

First Nesting of the Cliff Swallow on the Mississippi Coast

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On 10 June 1986, Spence found 30 or more Cliff Swallows (Hirundo pyrrhonota) concentrated at a draw bridge which spans the East Pearl River on U.S. 90 at the boundary between Hancock County, Mississippi and St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. From the river bank, Spence saw at least two Cliff Swallow nests attached to supports beneath the bridge. They were above the tidal marsh on the east side (Hancock Co., Mississippi). Spence noted much activity around the nests and noted many other swallows which he presumed were making trips to nests beyond his vantage point. A few Barn Swallows (Hirundo rustica) were in the air above the west side of the bridge.

On 13 June, Toups and Dalton King counted 40 or more Cliff Swallows at the bridge. The tide was low at the time, affording a fairly close approach to the bridge supports on the east side. At least three Cliff Swallow nests were visible; two appeared nearly complete; the third was in an early stage of construction. All were attached to the concrete at an inside "elbow" and were seemingly attached to each other about 4 m above the river.

Swallows were gathering mud from just below the span and at least three were seen placing pellets on the existing nests. Many other Cliff Swallows gathered mud from the same area (less than one square meter) and flew with it between the concrete supports a few meters away. We have no doubt that other nests were under construction, although they were not visible to us. Photographs by Toups document this first nesting record for Cliff Swallows on the Mississippi coast and have been deposited in the ornithological files of the Department of Biological Sciences at Mississippi State University.

Until 1975, the Cliff Swallow was known to nest in Mississippi only in Tishomingo County, the northeasternmost county in the state (Turcotte 1975). Weber (1979) noted that by 1978 its breeding range in Mississippi had expanded to Grenada, Itawamba, Claiborne, and Hinds counties, and Jackson (1980)

included Panola, Yalobusha, Desoto, and Tate counties. All of the above counties are in the northern two-thirds of the state.

Prior to 1982, when Cliff Swallows nested along the Mobile Causeway in coastal Alabama, it was a common nesting species in Alabama only in the Tennessee Valley (Imhof 1976).

Lowery (1974) reported no nesting of the Cliff Swallow in Louisiana. The first occurred in 1980 at Cameron Parish, a southwest coastal area (Jackson 1980); others followed from the southeast coast and areas in north Louisiana. Since this swallow was found nesting at a bridge over the Middle Pearl River in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana in 1981 (Imhof 1982), less than 8 km west of the Mississippi border on U.S. 90, local birders have been actively searching for nests along the Mississippi coast. The nests reported here were just a few meters from being in Louisiana.

The confirmation of Mississippi coastal nesting continues a trend of this rapidly expanding species. In 1980, Jackson wrote "While Barn Swallows seemed to expand in orderly fashion down our highways, the expansion of the Cliff Swallows has been more erratic, crossing wide gaps in unpredictable directions, but predictably becoming established as a nesting species at major river crossings and reservoirs."

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