

F O C U S

Swallows

Rich Stallcup

IT WAS ONCE WIDELY BELIEVED that swallows burrowed in the mud in late autumn to hibernate, not re-emerging until the first warm days of spring. We now know that this is not true at all, and what really happens is that during September they all turn into juncos. In reality, the swallows' nearly complete absence from temperate latitudes in winter and their abundance in spring and summer are among the most meaningful signs of the seasons.

Six species of small swallows brighten our skies and lives from early spring through early fall. Two of them, Barn and Cliff, build adobe nests of mud and spit usually on or in human structures. The two "white-bellied" swallows, Violet-green and Tree, nest in holes in trees, most often cavities excavated by small woodpeckers. The two "brown" swallows, Bank and Rough-winged, nest in tunnels in sand cliffs and clay stream banks. Cliff and Bank Swallows are always colonial, placing many nests in the same small area. The others nest as site opportunities arise, and so a single pair or several may be found in one place.

All of these are common and widespread in California except the Bank Swallow. Never very common in the west, they are sparsely seen during migration, are very local as breeders, and may be declining in numbers.

Very few birds can be easily mistaken for swallows, though one is the large Purple Martin. It is rather rare now in the west due to nest site predation by Euro-

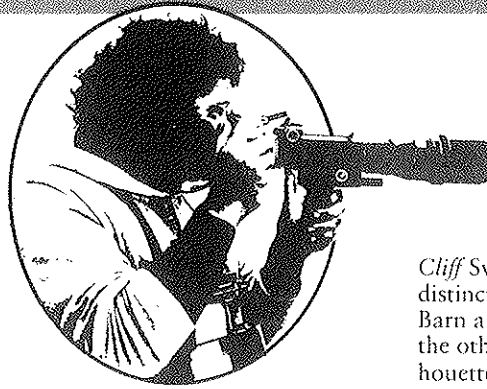
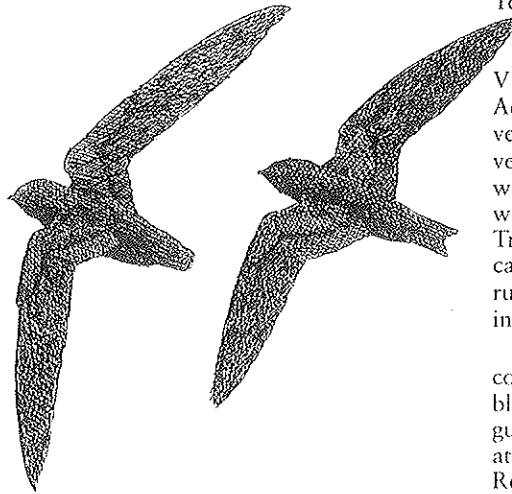


Figure 1. The primary feathers of swifts (1.) are relatively longer than those of swallows.



pean Starlings. Swifts bear a superficial resemblance to swallows, but their twinkling wingbeats are much crisper than swallows', and their wrists (the bends of the wings) are much nearer the body (Figure 1).

Identification Tips

HERE ARE SOME POINTS to learn and remember for identifying swallows to species, even at a long distance, while the birds are either perched or flying. With their ornate plumages, *Barn* and

Cliff Swallows are easy to pick out. Their distinctive tail shapes—long and forked for *Barn* and squared for *Cliff* (the tail tips of the other four are notched)—permit silhouette and distant identification (Figure 2). *Cave Swallow*, the only other one in North America with a squared tail, has not yet been found in California. Though rapidly expanding its nesting range in Texas and New Mexico, it need not confuse the issue here.

VIOLET-GREEN VERSUS TREE SWALLOW. Adult Violet-green and Tree Swallows have very similar plumages: the upperparts are very dark, the underparts immaculate white. The Violet-green has a distinct, white oval on each side of its rump, but the Tree Swallow's long, white flank feathers can also curl up around the sides of the rump when the bird is flying or (especially in cold weather) perching.

A better plumage feature is general color: male Tree Swallows are darkest blue, not green or light blue (as *all* the field guides show), and they often appear black at a distance. Male Violet-greens are bright Robin Hood green. Females of both species are duller in color and show brownish casts. The *eye* of the Tree Swallow is always in the dark part of the face; the Violet-green's is in the white part of the face and the lores are dusky. Except for shape this is the best feature for differentiating the two species in flight.

Shapes of the two are quite different. In flight, the Violet-green has a shorter tail than the Tree, and the relatively high translucence of the flight feathers (rectrices and remiges) gives the impression of a compact

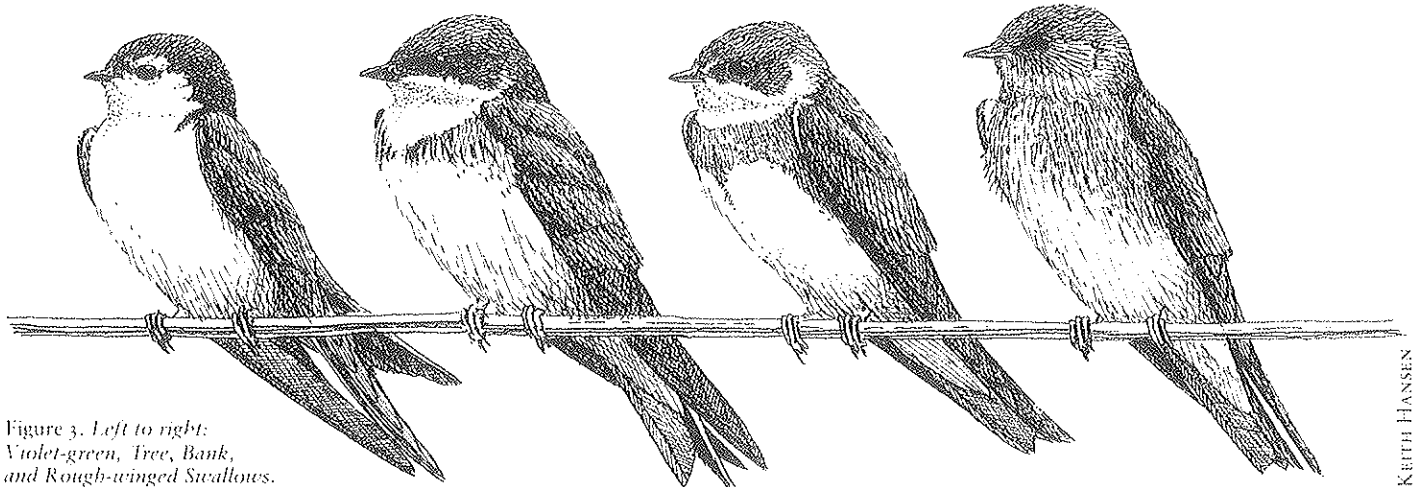


Figure 3. Left to right: Violet-green, Tree, Bank, and Rough-winged Swallows.

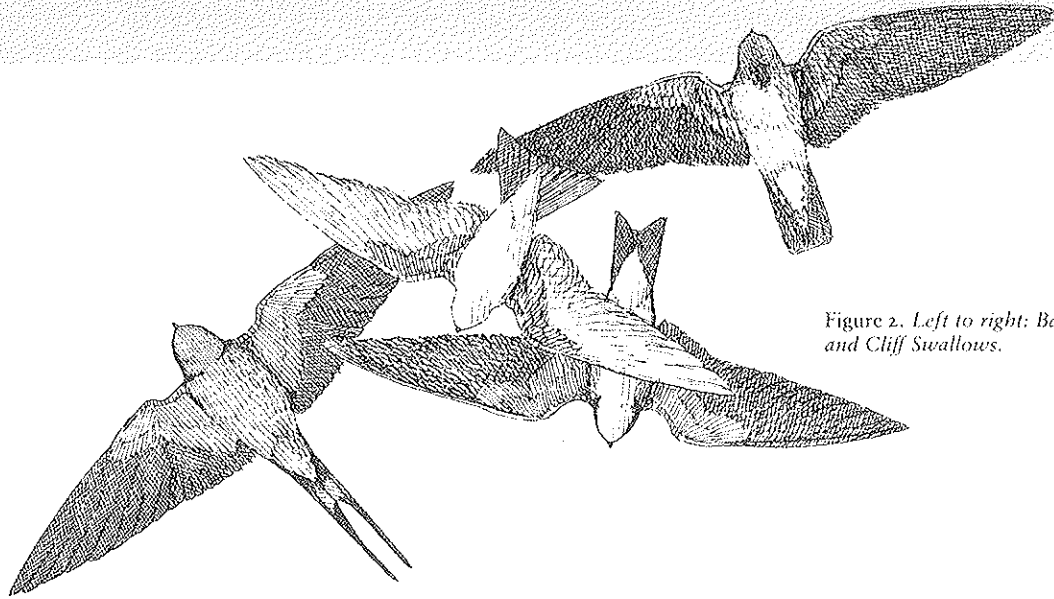


Figure 2. Left to right: Barn, Violet-green, Tree, and Cliff Swallows.

but wispy bird. Tree Swallow has a clearly longer tail, a broader base to the wing, and because the flight feathers are more opaque, the overhead bird looks more substantial. When perched, Violet-green is usually more horizontal, and the wing tips clearly extend beyond the end of the tail, often drooping below it (Figure 3). Tree Swallow is more vertical on a perch, and the primary extension is not so apparent.

Juvenile birds of these two species have extensive brown dorsal feathering that the Violet-green wears through its first autumn and the Tree Swallow just until August or September. Then they can be told apart by the characteristics listed for adults: the pattern of dark and light on the face and rump will distinguish Violet-greens. Young *Tree* Swallows, however, are very similar to *Bank* Swallows, especially given that some young *Trees* have breast bands! Banks are a bit smaller than *Trees*, but that is usually no help.

BANK VERSUS YOUNG TREE SWALLOW. Bank Swallows' underparts are bright white but always broken across the breast by a clearly defined, solid brown band. The band is complete, as strong in the middle as on the sides, and a short pointed spur extends posteriorly from its center. Juvenile *Tree* Swallows that do have breast bands are different. The breast band is in the same position, but it is never as sharply defined, and while its anterior edge is sharp, the rear edge is blurrier. The *Tree*'s breast band usually fails to meet completely in the center of the breast, and it always lacks a spur. It is shaped like a broad "V", the *Bank* Swallow's more like a broad "U".

Other differences include the throat and sides. On the *Bank*, the rear corners of the white throat curl up towards the nape behind the cheek (Figure 3). The face-throat contrast line of *Tree* Swallow cuts straight back to the base of the wing. The sides of the body at the base of and below

the wing are brownish in *Bank* but white like the rest of the underparts in *Tree*. *Tree* Swallows in fresh basic plumage have noticeable white tips to the tertial feathers, contrasted by the otherwise dark upperparts.

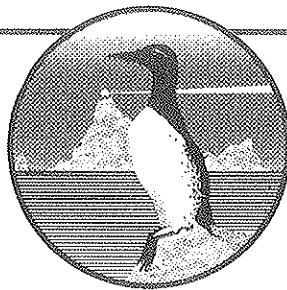
BANK VERSUS ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW. Both *Bank* and *Rough-winged* are always brown above. *Bank* Swallows are subtly patterned, with wings and tail darker than the back, and in many birds the back is darker than the rump. *Rough-winged* are entirely mouse brown above (warmer, more cinnamon tones in young birds), without much contrast.

In flight, *Bank* has broader wings than *Rough-winged*, and little light is allowed through the flight feathers. The *Rough-winged* has narrower wings that allow a lot of light transmission. Its flight is the most languid of all our swallows', with long glides between short sets of flapping.

SWALLOWS ARE AMONG the earliest migratory landbirds to return each spring and are able to raise more than one set of chicks in the parts of their range with mild climates. This gives us a good half-year to practice identifying adults and young swallows in the sky and on the wire.

POSTSCRIPT: Why not throw a party for your eyes? In case you have never *really* seen an adult male Violet-green Swallow, or maybe don't even know what the whole name refers to, make a point of it. Find a place where you can look down on one perched in the sun, preferably through a telescope. If the wings are spread and are hanging below the tail, the green back and purple rump colors may astound you. It is one of the nicest color shows in nature.

REFERENCE: "Unraveling the Mysteries of Brown Swallows" by Claudia Wilds, in *Birding* volume XVII:5, pages 209-211.



Farallon Patrol Log

THese are the stalwart skippers who made winter trips to South-east Farallon Island, supplying our research station with fresh personnel and groceries. Trips cancelled due to bad weather included Dick Honey in *Wind Dancer* November 23, Walter Andrews in *Puffin* February 1, Stan Starkey in *Selene* February 15 and March 8, and Louis Ickler in *Ghost* March 1.

November 30	STUART STEPHENS	<i>Taku III</i>
December 7	MARY BUCKMAN	<i>Shantung</i>
December 14	CHARLIE MERRILL	<i>Cimba</i>
December 22	STAN STARKEY	<i>Selene</i>
December 28	OSCAR FISHER	<i>Leaping Warrior</i>
January 5	JEFF MEYER	<i>Gruut V</i>
January 19	LES GOLDNER	<i>Elixir</i>
January 25	HENRY CORNING	<i>Insight</i>