

(Jeff Lemons)



## Hirundinidae the MARTINS and SWALLOWS

There are 86 members of the swallow family distributed worldwide. Swallows are “aerial insectivores,” renowned aerialists that consume fast-flying insects while foraging on the wing. Their characteristic flight is a series of short glides alternating with rapid wing flaps. Fifteen species of swallows have been documented in North America, and eight of these have been documented in the Carolinas. Seven of these swallows are described below, and the eighth, the Cave Swallow, is described in the Supplementary Bird List. The Cave Swallow is the only one of the eight that has not been confirmed in Mecklenburg County, at the heart of the Carolina Piedmont.

Two of our swallows, the Purple Martin and Northern Rough-winged Swallow are original breeding residents distributed throughout our region. Three others—the Barn Swallow, Cliff Swallow, and Tree Swallow have expanded their breeding range into this region since the 1950s. The Bank Swallow and the Violet-green Swallow, have only been found here during migration.

Swallows were once heralded in the South for their helpfulness in fighting the spread of the dreaded boll weevil, which rapidly devastated cotton fields here around the turn of the twentieth century. This report was posted in *The Charlotte Observer* on May 14, 1907:

Among the foremost of the useful allies against the Boll Weevil are swallows. As is well known the food of these birds consists almost exclusively of insects, and hence to the agriculturalist they are among the most useful of birds. They have been described as “the light cavalry of the avian army.” Specially adapted for flight, they have no rivals in the art of capturing insects in midair, and it is to the fact that they take their prey on the wing that their peculiar value to the cotton grower is due.

Occasionally, lucky birders are able to find all six of our regularly occurring swallows at a single location. On April 8, 2016, Monroe Pannell reported:

This evening around 630 pm I had all common swallow species on the river at River Bend Park, Catawba County, NC. Many were Northern Rough Winged, Tree, and Cliff. Less common were Purple Martins and Barn. Had only two clearly identifiable Bank Swallows. Park Ranger Dwayne Martin says this has been a good week for swallows. Cold air seems to push them down close to the river where the bugs are hanging out.