

Cliff Swallows in New Hampshire: Fast Facts

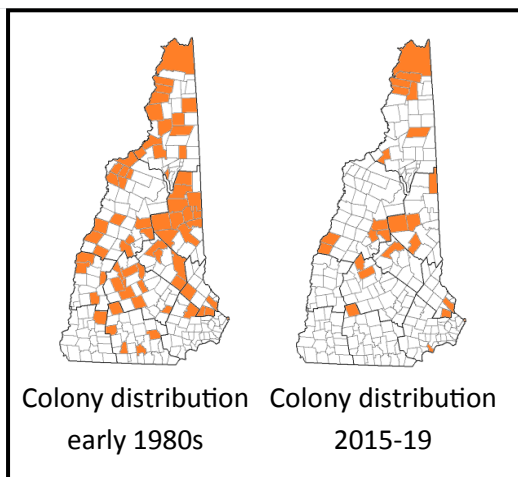
Distribution and trends (see maps):

Early 1980s: over 80 colonies

Early 2000s: fewer than 40 colonies

2015-2019: 20-25 colonies

Existing colonies are primarily located in northern Coos County, with a second cluster in the Lakes Region. Most are on houses or barns, with two known sites on bridges. They range in size from single pairs to over 30, with most in the 5-10 range.



Migration:

- Arrive in early May and depart in August
- Rarely linger into September

Breeding:

- Lay eggs by end of May (sometimes later in the north)
- Incubation for two weeks
- Young leave nest in three weeks
- Most breeding completed by end of July

Cliff Swallows belong to a group of birds collectively known as “aerial insectivores,” meaning that they feed primarily on insects caught while in flight. This group includes all swifts, swallows, flycatchers, and nightjars (nighthawks and whip-poor-wills), and shows some of the strongest declines among North American birds.

Most aerial insectivores in the Northeast are declining, and several additional species are considered “species of greatest conservation need” in New Hampshire including:

Common Nighthawk (endangered)

Purple Martin (threatened)

Bank Swallow

Chimney Swift

Eastern Whip-poor-will

Olive-sided Flycatcher

For more information on these species, please see the NH Wildlife Action Plan

<https://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/wildlife/wap.html>

For more detail on NH Cliff Swallows or to report sightings, contact Pam Hunt at NH Audubon (phunt@nhaudubon.org, 603-224-9909 x328).

Additional information available at:

<https://www.cliffswallow.org/>

Acknowledgments

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NH’s Threatened Cliff Swallows



The Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) is a colonial swallow that builds mud nests on vertical surfaces across most of North America. The number of colonies in New Hampshire has declined from over 80 in the 1980s to less than 25 today, and as a result it was added to the state’s list of threatened species in 2017.



The nest is gourd-shaped, made of mud, and attached to a vertical surface under an overhang (e.g., building eave). Nests are often very close together, even overlapping.

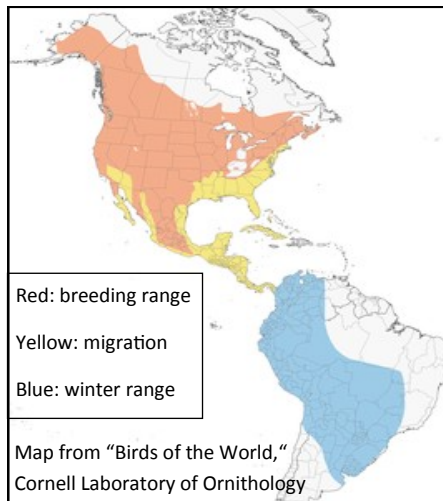
Species Overview

Cliff Swallows may be confused with the related Barn Swallow, which is far more common in NH. Barn Swallows are easily recognized by their long forked tails, while those of Cliff Swallows are short and square. They also have a buffy rump and white forehead.

Cliff Swallows breed across most of North America and spend the winter in South America.



Photo by Dick Dionne



Historically, they nested on vertical natural cliffs in western North America, but were rare in the largely forested east. Agricultural clearing in the late 1800s created the open habitat needed for foraging, and allowed the species to expand its range into New England. The birds that colonized the east tended to nest on buildings, since natural cliffs were rare. More recently the species also took to nesting on bridges.

Threats to Cliff Swallows

Disturbance

Cliff Swallows and active nests are protected under state and federal law but nests are sometimes removed by homeowners who do not want mud or droppings on the sides of their houses. Nests are also vulnerable to removal during bridge-cleaning.

Competition

Non-native House Sparrows often occur in the same agricultural settings as Cliff Swallows, and may take up residence in old swallow nests before swallows arrive in the spring. Even if swallows build new nests, the sparrows may take them over, and are also known to remove eggs or kill nestling swallows in the process.

Pesticides

Pesticide use in heavily agricultural landscapes may result in declines in Cliff Swallows' insect prey. Data linking agricultural intensification to swallow reproductive success are inconclusive, and more research is needed.

Climate change

Cold wet weather in late spring suppresses flying insects, and thus reduces food availability for swallows. If weather patterns become increasingly variable in this manner, swallows may fail to reproduce or suffer direct mortality.

Habitat loss

As farms are abandoned, the availability of barns for nesting and associated fields for foraging may become lower. Many formerly-occupied sites in NH do not appear to have changed so this threat is presumed low.

How You Can Help Cliff Swallows

Please don't knock down their nests!

With so few colonies in NH, we need to help Cliff Swallows as much as we can. If nests are resulting in a mess on the outside of your house, please wait until August to remove them and contact NH Audubon or NHFG for further guidance. Cliff Swallows and active nests are protected under state and federal law.

Provide artificial nests

Sometimes Cliff Swallows will build their nests on clay replicas attached to eaves of buildings, and this may be a way to get them to move locations. Nests should be placed at the top of a wall and directly under the eaves, and taken down for cleaning over the winter.

Provide a source of mud

If you do have nesting Cliff Swallows, you can help them out by maintaining a mud puddle nearby. They'll use this throughout the season to refurbish their nests. Make sure the mud is sticky (e.g., a good clay content).



Minimize use of insecticides

Report colonies to NH Audubon

If you see Cliff Swallows on your property during the summer, report them, even if you don't see nests.