



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

July 12, 2024

Swooping Swallows



Cliff Swallow patient perching in outdoor aviary.

This week we are diving into an insectivore aerialist- the Cliff Swallow. We currently have six of these fascinating birds on site. Two of the six are nestlings that were found together and out of the nest, both had minor abrasions that are being treated with anti-inflammatory and antibiotic drugs. One was found orphaned with a wing droop that has since been resolved. The remaining three were fledglings that were presumed orphaned with no injuries present.

Cliff Swallows are unique in the way that they catch and hunt for food and are one of the species that we intake at CWC that eat “on the wing.” Eating on the wing means that they catch their food (insects) while in the air. Swallows have a beak shape that has perfectly adapted to this eating style. Their beaks are small but can gape widely, which allows the bird to use their mouth as a net to catch insects as they fly.

Once these birds are flighted, CWC staff will feed swallows by holding a hemostat- a metal clamping tool- in the air with a mealworm, which the bird will swoop to eat. We also encourage the patients to hunt by providing them with wild fruit flies. To do this, fruit waste (citrus peels, apple cores, strawberry tops, etc.) is collected in a bucket, and medium sized holes are drilled in the lid. When the fruit begins to overmature the fruit flies swarm the bucket, providing opportunities for the swallows to catch them in the air. Moths are also periodically placed in the enclosure to help these patients hone their skills.



A group of Cliff Swallows in care at CWC.

Cliff Swallows are cavity nesters and build their nests entirely of mud. Their nests are meticulously built by one or both birds in the partnership who busily stack hundreds of small mud pebbles onto each other. The result is a nest that appears to be gourd-like in shape and is attached vertically to a wall. There is only a small opening in the nest that allow the parents to come and go, however the nestlings are kept in near darkness. When orphaned Cliff Swallows are admitted at CWC, they are initially placed in a dark wooden box to mimic the dark nest environment they have in the wild.

Swallows are very social birds, which is evident by the large number of nests that are often found clumped together in one vertical area. One of the most popular historical sightings of Cliff Swallows is at the Mission San Juan Capistrano. Every spring, large groups of Cliff Swallows return to the area to nest in the eaves and cracks of the old mission. On March 19th St Joseph's Day and the Return of the Swallows is celebrated with festivities at the mission to commemorate the return of the swallows. The tradition began in the 1920s by Father O'Sullivan.

These birds are a migratory species and do so in large groups that can number several hundred swallows. When CWC releases Cliff Swallows, we utilize online resources and citizen scientists to locate the nearest flock. Once a migratory group has been confirmed, a staff member will drive to the location to confirm a flock is indeed present, at which point the bird will be released. It is imperative to release Cliff Swallows with an established flock so the patients can be successful in their reintegration back into the wild.