



There are more than 500 holes in this sand cliff along the banks of the Wabash River in southern Indiana, and each hole is the nest of a cliff swallow. This is one of the largest bird nesting places on record.

Always a bird of mystery...

20th Century Cliff Dwellers

*by Grover Brinkman
Columbia, Illinois*

Quite often our Creator tosses into the lap of man a profound mystery. Often the mystery is so intriguing that centuries pass before the human brain partially or wholly solves it. Take, for instance, a tiny bird called a cliff swallow. It's a bird that colonizes, nesting in clay banks, cliffs, and dunes always near some body of water.

Scan for a moment the photo illustrating this feature. Here is a large colony of cliff swallows in the side of a midwestern clay bank. Each hole is the "apartment" of a pair of birds. They approach the bank at full speed and vanish inside the nest. They never miss! What uncanny instinct directs them to their own individual burrow, over and

over?

In size, the cliff swallow is five to six inches in length, mostly dark with a lighter forehead and square tail.

After it was reported from Hudson Bay in 1772, no naturalist mentioned the bird until 1815 when Audubon found a few in Kentucky. From then on, the cliff swallows were seen in many

parts of North America. They are among the swallows that return to the Mission of San Juan Capistrano in California on or about March 19th of each year. This in itself is an uncanny statistic.

The cliff swallow and its two relatives, the tree swallow and barn swallow, feed almost entirely on insects caught a-wing. Like the purple martin, these birds keep the mosquito population under control in many areas of the nation. Of the three, the tree swallow is the hardiest, arriving early in Spring and often wintering in some areas. Tree swallows will nest in bird houses and mailboxes, spots shunned by the cliff-nesting birds.

Let's return for a moment to the

photo illustrating this article. Each hole in this clay bank is the home of a pair of cliff swallows. Painstakingly, with tiny beak and sharp claws, the birds scrape out their particular "apartment," burrowing horizontally from two to three feet into the bank.

At the end of the burrow, they scoop out a "room" and in this enlarged space the nest is built. The young hatch in this cave-like environment, in semi-darkness far from bright light and fresh air.

Now here is the mystery that naturalists have never fully explained. At full flight, the adult swallows race for the cliff bank, their mouths full of insects, and zoom into their tiny holes. They never miss! Neither do they get into the

wrong apartment! This journalist has stood entranced for hours, watching this homing process. Never a miss, or even a near-miss. Their flight is something like a fighter plane returned to a carrier in mid-ocean. Extreme accuracy, over and over. How is the feat accomplished?

There have been many theories, but no one seems to tie it down into a statistic, other than the fact the birds are imbued with some God-given instinct that guides them home.

The photo showing this colony of cliff swallows covers only a small portion of the whole. Possibly there were 5,000 birds nesting here. The site is the Wabash River of song and story. Here is nature at its best. ●



Nests of barn swallows on a highway bridge spanning a river in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri.

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