

Spring's first barn swallow



A barn swallow calmly contemplating the photographer, photo from fws.gov

This season's first barn swallow almost makes it feel like spring. True, I am watching my grandson's baseball game while wearing sweatshirt and jacket, cap and blanket. Also true, the barn swallow circling the baseball field probably wishes it had waited a few more days before arriving in frigid Elko, but swallows signal warm weather is finally here, (or almost anyway).

Of the four swallow species I most commonly see around Elko, barn swallows are the most beautiful. They are best identified by their deeply forked, "swallow-tailed", tails that flare outward as they make sharp turns. Their backs are slate blue and their undersides are light brown with dark brown throats and faces. White spots decorate both upper and lower surfaces of the tails.

Most swallow names reflect where they nest. Before barns proliferated, barn swallows nested on vertical rock faces. They quickly learned barn walls made great nest sites and their populations grew. Now with fewer barns and more of these closed up, their numbers have dropped. Their cup shaped nests are formed of mud balls they gather in their mouths from wet ground. I have seen a dozen working feverishly beside a ranch yard's mud puddle, gathering material to plaster on the ranch's barn.

Cliff swallows look like their cousins, but without the forked tails. A band of light brown crosses their lower back and between their eyes. Their nests are also made of mud balls, but are globe or jug-shaped, with downward facing openings. They like to nest in thick colonies on the outsides of barns or more commonly beneath bridges. Walking beneath Errecart Bridge, I usually see long lines of cliff swallow nests, each with its resident bird looking down at me.

Bank swallows are plain in comparison, with brown backs and white undersides. They are best identified by brown breastbands. Their nests are more natural, simple burrows dug up to four feet long into the vertical faces of riverbanks or gravel piles. Up to 400 birds may form congested communal sites.

Violet-green swallows share my enjoyment of mountains. They carry iridescent green and violet backs and white undersides, best identified by the white patches just behind the wings that extend from the belly around their sides and almost meet on their backs. They nest in hollow trees or rock cracks.

Soon all four types of swallows will return for the summer nesting season. Each will nest in their own, characteristic way and signal to all who see them it is summer in Elko.

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