

CAT PRINTS



Wildcat Audubon Society - Serving the Nebraska Panhandle

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Swallow Summer Revisited

by Allison Johnson

The cliff swallow, *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*, frequents the skies over Nebraska. It's a small bird, but one with a lot of heart. Weighing only around 20 to 28 grams, it is a wonder that this elfin bird travels the way it does, spending six months out of the year moving from South America where it winters to as far North as Alaska or Nova Scotia where it breeds. The bird makes up for its lack of brute force by coming by the hundreds, sometimes even thousands. Cliff swallows are one of the most social birds in North America, entering into great colonies in their nesting sites ranging from one or two pairs to 3000 nests. This behavior makes cliff swallows a perfect candidate for field study. Not only do they come with numbers, but they also cluster their colonies, living less than a mile apart on occasion. In 1982, Dr. Charles Brown arrived at Cedar Point Biological Station in Ogallala, Nebraska to spend a few years documenting and learning more about the fascinating colonial lifestyle of these amazing birds. The birds easily work their way into your heart, as I have just found, and Charles and his wife Mary have recently completed their 25th year of study, making the cliff swallows the longest studied population in biological history.

I was privileged enough to spend the 25th summer with Charles, Mary, Charles' graduate Valerie O'Brien,

his master's student Stephanie Strickler, and two other assistants, Jillian Blackwell and Sarah Robinson. The girls and I lived in a small wood cabin with a concrete floor. Each day started and ended about the same way, in that little room, but repetitive as field work may seem, it was an experience in patience and flexibility.

Mornings, afternoons, and occasionally nights were spent thinking, living, and breathing cliff swallow. Alarm clock goes off at 6:57am, breakfast at 7:00, meet in the lab at 7:45, pack the trucks (two poles, two buckets, two to six lawn chairs, water, and the back pack...DO NOT FORGET THE BACKPACK!!

Everything remotely important resides in the backpack, clipboards, pens, nets, bands, pliers, weigh bag, Mary's tool kit...), plan to leave at 8:00, actually leave at 8:30. Thus starts a typical morning. Charles divided us into teams and off we went to our respective posts to spend the morning recording swallow life after swallow life as they blundered into our net. Lunch was a noon, we divided and conquered again for the afternoon shift, then returned for dinner (usually late) at 5:30.

It was scheduled and it was planned. But swallows and the weather do not obey the word of Charles Brown.

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Visit our new web-site at

<http://www.wyoneb.net/-delara/WildcatAudubon.htm>

Kenitz Corner

By Alice Kenitz

Winter birds have definitely arrived!!! Juncos and Pine Siskins are visiting feeders. Helen Hughson had another Varied Thrush in her yard a few weeks ago. Earlier in the fall she had a Black-throated Blue Warbler for a couple of days—long enough for several of us to get it on our life lists. Today (the last day of November) I'm enjoying a nice flock of 15-20 robins in my backyard. They seem to be most interested in the ice we chipped out of our freezer a couple of days ago and put out on the lawn.

In August a few of us were able to spend some time birding and visiting with Sarah and Harley Winfrey, Benton and Henry. Winfreys have had a lot of adventures (birding and otherwise) since they left here. They are all doing well and the boys are growing like crazy. We did a little birding in Carter Canyon and at Kiowa. Highlights of the day were Snowy Egret, Burrowing Owls, Cassin's Kingbirds, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and Bank Swallows.

One of the birding highlights of any year is breakfast at Hughson's. Breakfast is always delicious, fellowship is special, and birding is pretty darn good. The highlight of this year's trip in September was a Chestnut-sided Warbler—another lifer for several of us. Other birds of interest were Great-crested Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and at least 4 Gray Catbirds.

We postponed our fall count by one week because the weather was so disagreeable. But when we went on September 30, it was

a perfect day which we enjoyed almost as much as the birding. It's always fun to see pelicans in the spring and fall. Other interesting species were Short-billed Dowitcher, Bald Eagle, Eastern Phoebe (which hung out in Ann Duey's yard for quite a few days), White-breasted Nuthatch, and Brewer's Blackbird.

On our waterfowl trip in mid-October we were a little disappointed in the number of individual birds we saw, but we had 55 total species before the day was ended. We were a little surprised to see a Ruddy Duck at Winters' Creek Lake on that date. Other 'good' species were Osprey, Herring Gull, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Townsend's Solitaire, Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-throated Sparrow, and Brewer's Blackbird.

In just a couple of weeks we'll be doing the Christmas Bird Count—always a special time for birders. Come join us if you can. Or, if you live in the Scottsbluff-Gering area and are unable to join us but would be willing to count birds in your yard, please let me know. [Email](#) or phone 308-436-2959

RECYCLE

Bring your aluminum cans to any Wildcat Audubon event or meeting.

Postage paid envelopes are now available for individual ink jet cartridges you can mail from home. Pick some up at the next meeting.

Proceeds from your recycling will help pay for Audubon Adventures in local schools.

DUCK STAMP

Did you know that 98% off every dollar spent on a Federal Duck Stamp goes into a fund to purchase or lease wetland habitat? More than \$700 million has protected over 5.2 million acres in the National Wildlife Refuge System since 1934.

Did you know that one third of America's threatened and endangered species make their home in wetlands?

Did you know that wetlands also play an essential role in protecting our water supply? 1/10th acre of wetlands can filter 730,000 gallons of water each year cleaning agriculture runoff and pollutants before they reach our drinking water supply.

Did you know that we are still losing 100,000 acres of wetlands a year? For centuries wetlands were thought of as wasted space and were plowed under, filled in, or used as garbage dumps. More than half of all wetlands that existed before European settlers set foot in America are gone.

Did you know that for only \$15 per year birders and conservationist can purchase an annual Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation stamp also known as the Federal Duck Stamp?

Everyone who enjoys watching birds and wants to protect their habitat can participate in conserving it. Even those who don't hunt can appreciate the valuable impact of the stamp.

Federal Duck Stamps can be purchased at your local post office, their web site www.usps.com and where hunting and fishing permits are sold.

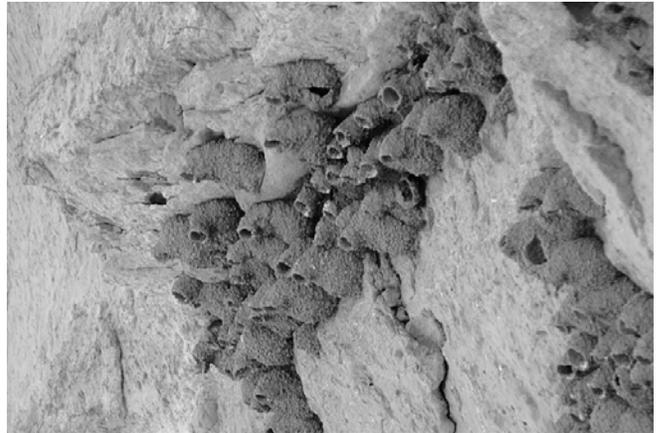
Did you know you could make a difference?

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The day was always determined by the birds and the weather. In the world of Charles Brown, what the swallows say goes. Charles is a swallow man. We could go out into the field with a plan, a set motive that could be dashed as easily as a wine glass with a drop of rain or a flighty colony. One particular morning Charles and Valerie decided I would go with them to draw blood from birds at a colony called Roscoe. Roscoe wasn't going to cooperate. It rained. It poured. Charles melted. His face changed from one of determination to one of despair as the clouds turned to rain. We must have sat in the truck for a half hour trying to wait out the rain before he finally gave up. He wouldn't set up the net, he would never willingly overstress his birds.

Sometimes it wasn't the weather that toyed with the plans. The birds were to Charles and Mary either buddies or buttheads. A fair majority of the time they were buttheads. IS 3 was a particularly nasty bunch of swallows. We would hide in the culvert for up to an hour waiting for the birds to calm down before we would rush out and drop the nest over the canal. Well, the hour was the time period given before we all got so exasperated we had to run out and try to net the irritating colony that wouldn't quit alarm calling at us. One afternoon we had gusty wind and the birds wouldn't calm at all so we all finally chose a bucket to sit on in order to hold up the poles and so we could jump to the nets more quickly, hoping to gain the element of surprise...it failed, miserably. Charles finally drove by, and commented that our setup wouldn't work, we would do better to give up. And so we did, more often than we liked. The birds hold rule.

Not everything was fun and games, though, each of the assistants had to do their share of 'bug picking'. Not only did we work with the swallows, but also with their ectoparasites, namely the swallow bug. Swallow bug doesn't really express the small creature's true capacity for evil. They are very closely related to our bed bugs, they are small, brown, cursedly fast, and (like the bed bug) pack a nasty bite. The bugs are of particular interest because they are the host for the buggy creek virus that affects the cliff swallows, and in order to understand the virus's behavior it is crucial to understand its affect not only in the bird population, but also in the bugs'. So we counted bugs. We swept them off nests (and were covered with them) and worked with them in the lab (and were covered with them). Terrible things, they would run from the tweezers, play dead, and were



Cliff Swallow Nests at Register Cliffs by Allison Johnson

all around just plain hard to find in a pile of nest dirt. After a full day of sorting swallow bugs into vials of one hundred each we could close our eyes and see them moving on the skirts of our vision. I even had nightmares about the things! I would chase them with tweezers, but never, never would I succeed in catching them! The whole experience was slightly traumatizing!

It wasn't really work though. There were the evil bugs and the long hot days, but there were the people, and in the end, there were also the birds. Certain memories stand out: Charles and his one and only field shirt that finally started ripping on the last day of work, the worm dance, the cuckoos (or lack thereof), being stared at because we were always covered in some sort of excrement, saving a baby swallow from the throat of a bull snake. The list could extend for miles. It was amazing. It was spectacular. It was an unforgettable place with unforgettable people, and something I will always remember with a smile.

At the end of the season, I left with a heavy heart. I got a little more emotional than I planned, but how much the small, twittering swallows actually manage to grow on a person didn't hit me until I got home and agreed to stake out colonies in Scottsbluff so that we could collect more bugs. Wildcat, Damsselfly, and Cat-tail are the homes of birds that I am now acquainted with.

Charles might come with me to them next summer, but somehow they have become my colonies. It took the effort of seeking out these birds and holding new, un-banded babies to realize how difficult field work really is, but also to realize how rewarding it is. The things that Charlescontinued on page 4

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and Mary have accomplished in the last 25 years are amazing. To dedicate your life to the study of one species and one particular population of them takes true commitment and true love. But it is now entirely comprehensible to me.

Holding a buddy in your hand is a lesson in perspective. Suddenly the bird has a history, a lineage we can trace, an identity, a life that make that one bird in a colony of a thousand more important than any other. It spent three months of its life traveling to this place to raise its offspring and to spend a mere three months here building a nest and raising as many little swallows as is possible before flying off to make the journey back again. And the amazing thing? We might see them again. We might meet our new acquaintances next year, perhaps at the same colony, perhaps not, but we will know who that life is. Charles is a swallow man...it is an admirable thing to be.

Editors notes:

Allison is a graduate of Scottsbluff High School and is now attending college in St. Olaf in Northfield Minnesota majoring in biology. She is the daughter of Dr Steve Johnson and Dr Diane Gilles.



Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas Project II

This is a short report from Wayne J. Mollhoff, Coordinator of the NBBA Project II, after this year's surveys of breeding birds in Nebraska.

Confirmation of early suspicions of changes - mostly negatives - crows (of all things) are scarce EXCEPT in the Pine Ridge, Swainson's hawks seem especially scarce EXCEPT in the SW Panhandle, loggerhead shrikes continue to decline. Bright side news show bald eagles virtually statewide - not necessarily noticeable if you started birding in the past 20 years - but for folks birding 30+ years, the change is astounding. Obvious increases in numbers and range for Eurasian Collared-doves, White-winged Doves, House Finches and some others.

The drought has an obvious impact. My feeling is that southwestern species are heading this way in the long term - maybe climatic warming, maybe something else.

As regards the atlas project to the above - changes in breeding numbers and distribution are probably better indicators than what happens on migration or winter patterns. But then, I'm admittedly biased!

This project is co-sponsored by the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, with funding by the Nebraska State Wildlife Grant and matching funding by the co-sponsors. Wayne can be contacted at wmollhoff@netscape.net for more information or if you would like to help with next years surveys.

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To order contact Ann Duey at 632-3544, or dduey@actcom.net or contact any Wildcat Audubon Society Member.

Products will also be available at the general meetings and other Audubon events.

USFWS Land Proposal

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is looking for public input on the proposed acquisition of 1300 acres of land along the North Platte River. The properties are being offered by Platte River Basin Environments Inc. a non-profit conservation organization in Scotts Bluff County.

The North Platte National Wildlife Refuge is made up of Lake Alice, Winter's Creek Lake, Lake Minatare and Stateline Island. The additional tracts would include the Horse Creek Unit of 480 acres that would adjoin Stateline Island and the Spotted Tail Unit of 830 acres just west of Mitchell. The USFWS will present the proposal during an open house at 115 Railway Street in the Railway Office Plaza conference room December 6th and 7th from noon to 5p.m. The public is invited to attend to learn more about this proposal and offer their input.

Calendar of Events

There is no General Meeting in December

December 16th

Christmas Bird Count

Meet at Arby's at 6:30 am. Count areas will be assigned at that time. This is an 8 hour count but you can help for all or part of the day. We will meet for lunch then continue for the afternoon. There is a \$5 charge per person for participating, Wildcat Audubon will pay half. Feeder watchers are also needed within the count circle in Scottsbluff and Gering, no charge for this. The \$5 includes materials, and a publication sent to each person listing participants and the national count results. Please contact Alice Kenitz if you have any questions or would like to help at 308-436-2959 or akenitz@prairieweb.com

December 17th

Guernsey/Ft Laramie Christmas Bird Count contact Jane Dorn linglebird@yahoo.com

December 30th

(if bad weather, 31st)

Lake McConaughy Christmas Bird Count Meet at Valentino's in Ogallala Friday at 6pm for assignments and supper. Email Steve Dinsmore at cootjr@iastate.edu if you plan to attend

December 31st

Crawford Christmas Bird Count Meet at the Snack Shop, 301 Main Street, Crawford at 7:30 am. Contact Bruce or Donna Walgren Timperley-Walgren@bresnan.net 307-234-7455 for information.

January 1st

Sioux County Christmas Bird Count contact Elliot Bedows ebedows@cox.net 402-559-6074 or 402-292-5017

January 20th

General Meeting

Regional West Medical Center South Meeting Room 7:30pm. The program, "Belize & Tikal, Rainforests, Reefs & Ruins" will be presented by Dr. Don and Meredyth Gentry on their trip to Belize. Hostess Ann Duey

February 16th-19th

Great Backyard Bird Count

Count birds in your yard, a park or other area for at least 15 minutes and report to www.birdsource.org/gbbc You may count in as many places as you want but a separate list must be kept for each. If you do not have internet access you can give your checklist to Kathy DeLara by Feb.24

February 17th

General Meeting

Regional West Medical Center South Meeting Room 7:30pm. Bob Grier, Regional Editor of Nebraska Land Magazine will give a program on photography, including basic photography and using photography creatively for both film and digital photographers of all age and experience levels. He will include a PowerPoint presentation of some of his favorite photos, Q&A will follow. Hostess Kathy DeLara

March 16th-18th

Rivers and Wildlife Celebration

Rowe Sanctuary, Kearney NE www.Nebraska.Audubon.org

March 17th

Waterfowl Fieldtrip

Meet at Arby's at 8:00 am. We will bird around the local ponds and lakes and should be back to town by 1:00

Visitors are always welcome at any of our meetings, events or fieldtrips

March 24th

General Meeting

Regional West Medical Center South Meeting Room 7:30pm. Blanca Alvarez Stransky, Superintendent at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument, will give her program "So You Always Wanted To Be A Ranger". Join us as she and fellow Rangers reminiscence on the joys and hardships of being a National Park Ranger. Blanca's 23 year career with the National Park Service has taken her from one end of the U.S. to another--from Pearl Harbor to our highest peak. Come and learn about all the great adventures to be found within our national park lands. Hosts Dean & Phyllis Drawbaugh

April 21st

General Meeting

Regional West Medical Center South Meeting Room 7:30pm. The program by Neil Powers, Crescent Lake Refuge Manager, will take us behind the scenes on a journey through the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge. We will learn why the refuge is important what issues they face and how the habitat is managed for wildlife benefit and for people to enjoy. Neil will have lots of pictures of this journey. Q&A will follow.

Field Trip/Class Committee

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If you would like to sign up send an e-mail to Kathy at renosmom@charter.net

Please put "**WAS Newsletter**" in the subject line so your email doesn't accidentally get deleted.

If you decide that you want a printed copy you can just print it from your computer at home.

It's also available on our website www.wyoneb.net/-delara/WildcatAudubon.htm

Join the Wildcat Audubon Society

Membership dues are only \$5.00 per year.

Your dollars help pay for Audubon Adventures in local schools, postage and printing of the newsletter, Beginner Birding Classes, public education and other projects

We would like to thank all of our local members for their support.

New members since the last newsletter are:

Donna Riesen, Susan McLaughlin, Larry Parker, Anne James, Jan Foster, Bernard & Betty Stanley, Gwen Smith, Ken Gilles, Wilber Weitzel, Brent Nelson and Frank & Ethel Valla, Audrey & Lou Towater, Audrey Sterkel

Wildcat Audubon Society
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Send along with \$5.00 membership dues to:

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