A Community Effort to Help Cliff Swallows

By Carol Ann Fugagli

Having recently moved around the corner from Western New Mexico University, my family frequently walks our dogs on campus enjoying the social happenings. In May of 2017, we were shocked to find the university maintenance crew destroying Cliff Swallow (CLSW) nests built under the overhanging rooftops with a high power spray hose. We spoke with the SWNM Audubon Board and members and a plan was devised. In a meeting with the university president, we encouraged them to place exclusion barriers in high pedestrian traffic areas to keep the walkways free from bird droppings. Gratefully, they readily agreed and attractive red brick-colored metal barriers were erected and no nests were taken down in 2018.

Adult CLSW feeding nestling. July 15, 2018

Volunteers from SWNM Audubon conducted weekly surveys of the buildings on campus to determine which were the favored locations of the CLSW. We also were curious as to how many nests would be successful in a single season, which would give us an estimate of how many CLSW fledged. Armed with binoculars and data sheets the team set off to observe the graceful birds.

From May to September we were pleased to witness the birds' entire breeding cycle of building nests, incubating eggs, feeding nestlings and finally watching the skies fill with new life. Campus structures most used by the birds were Miller Library, estimating to have fledged 396 young and the back of the Phelps Dodge building, producing 87 young.

Since CLSW are colonial, being present at the exact moment the young leave the nest is extremely challenging. To remedy this, we took an estimate of how many young left each nest. CLSW lay an average of 3 eggs per clutch and so we used this number to determine an average of how many fledged each nest. The campus as a whole produced an impressive 606 young Cliff Swallows!

Over the course of the season, we had three notable *'Aha'* moments. The first was in July just after the monsoon rains began. The nest of a CLSW consists entirely of small mud balls and when this resource dries up, so does the nest building. Just prior to the monsoons, many birds had only partially completed nests. But now that fresh mud was available, they continued to complete their building process.

CLSW fledglings returning to their nest.

The second discovery of the season was when the newly fledged young returned to their nest for the night. Many birds, once leaving their nest, never return. Yet the CLSW fledglings freely used their nest as a safe haven for the rest of the breeding season.

The third realization was that we have two separate subspecies on campus giving us CLSW diversity. The bird with a creamy forehead triangle is *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota tachina* and the southwest variety with a cinnamon triangle is *P.p. melanogaster.*

We are grateful to the university staff for collaborating with us so we can enable our feathered friends' success!

SWNM Audubon CLSW monitoring team: Rachelle Bergmann, Lisa Fields, Carol Ann Fugagli, Chris Overlock, Kenneth Sexton, Patricia Taber, Terry Timme.

Two CLSW nestlings. July 15, 2018

Photos by Carol Ann Fugagli