

Bird Watcher's

— D I G E S T —



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birdhouse

PLASTIC BOTTLE



1. CAREFULLY CUT A ROUND HOLE IN THE SIDE OF THE BOTTLE
2. GLUE COLORED TISSUE PAPER TO OR PAINT THE BOTTLE
3. STRING A CORD THROUGH THE LID AND HANG IT IN A TREE OUTSIDE
4. WAIT AND WATCH FOR SMALL BIRDS TO COME ENJOY THEIR NEW HOME

RETHINK YOUR TRASH



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Tree Swallow

Swallows

by Alvaro Jaramillo

Hear the author read this article in the app and digital edition!



Alvaro Jaramillo is a book author and enjoys guiding birding and nature tours. He lives in Half Moon Bay, California.

Swallows are a well-known group of birds, and one of the few that names and describes the look of entirely unrelated birds. Think of swallow-tailed kite, or in other parts of the world swallow-wing, and swallow-tailed nightjar for example. Some swallows are straightforward to identify in their adult plumages, but less so in duller plumages or at a distance. Perhaps they are not usually thought of as identification article material, but remember that in Monty Python's *Holy Grail*, the answer to the critical question of the airspeed of an unladen swallow depended on the answer, European or African? So indeed, identification of these birds that are easily recognized as a group is not trivial!

Are swallows as a group easy to identify? Well, it depends on how well you know swifts. Both families are aerial insectivores which are almost always on the wing, although swallows, unlike the swifts, will perch to rest every so often during the day. Swifts are more mechanical and stiff-winged in their flight style, while swallows appear more fluid. Swifts typically forage higher than swallows in very open areas, while swallows may forage extremely low to the ground and in habitats with more obstacles. Swallows tend to nest in human-made structures or banks, and the nests tend to be easily visible, while swifts hide nests in chimneys, large hollow trees, bridges or cliffs.

Swallows are widespread in North America, and all are highly migratory. Here, there is no such thing as a resident swallow. Nearly all of our swallow species—except the tree and violet-green



Swallows in Flight

swallows—head south of the border in winter, some heading as far south as southern Chile and Argentina! Sometimes the odd barn swallow remains in winter in the southern United States, and their migration north is becoming earlier and earlier—so much so that in coastal California some barn swallows are found heading north as early

as December.

Barn, cliff, bank, northern rough-winged, and tree swallows and the purple martin are found from the West Coast to the Atlantic. However, the purple martin has separate western, eastern, and desert populations, and these appear to winter in different areas; the eastern birds in the southern Amazon Basin, while the western population head farther south to coastal southeastern Brazil; we do not know yet where the desert birds winter. This is one of the few instances of a western population of birds that flies farther south than an eastern population!

Two other swallows are more regional in their distribution. The cave swallow is found in southern Florida, as well as the south-central U.S., and the

violet-green swallow is distinctly western, found from the Rocky Mountains westward. Cliff swallows are distinctly more common in the west than in the east, while bank swallows are more local and rare in the Far West. Similarly western purple martins are rare away from the Pacific Northwest.

Two swallows, the barn and tree, are widespread and common and act as great comparison points for the rest of the swallows.

Barn Swallows

Barn swallows often breed in barns and under bridges, and can be very visible in spring and summer. At this time they are in adult plumage which is striking and has the characteristic long and forked “swallow-tail.”

When seen well, the spread tail has a white band across it which is absolutely diagnostic. The barn swallow is known in the United Kingdom as “the swallow” and is the species that gave the group their English name. Barn swallows are dark above, with a blue iridescence in good light, and cinnamon below with a darker breast band. In late summer and fall, young barn swallows show a forked tail, although it’s much shorter and less obvious than in adults. They are also more brownish above and less colorful below - more buffy than



Barn Swallow



Tree Swallow

cinnamon. To identify barn swallows at a distance, keep this tip in mind: They are long-winged for a swallow with a graceful and fluid flight style. Barns are the swallows that most commonly fly close to the ground.

Tree Swallows

The tree swallow is white below in all plumages, but varies in its upperpart coloration. They are iridescent blue in adult males, paler in older females, and brownish in young. Fall immature birds can appear to have a very faint breast band. In all plumages the dark of the face is cleanly demarcated from the white throat. In flight, the white of the underparts sneaks up the side of the rump but does not extend to the upperparts as it does in the similar violet-green swallow. Tree swallows have a bulky and stocky body, and relatively short wings and tail. The operative word there being “relatively,” as all swallows are long-winged for land birds. Maybe due to the wide wing bases the wings of the tree swallow look on the short side for a swallow.



Bank Swallow

Bank Swallows

The bank swallow is colonial, while the rough-winged is solitary and more closely associated with creeks and rivers. Bank swallow is the smallest of our swallows; it is slim and relatively long-tailed. Like the tree swallow it has a dark face very clearly differentiated from the bright white throat,

In the barn swallow, the white of the throat extends around the cheeks.

but distinctive for the bank swallow is the well-defined brown breast band. When you see a bank swallow perched, apart from the small size, look at the back which is brown, a shade paler than the wings. Young tree swallows show a dull and indistinct grayish breast band, and may be confused with bank. Apart from size and the distinct breast band, also note that on the bank swallow the white of the throat extends to a “wrap-around” behind the cheeks.

Northern Rough-winged Swallows

Northern rough-winged swallows are larger and more thickset than the bank swallow. They do not show contrast in the face; the throat is dull brownish and becomes gradually lighter, becoming white on the breast and belly. This “dirty” cloak is very different from the contrasting face of the young tree or any

The rough-winged swallow looks long-winged, with a fluid wing stroke.

bank swallow. In flight, the rough-winged swallow looks long-winged, with a smooth and fluid wing stroke, as well as a back-swept shape to the wing. Young rough-winged swallows are like the adults, but have distinctive cinnamon wing bars.



Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Cliff Swallow

The cliff swallow is sometimes confused with the barn swallow as both show colorful underparts, and have blue upperparts. The cliff swallow is more complex in pattern, showing a distinctive buffy to rufous rump, and a grayish collar and rusty cheek with a darker throat. The breast and flanks may look grayish to dull buffy, whiter on the belly, and dusky on the undertail coverts. Cliffs never show a long tail like the barn swallow.

Young cliff swallows are variable and confusing, but always show the classic square tail and have a buffy to rufous rump. Some are brownish on the throat,

Cliff swallows show a rufous rump and grayish collar with rusty cheeks.

others speckled white on the face, or showing buffy or whitish foreheads. In late summer or fall, look for the tail shape and rump to separate these from the widespread swallow species.



Cliff Swallow



Cave Swallow

Cave Swallow

A cave swallow is much like a cliff swallow, including a buffy to rusty rump, darker in the south Florida population.

Cave swallows are paler than the cliff, with a cinnamon forehead.

They have similar buffy to rufous throats, much paler than cliff swallows', and cinnamon foreheads—never white. The pale tone of the throat creates a dark, capped look that is not typically detected on a cliff swallow. In shape they are similar to cliff swallows and they are also colonial but the mud nests are cup-shaped like a barn swallow nest, not globular like the cliff's. Cave swallows are restricted largely to south Florida and Texas, but in late fall they show up well out of range, and with frequency at migratory hotspots on the Atlantic Coast, such as Cape May. Keep this in mind if you think you see a very late "cliff" swallow; maybe it is the rarer cave.

Violet-green Swallow

In the West is found the violet-green, a close relative of the tree swallow, with many of them staying into winter in California. Although an odd name, it is an apt one, as the male is a gorgeous grass-green color above, turning violet on the rump and wing coverts. In all plumages the

The male shows a white face, while females have dusky faces.

violet-green is white below, but key is the extension of white from the vent up and around to the sides of the rump. In some views they almost look entirely white-rumped, although the middle of the rump is dark. This pattern is definitive for this swallow; no tree swallow will show white on the rump. In shape they are stiff-winged and they have a very short tail. Both of these features make it the swallow that is most likely to be confused with a swift. In direct comparison, the violet-green is a tad smaller than a tree swallow. The male also shows a gleaming white face, such that the eye looks dark and beady, unlike a tree swallow. Females and young have dusky faces. When perched, the white rump sides are not seen, but the lack of a distinct dark face and white throat, and the shape difference of the wings that extend well back beyond the short tail on a violet-green aids in separating it from tree swallows.



Male

Female

Violet-Green Swallows



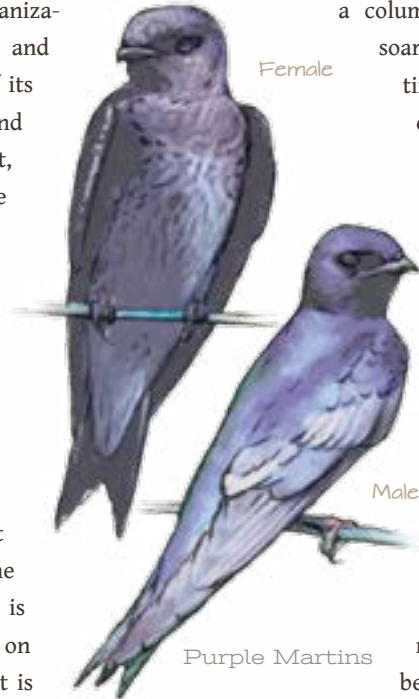
Purple Martin

I left the big guy for last; the largest swallow by far is the purple martin. This is a beloved species, with an entire organization devoted to it and the maintenance of its nesting “condos” and guards. In the East, purple martins are wholly dependent on artificial nesting structures provided by an army of volunteers. In the West, purple martins still nest in natural cavities, although the largest concentration, in the Pacific Northwest, is similarly reliant on boxes and gourds. It is said that Native Americans were the first to establish nesting structures for martins by

Males are black with blue iridescence. Females are speckled grayish below.

hanging dry gourds with a side opening that allowed access to the big swallows. Gourds still function well as nest boxes.

Purple martins dwarf all other swallows; they are big and bulky and



Female

Male

Purple Martins

large-headed, with long wings and slow wing beats. They do much more gliding than smaller swallows, and often catch a column of rising air, even soaring for short periods of time. In flight, due to the dark color and size, they can be confused with starlings - at least momentarily. Adult males are entirely black with a dark blue iridescence. Females are glossy blue above, but grayish and speckled below becoming whiter on the belly. Immatures are even more whitish on the belly and vent. Females and immature plumages show a grayish forehead and collar. Males in their first spring and summer look like females, but with telltale black feathers coming in on the flanks and breast. Western females are paler than the eastern birds. The sweet and melodious, rich gurgling and chortling calls of the purple martin are often heard, sometimes well before the birds are within sight. They are a particularly vocal swallow.



Barn Swallow

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Violet-Green Swallow

Cave Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Purple Martin

Swallows of North America



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