

Report to the Nuttall Ornithological Club

New Hampshire Swallow Colony Registry

September, 2011 through August, 2012

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Summary

The 2012 breeding season was the second full year for the NH Swallow Colony Registry (Swallow CORE), a statewide citizen science initiative to collect data on swallow nesting sites across the state, coordinated by New Hampshire Audubon (NHA). In September of 2011 we received \$3,000 from the Blake-Nuttall Fund to support the growth of the Swallow CORE project in 2012. The purpose of Swallow CORE is to obtain more comprehensive data on the distribution and abundance of declining colonial swallows across the state.

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.

The goals for 2012 were to test a new eBird process, continue to raise the project's visibility, and recruit volunteers. In summary, the volunteer corps continues to grow as the project becomes better known, we trained a new volunteer project assistant, updated the colony registry, entered all reports in eBird and significantly improved communication with volunteer colony monitors. We produced the first project newsletter for volunteers and the first conservation fact sheet (for Cliff Swallows). Details on these and other accomplishments are below. The 2012 field season is just ending and data forms are coming in. We will be evaluating the results, entering and updating the data, and providing a summary for volunteers. We very much appreciate the Blake Fund's support for Swallow CORE.

Swallow CORE Results

Reports of nesting colonies increased dramatically from the pilot year in 2010 with 24 sites checked in 2011 and 36 anticipated to be checked in 2012 (data forms are just coming in). We will be entering 2012 data into NH eBird and updating the Swallow CORE registry of nesting sites with this new information. The current data suggests that Cliff Swallow colonies are fewer than expected while Bank Swallow colonies have been found more regularly at expected locations (gravel pits and river banks).

We produced the project's first newsletter with a project update and basic information to help with commonly asked questions. A copy is included with this report. The project's visibility continued to increase through articles in eField (NHA's electronic newsletter), NHA's Conservation Notes (News from the Conservation Department), AField (NHA's printed newsletter), and NHA's Facebook page. The continued publicity brought in more volunteers and increased coverage. All project information is on the web site at:

<http://www.nhbirdrecords.org/bird-conservation/swallow-core.htm>

The more the project becomes known, the more inquiries we receive regarding swallows in general. Volunteers and interested citizens have been requesting conservation information that they can give to people who consider swallows a "problem" – i.e. Barn Swallows that make a mess, or Bank Swallows at a gravel pit. We developed a handout for Cliff Swallows (in response to a request from a caring person where nests were destroyed by stone throwing) and it is on the Project's web site. A copy is included with this report.

Most volunteers prefer to monitor active colonies near their homes, especially Barn Swallows. Many of these colonies are small but this means they can be more easily observed and counted accurately. They may provide the best opportunity for collecting long term productivity information. Large colonies are far more challenging to count nests and chicks. Large Bank Swallow colonies can be especially challenging to determine the number of active burrows and we experimented with the best way to determine the number of active burrows.

Volunteer Protocols and Volunteer Assistant

Swallow CORE is heavily dependent on not only volunteer observers but also on a dedicated and skilled Project Assistant to help with the many office tasks and communicate with volunteers. Unfortunately, the first volunteer Project Assistant left the project in the summer of 2011 and it was late January, 2012 before a new Project Assistant, Yvonne Beran, was found. She did a terrific job catching up on the backlog of work, including processing all the 2011 data. With her help we revised and simplified the volunteer packet before the 2012 season, updated the colony registry with the information collected since the beginning of Swallow CORE, and produced the newsletter which was sent to all volunteers.

In reviewing the 2011 data we determined that having volunteers enter their observations directly into eBird was quite problematical. Critical data was often missing from the sightings, such as how many nests were seen. Yvonne was more successful entering the data herself and

corresponding with volunteers when she had questions. We adjusted our protocol, requesting that people send in their field observations on the monitoring forms, whether they enter data in eBird or not. After we have received the 2012 data, we will evaluate this strategy.

Challenges

As the number of volunteers on the project grows, it has also resulted in considerably more volunteer support than expected. It has become clear that the original Swallow CORE goal of being a stand alone volunteer-based project with minimal staff involvement is not realistic at this point. Swallow CORE volunteers are frequently inexperienced observers and are not long time birders. It is proving to be important to provide support during the field season for quality observations, and the Project Assistant is a key part of that. As these volunteers have more years of experience, the quality of their observations will increase. We continue to evaluate the need and available funds for formal training workshops.

We receive quite a few casual observations of nesting swallows, either via e-mail or other personal communication. Converting these incomplete observations into valuable Swallow CORE data has been difficult. Although the observers are often experienced birders, it has been challenging to persuade them to collect and record the necessary data (such as number of nests) or to become a Swallow CORE monitor. There appears to be a perception that the project has personnel that we can send out to collect data once we are notified of a possible colony location. While the reports can be of value, we need to determine the most productive way to utilize them.

It remains challenging to recruit people to check historic colonies. In 2013 we plan to better publicize the location of specific colonies that need visits. We will also be reviewing sightings submitted to eBird by individual birders who are not associated with Swallow CORE to determine if it is a valuable source of nesting colony reports.

We very much appreciate the Blake Fund's support for Swallow CORE as we continue to build this fledgling project.