

Conservation Notes

NH Audubon Launches Cliff Swallow Nesting Study

by Pamela Hunt

From over 80 colonies statewide in the early 1980s, to only 20-25 colonies by 2020, New Hampshire's Cliff Swallows have declined significantly in the last 40 years. The reasons remain unclear, but in an effort to start teasing apart the possible factors, NH Audubon initiated a pilot nest monitoring study this year. Starting in late May, I visited two colonies in Tamworth weekly and recorded the status of all nests at each. The idea here is that if threats like reduced food supply or inclement weather (see the Purple Martin article in this issue) are affecting our populations, we would see fewer successful nests or fewer young produced.

The two colonies I studied supported a total of 26 nests (15-20% of the state's population), and an estimated 70 percent successfully fledged at least one chick. This number is at least as good as others reported for the species, but two colonies in one year do not provide enough data to make sweeping conclusions! Our goal is to continue the study for multiple years and expand it to include more colonies. Of particular interest is Pittsburg in far northern New Hampshire, where as much as 25-40% of the state's population occurs. We also hope to collect more detailed data on the number of young per nest in future years, and

perhaps even develop projects involving tracking the adults.

With respect to the 2021 data, there was no sign of widespread nest failure associated with the rainy periods in July. However, just after the weather improved in early July, five pairs commenced new nesting attempts at one colony, which indicates that they were failed breeders from elsewhere (Cliff Swallows never produce two successful broods in one season). The last of these late nests still had a single chick in late August, which should have left the nest by the very beginning of September. This is exceptionally late for a Cliff Swallow in New Hampshire: the latest date for a nest with young during the 1980s Breeding Bird Atlas was July 16.

By mid-September, even lingering breeders like these Tamworth birds will have largely left the state for points south, and they won't be back until May of 2022. When they arrive back in the Granite State, NH Audubon will be ready to launch our second season of this study.

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Cliff Swallow nestlings at one of the Tamworth colonies, by Pam Hunt, June 25.