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Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva*

The Cave Swallow is a poorly known species with distinctive populations in the Greater Antilles and adjacent Yucatan Peninsula and in Texas and northern Mexico. Both populations have expanded considerably in the past 30 years.

Habitat. The diet of this bird consists principally of flying insects captured in flight over open country, ponds, and canals.

In Florida, Cave Swallows begin nesting by building open cups of mud pellets, similar to those of their close relative, the Barn Swallow. Nests are lined with soft materials, such as fine grasses, cattail down, and feathers. Most pairs begin laying eggs and raising young in these open nests even as they continue to add to them. Eventually, most nests here achieve a bottle-like shape close in appearance to that of their other close relative the Cliff Swallow (*P. pyrrhonota*). Cave Swallows in Texas, on the other hand, seem to prefer to retain the open nest shape (Martin and Martin 1978). The same nests seem to be used year after year, until eventually they fall.

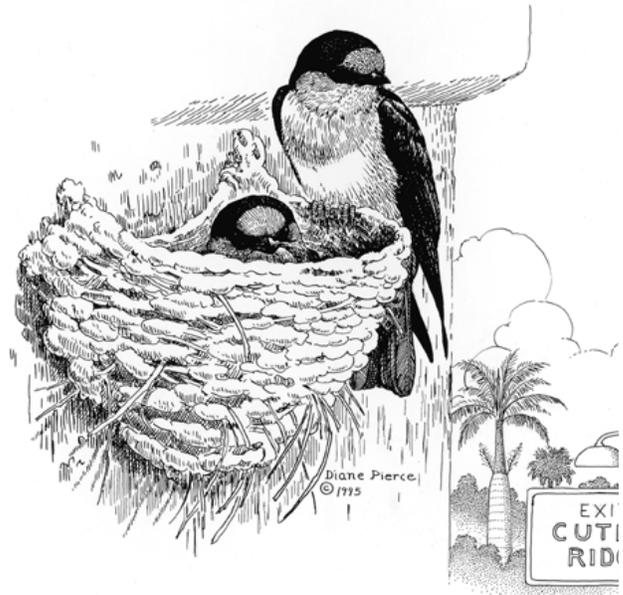


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Three to 5 white eggs, finely spotted with brown, are thought to be incubated by both sexes; however, only the female develops a brood patch. The young are able to fly after 20 to 22 days (West 1995).

Seasonal Occurrence. According to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), the Cave Swallow is found in the Keys and on the mainland, during migration, and in the irrigated agricultural fields of southeast Florida, in the summer months. Breeding occurs from early April to late July (Smith et al. 1988).

Status. The Cave Swallow was considered a vagrant from the West Indies to Florida until 1987, when several breeding sites were found in southern Dade County, under bridges constructed as part of Florida's Turnpike Extension (Smith et al. 1988). Since its discovery, this population of several dozen pairs has remained vigorous and has grown slightly. However, it has not yet spread much beyond the original vicinity.

The expansion of Cave Swallow breeding may be related in part to certain highway construction techniques, which utilize rough cement I-beams as roadway supports for bridges and overpasses. The well-shaded undersides of these cement I-beams, especially those over water, may furnish an environment similar to the limestone caves where Cave Swallows have traditionally nested.

P. William Smith

Cave Swallow

