

Birding

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Featured Photo—Juvenile Cliff Swallow.

Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Box Elder County, Utah; June 2019.

Adult swallows in the ABA Area are generally straightforward to identify. With a decent view, a bird in flight or on a wire can be matched to an illustration or photo in your field guide or on your phone. In this installment of the *Birding* Featured Photo, however, we focus on hatch-year swallows in late summer. Soon after fledging, these birds are capable of flying far, and they are often seen quite some distance from the nest—and from their parents! Moreover, they can be somewhat to majorly different in appearance from the adults of their species.

Case in point: the bird in our Featured Photo, a Cliff Swallow. It lacks the telltale white “head lights” of the adult, and its throat, being substantially flecked with white, gives a pale impression. That combination of marks (dark forehead, light throat) identifies the adult Cave Swallow, not the Cliff Swallow. And in this particular image, the bird’s telltale orangey rump is completely obscured. (The Cave Swallow also shows this mark.) So how do we know this is “just” a young Cliff Swallow? And what about young of the other swallow species in the ABA Area?

In this article, Utah-based bird photographer Mia McPherson takes us on a brief photo tour of some of the juvenile swallows of the Salt Lake City region. The analysis is restricted to the birds called “swallows” (so no martins) that commonly occur in the ABA Area. And the intent, as Mia comes right out and states, is not to offer an exhaustive diagnosis of all the swallows of our region. Her strategy is to KISS it: *Keep It Simple, Sweetheart*. Think of it as a “warmup” for the next time you’re challenged and delighted with the surprisingly diverse and beautiful juvenile swallows of the ABA Area.

Field ID of Young Swallows: Just KISS It

Juvenile swallows learn to fly quickly and are often seen far from their nest sites

Just after North America’s swallows fledge from the nest, the young can be seen perched on wire fences, trees, signs, and the tops of tall grasses and rushes from coast to coast. And they can be as challenging to iden-

tify as peeps, empids, and immature gulls. Sometimes they occur singly, but they are at least as likely to be encountered in mixed flocks or to gather in large crèches of young swallows fresh out of the nest.



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When I am out in the field, these are the things I look for on young swallows:

- 1 • Does anything leap out with regard to size and shape?
- 2 • What colors and patterns do I see “up front,” on their breasts, throats, and heads?
- 3 • What color are their undersides?


I ask myself these three questions to keep my field ID simple. Later, when I return home, I can view my images on a larger screen. And if I still have questions about my ID, I can consult my collection of bird books or apps for verification.

Fledgling Barn Swallows are probably the most recognizable and easiest to identify of our swallow species because of their dark blue-black upperparts, which contrast sharply with their distinctive cinnamon to orangey undersides, rusty throats, and buffy-orange foreheads. Even as youngsters, they are slender of shape and long of tail. No other North American swallow species looks like the Barn Swallow, whether just out of the nest or fully adult.

Young Northern Rough-winged Swallows have medium-colored, drab undersides, but they also have two cinnamon-colored wing bars that other young swallows in the ABA Area do not. That is the key ID feature. If the young swallow I am observing has those cinnamon wings bars, it’s practically a guarantee I’ve got a Northern Rough-wing. Something else: Fledgling Northern Rough-wings don’t have white feathering on their heads and throats. But Bank, Tree, and some Cliff swallows do. In other words, if a young swallow has white flecking or splotching on the head, I can safely rule out Northern Rough-wing.

Fresh-out-of-the-nest Cliff Swallows have distinctive dark foreheads with contrasting dark brown throats and brownish napes. They often have varying amounts of white feathers mixed in with the dark feathers on their foreheads and throats. That combination of dark and white is unique among ABA Area swallows.

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Supplemental Photo 1



Young Cave Swallows have dark foreheads that could appear similar to Cliff Swallows of the same age, but their throats are very pale compared to Cliff Swallow juveniles. Young Cliff and Cave swallows both have spotted undertail coverts. The Cave Swallow's range in the ABA Area is relatively restricted, and that's a double-edged sword for field ID. Usually, it means we can rule out that species when we are out of the range; however, the Cave Swallow is expanding its range, and we should be aware of the possibility of vagrants.

Bank, Tree, and Violet-green swallows fresh out the nest can be the most confusing to identify in my experience. All three have darkish (shades of brown, basically) backs, napes, and foreheads, along with pale to white underparts. So how can they be distinguished from each other and from the other swallow species?

Not one of these three species has the distinctive cinnamon wing bar shown by young Northern Rough-winged Swallows.

Also, they lack the distinctive head, throat, and facial patterns of young Cliff and Cave swallows, so those can be ruled out rather easily. The distinctive Barn Swallow differs markedly in shape and color.

Young Bank Swallows have white underparts and white throats. Although they look similar to Violet-green and Tree swallows of the same age, they typically sport a complete, dark breast band that can appear to come to an elongated V-shaped point in the center of the breast. However, the presence of a breast band doesn't necessarily narrow our choices down to Bank Swallow!

Fledgling Tree Swallows, like Bank Swallows, have white underparts and white throats, along with a breast band. But it is different. On the Tree Swallow, it is usually light brown and faint.

Supplemental Photo 2



Supplemental Photo 3

Note the variation among the four juvenile Cliff Swallows in these supplemental photos. Feather patterns can change daily on individual birds when they are this young, and, of course, there are differences among individual birds as well. On all of them, pay attention to the variable white flecking on the throat and forehead, as well as the fresh, buff-edged flight feathers and wing coverts. The orangey rump is distinctive, but sometimes concealed.

All images from Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Box Elder County, Utah: Left images, June 2019; right images, June 2011.



Supplemental Photo 4



Supplemental Photo 5



ABOVE: Because this bird is solidly brown above, it might suggest a Northern Rough-winged or Bank swallow. It is not the former because Northern Rough-wings are never so cleanly white below. We can tell that the bird is a juvenile by its colorful gape, and a juvenile rough-wing would have cinnamon wing bars, lacking on this bird. This bird shows a trace of breast band, recalling a Bank Swallow, but the breast band is not nearly prominent enough to be that species. So this distinctively, and perhaps surprisingly, brown-backed bird is a Tree Swallow. *Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Box Elder County, Utah; July 2009.*

BELOW: All of our swallows are relatively small, with the Bank Swallow (left) being notably so. Such differences are difficult to gauge on individual birds, but can be obvious in direct comparison. Both birds are juveniles, told as such by, among other characters, the fresh feathers with distinctive buff fringes. On the Bank Swallow, note the fully formed breast band; the juvenile Tree Swallow may also show a breast band, but never so perfectly formed. On the Cliff Swallow (right), check out the dark forehead and mostly white throat—quite different from what is shown on the adult. *Beaverhead County, Montana; July 2016.*

It is typically incomplete and, in some views, gives the impression of barely being there.

Violet-green Swallows just out of the nest have light-colored underparts like the others, so the thing to look at is the dusky-colored face, which gives a smudgy look compared to the white of the faces of Bank and Tree swallows. Most lack the breast band of Bank (pronounced) and Tree (less so) swallows. And range is a consideration, as the Violet-green is restricted to the West.

Which brings up a final point.

Context: I have focused so far almost entirely on the physical appearance of these swallows, especially their feathers. But it is also important to know the timing of migration and other movements of swallows in your area. Seek out situations in which you can directly compare swallows (for example, see Supplemental Photo #6). Juvenile swallows can be identified solo, but nothing beats seeing and appreciating the birds in context. 🌈



Supplemental Photo 6

The
brilliant
answer is
always...



What more could you ask for?—a bird perfectly in profile, in “field guide pose.” And with that cinnamon forehead and pale throat, it must be a... wait a minute. Something doesn’t add up here. So flip back to pp. 56–60 of this issue, and read Mia McPherson’s analysis of this interesting bird.

We are reminded again of both the power and the pitfalls of expectation. If we “know” that recently fledged juveniles don’t forage far from their nests and parents, then we can be led seriously astray in situations like this one. That was a hint... 😊



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