

Cliff Swallow Overview in Color

Overview: Cliff Swallows Wings

Cliff swallows are songbirds that gather in large colonies and build nests out of mud that they attach to hard or rocky vertical areas with overhanging surfaces, like those found on many cliffs. Sometimes there are thousands of nests in one colony.



They spend half the year in South America and migrate north in large flocks to nest and produce young during the summer months. Their colonies are established near muddy areas close to water sources which provide them sufficient mud for nest building as well as sufficient food sources. Their diet is made up of flying insects.



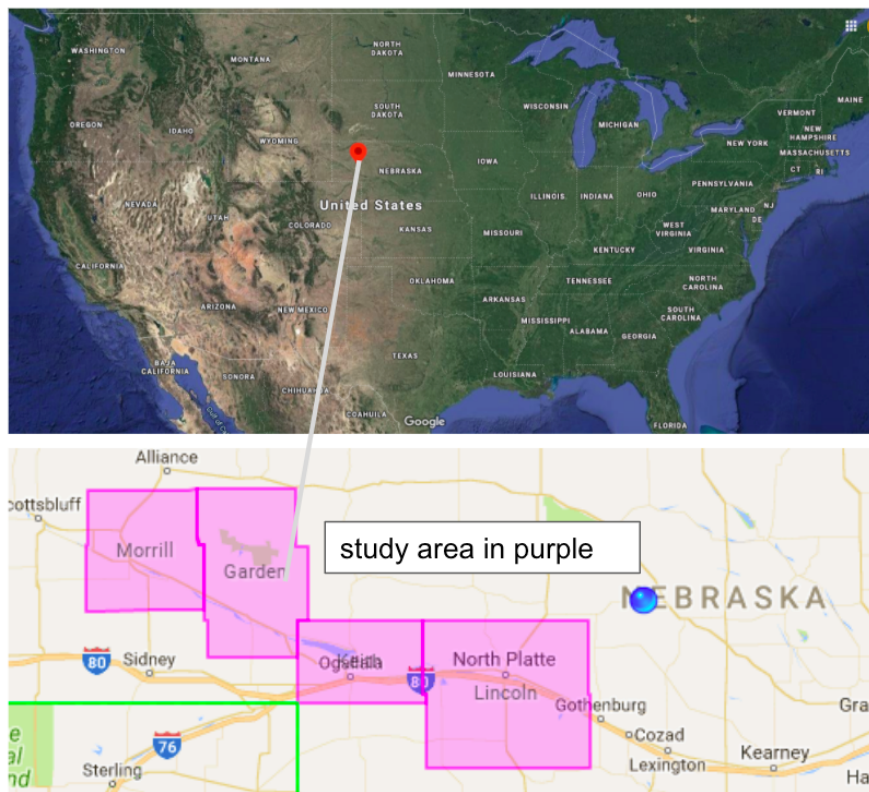
As the number of highways expanded throughout much of the United States, large populations of cliff swallows left their original nesting sites on natural cliffs and began nesting in highway underpasses and culverts and beneath bridges. Soon there were huge colonies nesting under highways



These man-made areas were more protected than the cliffs where the birds had been nesting before, and they had the same kinds of hard, vertical surfaces with overhangs that the swallows needed in order to build their nests. In addition, since many of these underpasses and bridges were built over rivers and other waterways, there were plenty of muddy areas and a lot of flying insects near the highways.

Researchers Charles Brown and Mary Bomberger Brown were interested in whether there would be any change in the birds themselves when they changed the locations where they nested from cliffs to under highways. Starting in the mid-1980s and continuing for many years, they studied large numbers of colonies of these birds that nested near highways in Nebraska, collecting specimens and banding, counting, measuring, and keeping track of birds

over time.



From 1983 to 2012, the researchers observed that the average length of the wings of the population of cliff swallows in Nebraska changed.