

Report to the Nuttall Ornithological Club

New Hampshire Swallow Colony Registry

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Summary

In October of 2010, New Hampshire Audubon received a \$5,000 grant from the Blake Fund to support the NH Swallow Colony Registry (Swallow CORE), a statewide citizen scientist initiative to collect data on swallow nesting sites across the state, coordinated by New Hampshire Audubon (NHA). The purpose of Swallow CORE is to obtain more comprehensive data on the distribution and abundance of declining colonial swallows across the state. In the early summer of 2010, NH Audubon developed and tested materials for Swallow CORE volunteers. The intent was to use the Nuttall grant to support the refinement of these protocols and launch the first full season of Swallow CORE. The specific objectives of the 2010 grant period were to:

1. Refine volunteer protocols
2. Recruit/train volunteer assistant
3. Increase project's visibility through various media outlets
4. Launch first full season of Swallow CORE
5. Evaluate 2011 results, modify program as needed

Overall objectives of the project

- Develop a registry of known swallow colonies in New Hampshire (Purple Martin and Bank, Cliff, and Barn Swallows). This will allow for site-specific monitoring of colony size, and refine our knowledge of swallow distributions in the state.
- Determine status of formerly active colonies.
- Collect data on productivity at swallow colonies.
- Engage citizens in efforts to collect data on species of conservation concern.

In summary, we revised the protocols and procedures, recruited a project volunteer assistant, tested eBird procedures, and recruited volunteer colony monitors. Details on our accomplishments are below. We are in the process of evaluating the 2011 field season and making further revisions to the volunteer packet. We very much appreciate the Blake Fund's support for Swallow CORE.

Volunteer Protocols and Volunteer Assistant

A Volunteer Assistant was recruited and trained to help correspond with volunteers during the field season and to help with the new volunteer protocols. It became clear that the process cannot be entirely self-directed by the volunteers and central coordination is critical to resolve past issues:

- 1) Difficulty in associating records with individual observers
- 2) Reporting 0 birds at a site (not supported by eBird)
- 3) Obtaining additional information on a site beyond what is required for an eBird submission
- 4) Accurate mapping of the location in eBird
- 5) Recording submissions from multiple individuals under the same location

Volunteers helped us experiment with two eBird alternatives in 2011 and we have refined the process to one that we believe will work. It requires initial data entry for each site by Swallow CORE, after which the volunteers can enter their additional data for that site directly into eBird. The Volunteer Assistant began implementing this procedure and as Swallow CORE moves into 2012, we will be testing this process.

Publicity and the Swallow CORE 2011 Field Season

We increased the project's visibility through articles in eField (NHA's electronic newsletter) and NHA's Conservation Notes (News from the Conservation Department), volunteer recruitment in AField (NHA's printed newsletter) and NHA's Facebook page, and an e-mail list for new and existing Swallow CORE volunteers. The increased publicity brought in more volunteers and increased coverage. It also resulted in considerably more volunteer support than expected as a number of volunteers were unfamiliar with swallow identification.

Reports of nesting colonies increased dramatically from the pilot year in 2010 and data forms are still coming in. Data is being entered into NH eBird and we will be updating the Swallow CORE registry of nesting sites with this new information.

We are just beginning to evaluate the data but it is already clear that recruiting people to check historic colonies is difficult. Most volunteers preferred to monitor active colonies near their homes. NHA Conservation Department staff contributed time (funded by NH Fish & Game) to begin checking historic colonies. This not only provided valuable information but helped test the process and the difficulties involved in finding colony sites from old reports that sometimes had little to no information on the actual location.

We will also be evaluating the need for training workshops. A basic level of bird experience may be more necessary than we originally anticipated, especially for gathering productivity information. Inexperienced volunteers had difficulty identifying both the type of swallow and their nest locations.

Challenges

1. Volunteer training and supervision – Swallow CORE was originally designed with the goal of being a stand along volunteer-based project with minimal staff involvement once procedures and protocols were worked out. This may not be a realistic goal given the knowledge level of some of the volunteers. It may be necessary to provide volunteer training and e-mail support during the field season for quality observations.
2. eBird as a database – Despite the power of eBird, there are difficulties in using it as a reporting system for Swallow CORE. The specific protocols of the project and the information desired do not quite match what eBird was designed for. We are hopeful but remain uncertain that the new volunteer protocols we have established will be successful.
3. Locating historic sites and finding monitors – As described above, it has been difficult to engage volunteers in checking historic colony sites. As the project grows and communication with volunteers increases, we may be better able to publicize the need for visits to specific colonies.

We will be continuing to evaluate the 2011 results, make further revisions to the volunteer packet and especially the eBird portion of the instructions, and create a summary for volunteers. We will be working towards establishing a sustainable process so the project can realize its potential. Only with better data on distribution and abundance can we take the next steps of teasing apart the factors behind the declines in swallow species. We very much appreciate the Blake Fund's support for Swallow CORE.