

First Documented Cave Swallow for Ohio

by **John Pogacnik**

4765 Lockwood Rd. Perry, Ohio 44081

jpogacnik@adelphia.net

My memories of the 5 November 2005 Kirtland Bird Club field trip begin with somebody asking me what I was hoping we'd see that day. "Cave swallow," I answered without hesitation. "Cave swallow....," he asked, puzzled, "Don't you mean cliff swallow? Cave swallows are native to Texas. Why would one be up here?" I reminded him that cave swallows have recently been seen annually along the east coast and in the Great Lakes region in the fall. I pointed out that only the day before over 100 had been seen at Hamlin Beach near Rochester, New York.

This was not the first fall season I had searched for *Petrochelidon fulva* in Ohio. Two years earlier, on the morning of 23 November 2003, I saw what I was sure was a cave swallow from my yard in Lake County as it passed along the lakeshore. I had pretty decent, but brief, views of it in my spotting scope as it flew east. The following day several were reported along Lake Ontario. I mentioned my sighting in passing, but because it was a single-observer sighting and the bird it was pretty far out, I felt uncomfortable about writing it up.

A couple of years before that I had observed distant swallows at Pymatuning Reservoir in Ashtabula County in November. It was raining, and the birds appeared dark, with no color apparent. I was unable to get any closer, and when I returned to my original observation point they were gone. Cave swallows were found not far away just inside Pennsylvania around that same time. I felt frustrated, as Ohio and Indiana were the only states in the region without records of the species, yet I had twice seen birds that could easily have been cave swallows. I was almost reluctant to watch the lake for fear I would see another that I couldn't count. The 5 November KBC field trip seemed promising, though, like one of those times when everything comes together. With over 100 cave swallows seen to the east the day before, we had numerous observers to help verify any possible sighting.

I arrived a little after 7:20 am for the scheduled 8:00 am field trip. Only ten minutes or so after arriving, a swallow passed by at eye-level, heading west. I saw only the tail end of the bird, and it was a little too dark to make out any coloration. Still, this was a most positive omen. In my years of watching the lake from Lake County, I have found very few swallows after early October. Along the western basin, swallows seem to linger later into the season, but along the lake here in the central basin any swallow after early October is extremely noteworthy. I knew any unidentified swallow could possibly be a cave swallow, and I hoped this single bird would be the first of many.

Once we assembled for the field trip I told the thirty-plus participants that cave swallow was a distinct possibility, and described what field marks to

look for on any swallow we might see. I had even printed a copy of Julian Hough's excellent "Cave Swallow vs. Cliff Swallow" ID comparison plate (<http://www.ctbirding.org/images/Cliff3.jpg>) to pass around. Knowing what to look for, all we needed now were swallows. It didn't take long before a group of twelve passed by, heading west. They were out pretty far, but I was able to get them in view in my scope. I thought I could see pale upper rumps, but I was again looking from behind the birds. Nobody else was able to get a good look at them either. About a half hour later a single bird approached. This time, I was clearly able to see the pale rump, very pale throat, and dark cap. I yelled for everybody to get on the bird because this one was surely a cave swallow. The bird cooperated by flying right over us, allowing for some decent views. Ohio finally had its first cave swallow. Two more birds passed by a little later, but again we were looking at the tail end of a bird flying away from us. We had seen a total of sixteen swallows and had identified only one as a cave swallow, though that species could not be ruled out for any of the others seen that morning. We later headed east into Ashtabula County, but saw no other swallows that day.

The following day, 6 November, I again started birding at Perry Park around 7:30. This spot is an excellent vantage point for watching Lake Erie, since there are no trees obstructing the view. By 7:45 I had a group of 30-40 cave swallows heading west. I knew Larry Rosche was in the Mentor Headlands area, so I called him on the phone and we decided to meet at Painesville Township Park, just east of Fairport Harbor. After about 20 minutes of lake watching, Vernon Weingart announced that some swallows were heading west out over the lake. Rosche and I were able to see clearly a group of at least 25 cave swallows. From there we headed to Fairport Harbor. I positioned myself at the marina where the mew gull had been found a few years back, while Rosche and others stood at the east end of Lake Metroparks' Fairport Harbor Lakefront Park. There we saw several swallows in small groups. I would see the swallows first, then advise the others by phone the birds were headed their way, whereupon they would get ready for them. All the swallows we saw from that area seemed to head inland, taking a west to southwest direction. None of the birds appeared to make it as far as the Grand River. Interestingly, Kevin Metcalf, who was leading a group at Headlands Beach State Park west of the river at the same time, saw no swallows until he took his group east of the river. By 11:15 a severe thunderstorm hit the area, and no swallows were seen after that.

In the days that passed, swallows were seen in Ashtabula and Cuyahoga counties. At Hamlin Beach in New York 579 were counted on November 6. One was found dead on a porch in Lakewood, Cuyahoga County, on 20 November. That bird was deposited with the Cleveland Museum of Natural History collections.

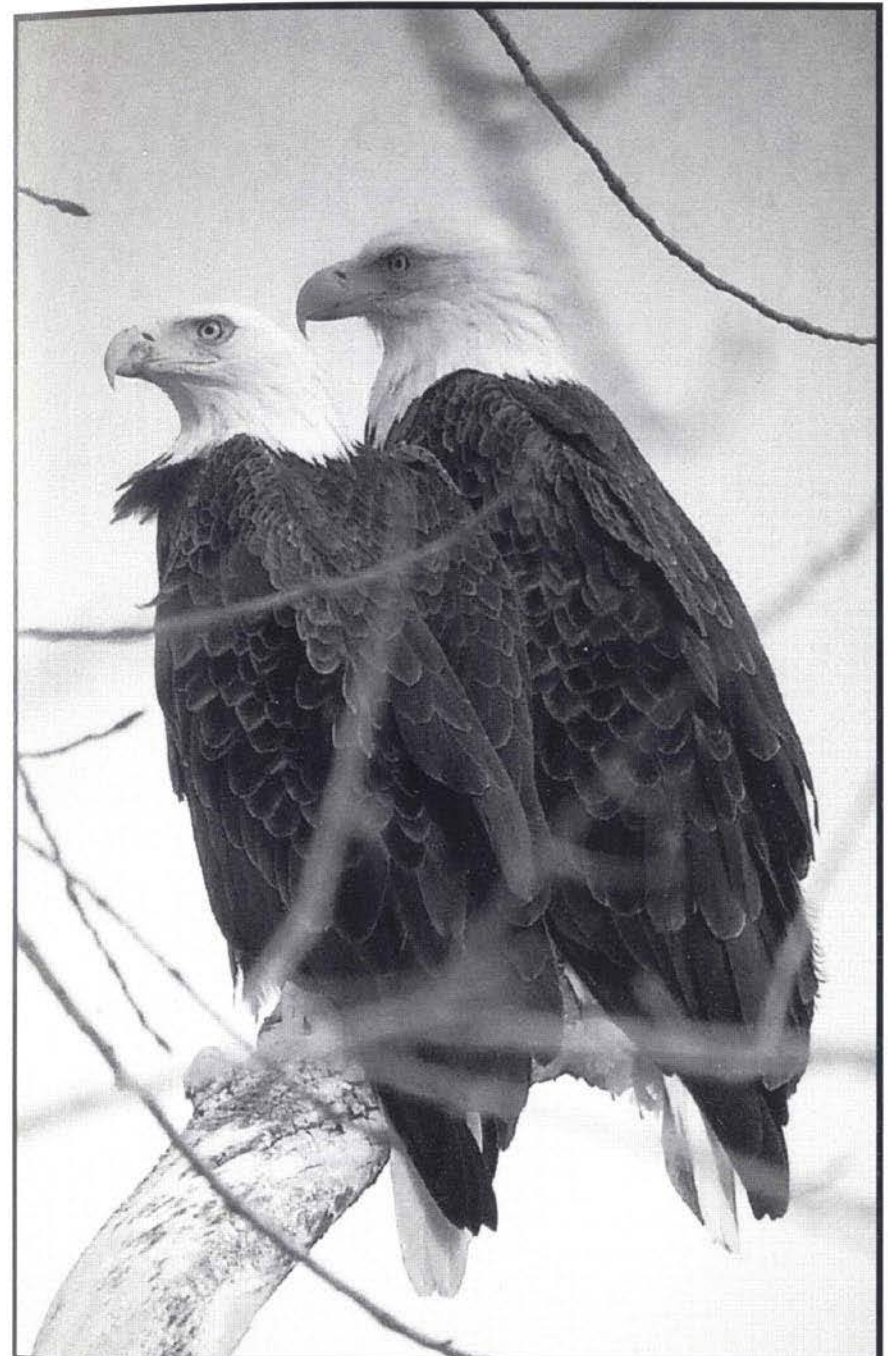
Prior to the early 1970s cave swallows (the southwestern race *P. f. pelodoma*) were found only in the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico and a few other smaller caves in Texas. In the mid-70s cave swallows began nesting in

culverts and under bridges in Texas. Within a few years, these swallows had begun nesting over the southern two-thirds of Texas and up into south-central New Mexico. During this same period reports of the species began to come from southern Texas during the winter. They began showing up at Cape May, New Jersey, and have become annual there in the fall. Birds started visiting Great Lakes shorelines within the last ten years.

Cave swallows can also be found in Florida. These, however, come from the West Indian race *P. f. fulva* and may well be a different species entirely. Unlike the southwestern population, Florida's has not increased markedly in size. All those seen at Cape May and elsewhere in the Northeast and Great Lakes have been of the southwestern race. If trends continue, cave swallows may become annual visitors to Ohio, and will be well worth looking for along Lake Erie's central basin in November.



Dorsal view of a cave swallow found dead on a Lakewood front porch. Photo taken in situ by Jim McCarty 20 Nov 2005.



Joey Shively captured this portrait at Crane Creek SP 13 Nov.