

Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia*



Folk Name: Bank Martin, Sand Martin

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Uncommon

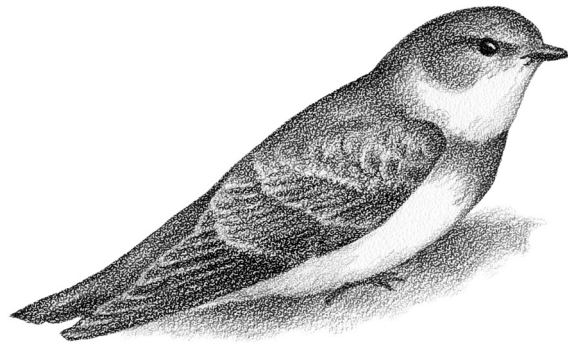
Habitat: Open water, fields

The Bank Swallow is our only regularly occurring swallow that does not breed in the Central Carolinas. Averaging just over 5 inches long and weighing under half an ounce, it is our smallest swallow. It is a drab brown above and bright white below with a dark breast band. It has relatively long wings with an average 13-inch wingspan, and it has a noticeably notched tail. The Bank Swallow is often misidentified due to its overall similarity with the Northern Rough-winged Swallow or juvenile Tree Swallow. Care should be taken to differentiate between these birds, especially after nesting season.

Historically, the Bank Swallow has nested very sporadically in North Carolina. Nesting has been reported in Wilkes County, Avery County, and at Lake Summit-Tuxedo in Henderson County. Preferred nesting habitat for this swallow is limited in the Carolinas. Bank Swallows require stream channels or road cuts with “exposed banks that are sporadically distributed and often not continuously available because of erosion and invading plant communities.” There have been several other instances of “suspected” nesting reported in the state, but none have ever been confirmed. Currently, the Bank Swallow breeding site in Avery County is the only one believed active. The North Carolina Natural Heritage Program has designated this small breeding population as “Significantly Rare,” meaning it exists in small numbers and needs continued monitoring.

There are two unverifiable reports of breeding in South Carolina. One report is from Aiken County in 1885 and 1886. Specimens were collected, but the record is not currently accepted. The second is a report of probable nesting for the upstate. Ornithologist A.L. Pickens of Queens College in Charlotte published an account of Bank Swallows between Table Rock and Caesars Head. In a 1934 issue of *The Auk*, Pickens wrote: “Further up among the mountains the Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia riparia*) has at last dropped across the state line, attracted perhaps by the huge vertical cliffs left in building the earth dam of the Table Rock reservoir.” He later confirmed he had “found no nests,” but he had observed the birds throughout the entire nesting season.

Bank Swallows migrate through the Central Carolinas in relatively small numbers primarily during the spring. They may be overlooked by some observers. Our first dated reports of this species are two Spring Bird Counts conducted in 1967. On one count, Mark Simpson reported



a tally of 72 out of a total of about 400 swallows of different species seen near the Town of Davidson. Simpson later wrote: “The large concentration of swallows represents a very conservative count. This huge flock was present for several days and all species were readily identified while resting on power lines.”

Our earliest spring arrival date is 2 April and spring birds have usually moved through by the end of May. We have more than a half dozen reports of this swallow found here well into the month of June. Several of these are provided by very experienced birders. Kevin Metcalf found one at Rural Hill Farm in northern Mecklenburg County on June 6, 2013, and noted the bird was “unusual for this location and date” and that it was seen “feeding low over fields with other swallows.” Even so, there is no indication that this swallow is a local breeder anywhere in this region.

The Bank Swallow is a rare fall migrant here. David Wright reported three on July 25, 1985, at the McAlpine



Bank Swallow. (Jeff Lemons)

WWTP in the Town of Pineville, but he usually found them there in the spring. Wright later reminisced: “I used to see it most years at [the plant] in migration, often when there would be a large mixed flock of swallows hawking insects over the lagoons at the south end of the facility. ... Bank Swallow was always the fewest in number among the migrant swallows in my experience.” We have only three additional fall reports. Kevin Metcalf reported on September 5, 2010, at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge,

thus establishing our late date for this species. Ric Porter found one in York County on September 2, 2013. Rob Van Epps sighted two on September 2, 2016, in a large flock of mixed swallows at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the population of the Bank Swallow is rapidly declining throughout its range.