

576-01-2005

Cave Swallow (*Petrochelidon fulva*) at Roderick Wildlife Reserve, Erie County, PA, 13-Nov-2005

Observer:

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Facts:

Temperature: 55 F
Wind: SSW 15-20 MPH sustained
Sky: overcast, with passing showers until about 8:30 AM, then clearing and mostly sunny; despite the rain, the air was very clear with no fog

Time: 7:45 AM and again around 8:00 AM
Equipment: Leica 10x42 BN binoculars, Kowa TSN-824 (20-60X) spotting scope
Photos or audio recordings: None
Accompanying observers: None
Documentation date: November 14, 2003
Submission date: November 15, 2005

Location:

Roderick Monument, part of the Roderick Wildlife Reserve which is situated on State Game Lands 134, sits on a bluff 100 feet above Lake Erie, less than one mile east of Pennsylvania's western border with Ohio. The lake is directly below, along with a minimal rocky beach punctuated by numerous small rocky sandbars. I conducted a lake watch from this location on the morning of November 13, beginning at 7:45 AM. The monument grounds offer a panoramic view of the Lake Erie shoreline and bluffs in this area, with a 180-degree perspective on the lake and shore as you stand facing north.

Observations:

Within one minute of my arrival, I was just getting organized with putting on rain gear, setting up my scope, and readying my camera when I saw two swallows flying in from the east and headed west, below my position, perhaps 50 feet above the water and beach. I was afforded excellent binocular views of these two birds as they passed beneath me, fifty feet below and a few dozen feet out from the bluff face. The lighting was overcast but sufficient to allow excellent and satisfying views of all necessary detail, described below. These two birds will be referred to as "Group 1" in the discussion to follow.

About ten minutes after this sighting, I was scoping the gulls in the water to my west in and around Conneaut Harbor, OH, which is easily visible from the overlook. I noticed movement directly above me, which turned out to be three ring-billed gulls passing overhead. But I also noticed that there was a swallow near them, fifty feet overhead and fifty or so feet out from the bluff face. This single swallow was followed by two more trailing behind, all of which continued to the west without pausing or changing direction at any time. These three birds (hereafter, "Group 2") were against the overcast sky and did not present nearly as good a viewing opportunity as Group 1. Again, I was limited to binocular views only.

Shortly thereafter it began to rain, sometimes quite steadily, and did not let up for at least 20 minutes. After the showers passed the sky cleared quickly and it actually became a pleasant sunny morning. Unfortunately, no other swallows were noted despite searching until 11:30 AM. Shortly before 9 AM, I was joined by two other birders to assist in the search, to no avail.

Description, Group 1:

-- Two swallows flying by viewed mostly from above and to the birds' left at a range of about 50-60 feet. Plumage could not be studied in feather-by-feather detail but several characteristics were very clear in good light.

-- Dark crown with orange/buffy forehead patch, and dark wings and back. Pale collar across the nape cleanly dividing the dark crown and wings/back.

-- Buffy/orange rump; dark, squared tail.

-- Underparts generally white or grayish along the breast, belly, and flanks. Throat and cheeks unmarked and of the same pale quality as the nape, perhaps vaguely buffy on the cheeks and throat compared to the light, even off-white of the rest of the underparts.

-- Undertail coverts never directly visible.

-- Never heard calling.

-- Swallow-like flight, slightly undulating with quick irregular wing beats interspersed with gliding.

Description, Group 2:

-- Three swallows flying by viewed mostly from below and to the birds' left at a range of about 100 feet. Plumage and coloration could not be studied in detail but several characteristics were distinguishable, mostly as a study in contrast between light and dark areas of plumage. By this time the weather was worsening with the onset of light rain showers.

-- From below, the crown, including forehead, generally appeared dark, but a light collar around nape and light rump were distinguishable, contrasting against otherwise dark upperparts and upper wings.

-- The birds appeared generally light underneath compared to the darker upperparts.

-- The throat and cheeks were unmarked when compared to the rest of the underparts down to the lower belly and vent - in fact the entirety of the underparts above the undertail coverts appeared, quite simply, a dirty pale shade of gray.

-- Undertail coverts appeared as a vaguely darker region when compared to the rest of the underparts, this could have been an optical illusion or shadow. Detail was very hard to discern and little or no color could be determined.

-- Obvious squared tail.

-- Never heard calling.

-- Swallow-like flight, slightly undulating with quick irregular wing beats interspersed with gliding.

Discussion:

I believe that I saw a total of five Cave Swallows on the morning of 13-Nov. There can be no doubt as to the identity of the two individuals in Group 1, the orange rump and square tail eliminates all possible identifications other than cliff and cave swallows. However, cliff swallow is eliminated by the pale, unmarked, and somewhat buffy throat and pale buffy cheeks, instead of dark rufous cheeks with a black patch at the lower throat as in cliff. Further, the forehead on a cliff swallow is white, and dark rufous on a "Mexican" (*H. p. melanogaster*) cliff swallow. The forehead on these birds was pale buffy/orange, generally of the same quality as the rump or perhaps slightly darker orange.

As for Group 2, again the broad square tail eliminates bank and barn swallows immediately, the light collar and rump together contrasting with the rest of the upperparts eliminates tree, northern rough-winged, and violet-green, as well as further eliminating bank and barn and purple martin. Finally, the lack of contrast between the cheeks and (especially) the lower throat and the rest of the underparts eliminates cliff as it did in Group 1.

The subspecies of Group 2 - "Mexican" (*P. f. pelodoma*) or "Caribbean" (*P. f. fulva*) - probably can not be distinguished, although *pelodoma* is more likely and is fully supported by the field marks noted. However, Group 1 can be identified as *pelodoma* based on the lighter, less contrasting cheeks and throat. In *fulva*, the cheeks and throat are generally a darker rufous that presents a noticeable contrast when compared to the rest of the underparts, and to the pale collar. I believe these features of *fulva*, if present, would have been visible in the good light in which these two birds were observed, based on my previous experience with *fulva*.

Prior experience:

I have seen hundreds of Cave Swallows of both the *fulva* and *pelodoma* subspecies, in Florida and Texas respectively. This was the first record of Cave Swallow I have had in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Cave Swallow (Petrochelidon fulva)

Date of Sighting: 13 November 2005 to 13 November

Location: RODERICK WILDLIFE RESERVE

County : ERIE

Observer(s): Geoff Malosh

Date of Submission: 2005

Submitted by: Geoff Malosh

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

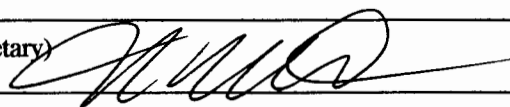
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut								
A. Guarente			X					
P. Guris			X					
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer			X					
J. Heller			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			6					
DECISION			X					

Comments: c/o

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

7/24/08