

Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia*

The Bank Swallow has long been extirpated from the site of its single known colony in San Diego County, and now it is rare even as a migrant. Its specialized nesting habits confine it to vertical sandy river-banks, cut by erosion, or, as in San Diego County,

bluffs overlooking the beach. The birds dig their own burrows, forming colonies. Unfortunately, in its dependence on a naturally unstable and shifting habitat, the Bank Swallow is losing out to the work of flood-control engineers and society's demand for a static, tamed environment.

Breeding distribution: Long ago, the Bank Swallow nested in coastal bluffs at Las Flores (E3), then the southernmost nesting colony known in North America. Nelson K. Carpenter collected 11 egg sets there on 13 May 1917, eight on 2 May 1919 (WFVZ). Another set taken “north of Oceanside” on 9 May 1925 (SBCM) is the last record of the colony.

Nesting: Carpenter (1918) described the colony at Las Flores as consisting of hundreds of tunnels (many abandoned) in a bed of sandstone sandwiched between layers of cobbles and clay. The bluff in which they were dug rose 25 to 100 feet above the narrow beach.

Migration: Even as a fall migrant the Bank Swallow is now very rare in San Diego County. In spring, when the species is still less frequent than in fall, we had only two records from 1997 through 2002, of one with other migrating swallows at a pond on Otay Mesa (V13) on 15 April 2000 (P. Unitt, S. D. Cameron), the other of one at sewage ponds near the Santa Margarita River mouth (G5) on 14 April 2002 (P. A. Ginsburg).

Winter: The Bank Swallow is casual at this season, with only three records, of one in the Otay River valley (V11) 21–22 December 1968 (AFN 23:522:1969), one at Old Mission Dam (P11) 26 January 1976 (AB 30:768, 1976), and up to four near Oceanside (H5) 27 December 1986–8 February 1987 (AB 41:331, 1987).

Conservation: With the wholesale channelizing of California’s rivers, eliminating most of the eroding banks



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

the Bank Swallow needs for colony sites, the population collapsed and the range retracted north. Even colonies in unaltered habitat, like the coastal bluffs at Las Flores, were abandoned. The last reported nesting anywhere in southern California was in 1976 (Garrett and Dunn 1981). The decline continues with elimination of habitat for thousands along the Sacramento River (Garrison et al. 1987, Small 1994). The decline of the breeding population is reflected in the dwindling numbers seen of migrants, once “rather common” (Stephens 1919a). Like so many colonial birds, the Bank Swallow is more vulnerable than species that breed as dispersed pairs.

Taxonomy: The only subspecies of the Bank Swallow in North America, as across northern Eurasia, is *R. r. riparia* (Linnaeus, 1758).