

Search for Cave Swallow's Winter Range Underway

By Larry W. Johnson

Carlsbad Caverns, long known for its tremendous rooms and incredible formations, also houses the last bird species on the North American continent for which the winter range is unknown. The Cave Swallow, a close relative of the Cliff Swallow, makes its summer home nesting just inside the entrance to Carlsbad Cavern. Scientists at Carlsbad Caverns NP currently are engaged in one of the region's largest ornithological banding projects in an effort to learn more about this bird and ultimately to discover its winter range.

The Cave Swallow is a regular summer resident of Mexico, the West Indies, and northern South America, and currently is expanding its range northward and eastward into the United States. A relative newcomer to Carlsbad Caverns, the birds were first sighted in the cave in 1966, when two or three pairs arrived and built their nests just inside the cave entrance. Prior to 1966, the birds were known to roost only in a few very isolated locations in remote canyons nearby. Since then, the colony inside Carlsbad Cavern has increased to upwards of 4000 birds – the largest and northernmost active colony known to exist.

Cave Swallows (*Petrochelidon fulva*) are easily distinguished from the more familiar Cliff Swallows by their buff-colored throat and their practice of building a small, half-cup nest of mud, grass, and feathers instead of the fully enclosed, gourd-shaped nest of the Cliff Swallow. The primary nesting sites chosen by the birds are caves, although the birds have been seen occupying adobe buildings, silos, and similar structures.

Carlsbad Caverns is one of the few locations in the United States where the species can be seen readily by the general public, so park visitors get an extra treat when they come to see the caves. The swallows are interesting and fun to watch as they chatter, swoop, and make spectacular dives and maneuvers into and around the cave mouth.

Like the famous bats of Carlsbad Caverns, the Cave Swallows are predictable migrators. They usually



Cave Swallow

arrive at Carlsbad in February and depart for unknown wintering grounds by November. Soon after arrival of the first nesting pairs in 1966, a massive banding and study project was undertaken in an effort to learn more about the birds. Steve West, a local school teacher and NPS volunteer, heads the project. Project volunteers include park rangers and students from West's school, who get hands-on experience in netting, handling, measuring, and weighing the swallows.

Thousands of birds have been banded in the hope that some day a band will be recovered and returned to give a clue to the species' winter range. So far, no bands have been recovered outside Carlsbad Caverns, but the research indicates that the same birds do indeed return yearly to nest in the cave. There has been one reported sighting of a Cave Swallow in northern South America (Aruba) during the winter months, but whether that bird was part of the Carlsbad colony was not determined. One of the project's most unusual findings so far was the discovery of an albino Cave Swallow nesting in the cave.

While two or three bird species in North America may have questionable winter ranges, ornithologists generally agree that the Cave Swallow is the last and only species for which the winter range is virtually unknown.

Johnson is a Park Ranger at Carlsbad Caverns NP.