



## Cliff Swallow

### Coloring instructions:

Black - the bill and the eye

Dark blue - the top of the head and the back (except for the white stripes)

Pale orange - the forehead, the nape, and the rump

Brownish red - the chin

Dark gray - the wings and the tail

# Cliff Swallow

**Length:** 5"

**Habitat:** Cliffs, bridges, and overpasses, often near water

**Field marks:** Dark on top except for the pale orange forehead and rump.

**Field notes:** It flies like a fighter jet with quick turns.

Swallows are a sign of spring. You won't see them around in winter because there are not enough insects around to sustain them. Where are they in the winter? In South America, where it is summertime and there are lots of insects. Swallows need lots of insects because they nest in **colonies** with often more than 1,000 nests. The nests are built with mud combined with the bird's saliva. This forms a sticky substance that can be glued together onto inaccessible, vertical structures like cliffs and bridges.

Colonial nesting has several advantages. The insects that swallows feed on tend to hatch out in large numbers at unpredictable times and places. If swallows each had their own territory, there would be sometimes when the territory would be swamped with insects and other times when it would be bare. By not having individual feeding territories, all the birds are free to move into whatever area currently has lots of insects. Also, swallows can learn where the insects are from one another. They can watch for a swallow bringing back lots of insects and follow that swallow back to its hunting area.

Another advantage to nesting in colonies is that hundreds of adults are available to mob any predator that comes too close.

However, colonies also have problems. One is nest **parasites**. All nests become filled with mites, flies, ticks, and other bugs that infest, chew, and suck on birds. This is a major reason that a nest is **ONLY** a cradle. Nests are too unhealthy to be long-term houses. As soon as the babies are ready to **fledge**, they leave the nest and never return. Most birds don't reuse an old nest. Swallows, however, do repair and reuse their mud nests. In a large colony, parasites can become so abundant that they suck the baby's blood and energy out too fast and many chicks die. Large colonies sometimes alternate between two nesting sites. Perhaps they do this to starve any parasites that await the swallow's return.

Cliff Swallows have another very interesting parasite - themselves. As Cliff Swallows lay their eggs (one a day like most birds), they have been observed carrying an egg in their mouth and placing it into another nest while the occupants are away, sometimes tossing out one of the occupant's eggs. It's been estimated that more than one fourth of all the nests in a colony have been parasitized by other Cliff Swallows.

# Cliff Swallow Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- See a Cliff Swallow. There are several species of swallows here in the summer. Cliff Swallows have a pale orange forehead.
- See a colony of Cliff Swallow nests. Look for them under bridges.
- See a swallow catch a flying insect. Swallows fly like jet fighters.
- See swallows gathering mud to build or repair their nests.

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