



Foothills

Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

Swallows of the Foothills



Wheeling and diving over the lake on graceful wings, the bird banks and exposes its back. You see a flash of glossy green tinted with violet, and two white marks which appear to run together and form a bright band near the tail. A change in position reveals that these white marks are an extension of an immaculate white underside. This is the display of one of our most beautiful Spring immigrants, the violet-green swallow.

Other species of swallows also found in the foothills are the barn and cliff swallows. Coming from their southern wintering grounds, the swallows return during the month of March to breed and raise their young. The cliff and barn swallows have spent the fall and winter in South America, while the violet-green winters in Mexico and parts of Central America.

Swallows observed over Boronda Lake and Arastradero Lake can easily be distinguished from other sparrow-sized birds by their habit of continually circling the lake in search of airborne insects. Each of the swallow species is identifiable by certain color characteristics. The violet-green, as described earlier, is given away by its white underside and back marking. The cliff swallow has a brown back and rust-colored underside, but its most striking mark is a light-colored band between the eyes. The barn swallow displays a steel-blue back with an orange underside and is the only one of our swallows with deeply a forked tail.

Swallows cannot help but attract attention. They are, for instance, the only birds in the preserves that continually beat their wings while on the ground, necessary because of extremely small, weak feet which will not support their bodies. As a consequence, most swallow activity takes place in the air, except for the gathering of mud for nest building during the spring.

Another swallow curiosity is their nests. The cliff swallow's nests are made of mud mixed with the bird's saliva, forming sticky mud pellets,

and brought to the nest site in the swallow's mouth. The pellets are added one at a time until a pocket of dried mud is formed. This is roofed over with more mud, leaving the nest completely enclosed except for a small opening on one side. The violet-green swallows nest in a hole in a tree or building, while the barn swallow prefers to build its nest under a bridge or on a beam in a barn.

With the coming of fall, the young swallows have become strong enough to leave their nests. The swallows soon leave on their southern migration. When they return, it will be to their same nesting sites.

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