that the birds are residents on Slover Mountain during the entire year but they do not seem to be plentiful during August and September. Some days the birds are numerous and on other days not a sign of them can be seen or heard. The birds seem to know that they are safe while "in the rocks", for when I have surprised them in the quarry, I have seen the birds which were at the openings to narrow crevices crawl on out where they could turn around and then crawl back into the crevices out of sight.

When not in the crevices they spend most of their time soaring above the mountain, probably feeding on insects. They can soar with much ease and can remain almost stationary in the air even in a strong breeze. No doubt the White-throated Swifts are the swiftest birds on the wing when they choose to "speed up", and with rapidly vibrating wings and bullet-like speed they seem to enjoy passing within a yard of a visitor to their haunts.

The swifts do not seem to have any musical ability, but their notes or calls are pleasing, especially to one who is studying them. One series of peculiar shrieks is given while the bird is in rapid flight and is suggestive of joyous freedom. Another series of notes is given when the birds are in the crevices, which sound very much like the twitterings of small chickens as they cuddle under their mother's wings, only the swifts' notes are much louder. These twitterings are quite a contrast to the wild shrieks, and they can not help but suggest comfort and satisfaction.

The swifts are not alone on Slover, for many other birds find enjoyment here. Cliff Swallows (*Petrochelidon lunifrons*) and a few Barn Swallows (*Hirundo erythrogaster*) are frequently noticed flying about with the swifts in May and June altho they do not nest on the mountain. Rock Wrens (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) are common on the mountain during the entire year, and on useless trips to the old quarry there was some satisfaction gained when I could see this little wren bobbing on a rock or hear its little song and sometimes find a nest in some convenient pocket in the rocks. Barn Owls (*Aluco pratincola*) monopolized the large crevices in different parts of the mountain and, due to their ignorance in choosing some places, it was not uncommon to smell burning flesh and feathers after blasts in the quarries. Intermediate Sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambeli*) are common in the winter time. California Towhees (*Pipilo crissalis senicula*) are

always numerous, and conspicuous among them were several partial albinos. Black Phoebes (*Sayornis nigricans*) and Ash-throated Flycatchers (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) make their homes in an old lime kiln. California Bush-tits (*Psaltriparus minimus californicus*) and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers (*Polioptila californica*) are sometimes seen in the brush; and a frightened Road-runner (*Geococcyx californianus*) occasionally appears. The high rocks serve as good lookout points for stray hawks that happen to pass by that way. In the early days the Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura septentrionalis*) made their homes on this old peak but now they only soar around the hill as if to inspect the work of man. Of course hummingbirds and other birds found in the valley are found at the base of the mountain.

Spring is now here again and as I write these notes I feel the longing to visit the birds in their haunts and I am hoping that I may secure some more information concerning the White-throated Swifts on Slover Mountain.

Colton, California; March 1, 1909.

SOME NOTES FROM FRESNO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

By JOHN G. TYLER

THE Pigmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmæa*) is not an uncommon bird in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of this county, but only once during the past eight years has the writer noted its presence here in the San Joaquin Valley.

About two miles south of Clovis is an irrigation canal locally known as the Gould Ditch. Numerous ragged old willows and occasionally a cottonwood are found along the banks, sometimes close together and in other places farther apart but forming practically the only large trees to be found in the immediate vicinity in any numbers. Among this double fringe of trees, with water and good feeding grounds near at hand, many of our birds find suitable nesting places, and here during migration one stands the best chance of seeing some straggler from other regions.

On the first day of November, 1903, while making my way along this canal a Pigmy Nuthatch was seen working over a large cottonwood tree. When first observed the bird was about fifteen feet from the ground and upon seeing me it dodged behind the tree for a moment giving me a chance to approach unobserved, an opportunity that I quickly took advantage of, finally pausing not over eight feet from the base of the tree and remaining motionless. Soon the bird appeared again working around the tree in a sort of spiral fashion, head downward. Nearly half an hour was spent in watching this little visitor from the Sierras in its search for food. So long as I remained quiet it seemingly did not notice my presence, but a sudden movement would cause it to fly to the upper branches only to begin again its up-hill downward climb evidently not having exhausted the food possibilities of that tree; and when I finally went away it was still at work.

The town of Clovis can boast of an elevation of about 340 feet and the nearest foot-hills with their scattering oaks are at least ten miles away, while the heavier timber such as this species generally frequents is not nearer than twice that distance; so the little slate-colored nuthatch seemed to have wandered far from its usual haunts.