

The swallows of summer



A barn swallow nest, photo from USFWS

Watching the graceful, swooping flight of swallows is a summer pleasure. Whether they are circling high in the sky or skimming over water, their presence adds to the season.

Four swallow species are commonly seen around Elko. Swallows are usually named by where they prefer to nest. Cliff swallows traditionally built their mud nests on cliff faces, but today, people-built structures offer them more possibilities. They may be seen as a nuisance by people who maintain such structures but others enjoy watching them fly in and out from under bridges, culverts and underpasses.

It is interesting to watch their construction of mud nests. They use mud balls, gathered from wet ground. The nests are globe or jug-shaped, with downward facing openings. These swallows are often seen peering out from their nest openings. They like to nest in thick colonies on vertical surfaces where they are protected from predators.

They feed off insects they catch in the air and drink water by swooping low over a pond or river. They are identified by their blue heads with white foreheads and light brown chins and necks.

Before barns became common, barn swallows nested on vertical rock faces. They quickly learned barn walls made great nest sites and their populations grew. However, now we have fewer barns and more existing barns are closed up, so barn swallow numbers have dropped. Their cup shaped nests are formed of mud balls they gather from wet ground. I have seen a dozen working feverishly beside a ranch yard's mud puddle, gathering material to plaster on the ranch's barn.

Barn swallows are the most beautiful and most easily identified by their deeply forked, "swallow-tailed", tails that flare outward as they make sharp turns. Their heads are blue with light brown foreheads and chins. White spots decorate both upper and lower surfaces of the tails.

Bank swallows dig burrows up to four feet long into the vertical faces of riverbanks or gravel piles. Up to 400 birds may form congested communal sites. They are rather plain looking in comparison, with brown backs and white undersides. They are best identified by brown breastbands crossing their white chests.

Violet-green swallows are birds of the mountains, where they nest in hollow trees or rock cracks. They have iridescent green and violet backs and white undersides. They are best identified by round, white patches just behind the wings that extend from the white belly onto their backs.

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