

BAYLANDS

Swallows

Between March and September, the Baylands play host to several hundred swallows. Two kinds make their summer home here: the Barn Swallow and the Cliff Swallow. These birds are migratory, arriving sometime in mid-March from their wintering grounds in South America. Contrary to popular belief, the Cliff Swallows of Capistrano do not return there, or anywhere else, on exactly the same day each year, but rather within the same two or three week period. Their progress northward depends on the availability of an insect food supply.

Soon after arrival, the birds pair off and nest-building begins. Sometimes old nests are repaired, but usually new ones are built. The banks of the old yacht basin, kept wet by tidal action, provide a handy supply of mud. The Barn Swallows use this mud to build cup-shaped nests of mud interwoven with grass and lined with feathers. They gather the soft body feathers of gulls and ducks from the Duck Pond area.

The gourd or bottle-shaped nests of the Cliff Swallow are found under the eaves of the Baylands Interpretive Center. They use mud to build their nests and line them with dried grasses. The birds use their bills to shape the mud into pellets, but there is no evidence their saliva has any special adhesive properties.

The eggs are incubated for about two weeks. Like other species of weak-legged birds, young swallows stay in the nest a fairly long time, about three weeks. One or two broods are raised before the birds depart on their long migration South. Cliffs leave first starting in the middle of August. A few Barn Swallows may linger here until late September.

All Swallows are superbly adapted to their life of swift pursuit. Flying insects are their prey: flies, gnats, beetles, etc. Their long narrow wings make them strong and agile fliers. Their short, wide bill is

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surrounded by bristles: a perfect flying flytrap, as one writer has observed. Their legs are short and their feet weak and ill-suited for walking. Indeed, most of their waking hours are spent in the air.

The habits of these two swallows are quite similar yet there are small but important differences. Both eat insects, but the Barns tend to fly low over the marsh seeking their favorite food, flies. The Cliffs on the other hand fly higher and prefer beetles and other bugs. They both nest at the Center, but choose different locations. Thus direct competition for both food and nest sites is avoided.

At the Interpretive Center, you'll probably see the Barn Swallows first. As they skim across the marsh and dash beneath the building to their nests, notice their metallic, dark-blue backs, deeply forked tails, and rusty underparts.

Edited and Illustrated by Virginia Kolence

