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TREE-NESTING CLIFF SWALLOWS IN THE SAN BERNARDINO MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA

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The widespread Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) attaches its retort-shaped mud nests to cliffs, cave entrances, and a variety of artificial substrates, but the use of tree trunks and limbs for nest attachment has rarely been reported (Brown and Brown 1995). Nevertheless, Cliff Swallow colonies on yellow pines (*Pinus ponderosa* and/or *P. jeffreyi*) were long ago documented in the Big Bear Lake area of the San Bernardino Mountains, California, by Grinnell (1908; photographs), Willett (1912), and Dawson (1923; photographs). These authors did not specify the exact location(s) of the tree colonies within the Big Bear Valley; Dawson (1923) attributed the use of tree substrates to the lack of other suitable substrates in an "otherwise delectable country."

I photographed a group of Cliff Swallow nests on a ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) in October 1981 along Shay Road near the southwestern corner of Baldwin Lake in Big Bear Valley, San Bernardino Mountains (34° 16' N, 116° 49' W; see back cover); the nests were constructed and occupied the previous summer. This colony was active throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, often being a focal point of Audubon chapter birding trips to the San Bernardino Mountains; my field notes contain references to this colony for the years 1977 through 1983. Ongoing residential development has altered the landscape of this portion of the Big Bear Valley, and the nesting colony was no longer extant as of 1992 (Herbert Clarke pers. comm). In June 1989 James E. Pike (pers. comm.) observed at least one other small colony in pine trees just east of Holcomb Valley Campground, 10 km northwest of the Baldwin Lake site.

On 13 June 1980 I recorded detailed information about the placement of nests in the pine tree colony at Baldwin Lake. I counted a minimum of 154 nests on 18 trees. I was able to examine the entire trunks of only five trees, so many additional nests were probably hidden from view on the back sides of trunks of the remaining trees. Nest height (estimated visually) on these mature (30–35 m) pines ranged from 7 to 17 m (mean 11.0 m; $n = 44$). Nest placement by quadrant (based on the 44 nests on the five trees examined in their entirety) was 10 in the north quadrant (i.e., quadrant centered on 0° compass reading), 13 in the east quadrant, 15 in the south quadrant, and 6 in the west quadrant. This slight but nonsignificant tendency toward a southeasterly orientation (Kruskal–Wallis test of means; $p = 0.412$) agrees with Grinnell's (1937) description of a colony in Berkeley, California. Of the 154 nests observed, 148 were placed underneath a limb or stub (although some stubs were very small, i.e., <10 cm), one was placed laterally beside a small stub, and only five were placed directly on the trunk away from any limb or stub. Six clusters (totaling 15 nests) consisted of two to three extensively conjoined nests; many of the other 139 nests adjoined their neighbor(s) at the base. In 1981 (when the back-cover photo was taken), nests appeared to be more closely clustered; Brown and Brown (1995) noted that Cliff Swallows "prefer nests that share walls with neighbors." During the summer of 1980 I noted several other colonies of Cliff Swallows in the Big Bear Valley on buildings, dams, and other artificial substrates; one of those was along Shay Road within 1 km of the tree colony.

Cliff Swallows' use of trees as nest substrates is clearly a rare event and is not documented elsewhere in the species' broad North American range (Brown and

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Brown 1995, C. R. Brown pers. comm.). There is no mention of tree nesting in Colorado, where the species is widespread in ponderosa pine habitat (Kingery 1998). Similarly, no published breeding bird atlases from California counties mention trees as nest substrates. The unique colonies in the Big Bear Valley first documented by Grinnell, Dawson, and Willett now seem to have fallen victim to suburban sprawl and resort development, perhaps through a combination of reduction of overall habitat suitability for Cliff Swallows (Breeding Bird Survey data suggest recent population declines in southern California; Brown and Brown 1995) and the provision of a wealth of artificial structures for alternative nest placement.

I thank Herbert Clarke, Jim Pike, and Doug Willick for providing additional information about the Big Bear Valley colonies, and Kathy Molina and Charles R. Brown for comments on a draft of this note.

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27th Annual Meeting of the Western Field Ornithologists

10–13 October 2002

**The San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary in Irvine
and Ayres Country Inn in Costa Mesa, California**

Conference Information

Orange County, California, offers wonderful opportunities for birders to discover southern California resident and migrant bird species in rural, urban, suburban, and pelagic settings. The area is rich in bird life, and October will find WFO visiting during autumn migration. Bolsa Chica, Newport Back Bay, Limestone Canyon, Dripping Springs, the “gold coast,” the Pacific Ocean, Starr Ranch, and urban parrot roosts are examples of the field trips that have been planned for this meeting to highlight the rich diversity of landscape zones and birds that Orange County has to offer. With sufficient interest, postmeeting trips will go to the Salton Sea and Baja California.

Activities

WFO 2002 offers a mix of half-day field trips on October 11, 12, and 13. Other planned activities include a workshop on documenting bird records, evening field trips, a banding trip for hawks or owls, a full-day pelagic trip, afternoon paper sessions, and identification panels using both slides and recorded sounds. Social activities will include a welcoming reception, barbecue at the San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary, the annual dinner, and evening programs.

Speakers

The featured speakers for WFO 2002 are renowned marine biologist Robert L. Pitman and our own Philip Unitt. Bob will speak on the eastern Pacific pelagic frontier at the annual dinner to be held on Saturday, October 12. Phil will speak on the surprises revealed by the five years of field work for the San Diego County bird atlas at the barbecue on Friday, October 11.

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