

Northern Rough-winged Swallow *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*



Folk Name: Creek Martin

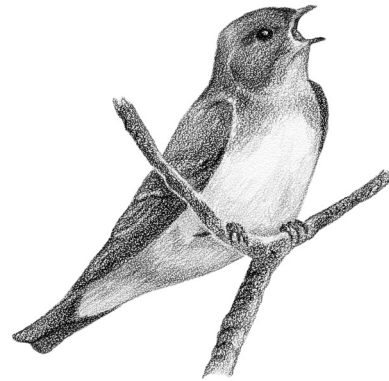
Status: Breeder

Abundance: Fairly Common

Habitat: Open water, fields

The Northern Rough-winged Swallow is 5 ½ inches long and is drab gray-brown above with a white belly below. It has a dusky brownish wash on its chin, throat, upper breast, and flanks. Its short tail is not notched. It is a fairly common migrant throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It generally nests singly or in small groups.

In Chester County in the late 1870s, Leverett Loomis described this swallow as “rather common” in summer and “common during its migrations.” He also noted it was: “Generally distributed, but most abundant in the vicinity of water.” R.B. McLaughlin reported them arriving in Statesville on April 4, 1885, and April 7, 1888. Elmer Brown recorded them in Salisbury on April 8, 1923. In the 1940s, Elizabeth Clarkson designated them a summer resident in Charlotte present from 3 April until the third week of July. In 1962, H. Lee Jones reported the first returning to Charlotte on 1 April. This bird has been reported on virtually every Spring Bird Count conducted in the region since 1940 with total tallies approaching 100 birds in one day. There have been many March arrival dates recorded in the last 40 years. Our earliest spring arrival date now on record is a single bird sighted by Steven Tracy at Rankin Lake in Gaston County on February 28, 2017. Tracy provided this comment: “Brown-backed Swallow with dusky throat. No breast band. Gliding flight. First bird I saw as I got out of vehicle. Seen within 40–50 yards with naked eye and with 20x50 Swarovskis. Also perched on utility line. Earliest that I have witnessed this species in Gaston County.”



J F M A M J J A S O N D

Most Northern Rough-winged Swallows have left the region by the end of August. H. Lee Jones reported several moving through Charlotte in fall migration on September 6, 1962. We have a few reports from October. Dwayne Martin provided our latest fall report of this swallow, noting a single bird on November 3, 2002, at Riverbend Park in Catawba County. We have no reports from the months of December or January.

Northern Rough-winged Swallows generally nest in small groups in steep, sandy banks along our large creeks, along our rivers, and at steep road cuts. It is considered a fairly common breeding bird in the North Carolina Piedmont, but breeding records from the upper Piedmont of South Carolina are “scarce.” Ornithologist John Cely suggests this is because of “its reliance on dirt bluff, cut banks and other ‘topography’ for nesting habitat” which appears to be a limiting factor in this part of that state.

Homer V. Autry, a biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, provided the first detailed nesting information for the Northern Rough-winged Swallow in



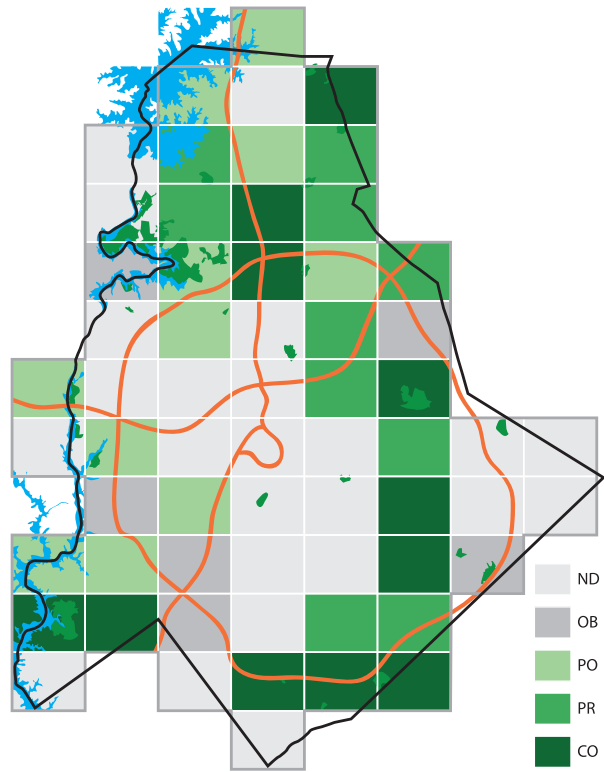
Northern Rough-winged Swallows in flight. (Jeff Lemons)



Northern Rough-winged Swallows in flight. A fledgling at a wastewater treatment plant. (Jeff Lemons)

the region. He reported them in Charlotte in the spring of 1953 nesting under a bridge over Sugar Creek. He noted “they were using the drainage holes” and that the “holes were metal pipes inbeded [sic] in the cement foundation of the bridge and extending an undetermined distance back into the fill to drain off excess water.” The birds had arrived at the nesting area by 24 April, and there were three nests occupied by 19 May. Bill and Flo Cobey reported them nesting along Little Sugar Creek on May 6, 1959. Black rat snakes have been observed preying on both eggs and nestlings in Rough-winged Swallow nests.

Our highest count in the region is an estimate of 120 birds reported at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on July 11, 2000.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Fairly Widespread (PR/10, CO/11)