

New Hampshire Swallow Fact Sheet



Six species of swallows breed in New Hampshire. The summaries below provide some background and history for each, including its conservation status.

Purple Martin (*Progne subis*)

Description: Adult males are uniformly dark blue-black. Females and immatures are duller with grayish underparts, although they often have some blue in the wings or back.

Habitat: Open areas such as lawns, fields, and golf courses; often near water.

Nest Site: In the eastern U.S., this species is entirely restricted to Purple Martin houses.

Coloniality: Highly colonial. Colonies can contain hundreds of birds, but in NH usually have fewer than 20 pairs.

Arrives in NH: late April to early May (4/17-5/3)

Distribution in NH: Only three known colonies, all in the Lakes Region.

Winter Distribution: Northern South America

Population Trend: Significant declines at northern edge of range

(northeast US, southern Canada, Great Lakes), but stable or increasing in south and west.

NH Status and Conservation: A “Special Concern” species in New Hampshire. NH’s Purple Martins have been in decline since the late 1950s, when there were roughly 30 colonies in New Hampshire. The highest number since 2000 was 10, of which five contained three or fewer pairs, and only three colonies have been active since 2006. Martins can be very responsive to management in the form of artificial housing, and techniques are well established for attracting and maintaining productive colonies. Given the small number of colonies in New Hampshire, and the state’s location at the edge of the species’ range, it is not clear how successful attempts to recruit new colonies may be. At the same time however, “landlords” of current colonies are encouraged to manage them in accordance with guidelines set forth by the Purple Martin Conservation Association (www.purplemartin.org). Current colony locations in New Hampshire are the Fun Spot, Laconia; Rt. 153, Freedom; and Route 302, Center Conway. This species is part of the Swallow CORE project, so please report any sightings of breeding birds. Expanded public outreach about the rarity of the species may result in previously unknown colonies being discovered.



Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

Description: Iridescent blue or green above, depending on light, and pure white below. Young females in their first breeding season are brown above, but can be distinguished from the following two species by their completely white underparts.

Habitat: Wetlands, fields, and edges where suitable nest sites are available.

Nest Site: A cavity nester. Frequently uses bird boxes but in natural settings occupies old woodpecker holes.

Coloniality: Not colonial in the traditional sense, but can reach high densities when nest sites are common.

Arrives in NH: last week in March (23-30)



Distribution in NH: Occurs statewide except high elevations of the White Mountains.

Winter Distribution: Coastal areas of southeast US, Mexico, western Caribbean, and northern Central America.

Population Trend: Significant declines along northern edge of range, but stable or increasing over most of the US.

NH Status and Conservation: This is the most common and widespread swallow in New Hampshire, and except for the Northern Rough-winged Swallow it is also the species showing the least severe decline. Even so, declines are pervasive across the northern edge of its range from British Columbia to New England and Nova Scotia. There is an extensive network of researchers working on Tree Swallows (<http://golondrinas.cornell.edu/>), and it is through such efforts that we are most likely to understand the sources of the decline. Because Tree Swallows often nest singly or in small clusters, and are widely distributed throughout the state, they are not well-suited to a site specific monitoring program. If several occupied nest boxes are maintained by a single person or organization, it is valuable to track and maintain records of nesting activity, timing, and productivity.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

Description: Brown above and pale below, with a dusky throat. The latter feature distinguishes it from the Bank Swallow, as does the absence of a dark breast band.

Habitat: Stream and river banks, gravel pits, and similar areas; usually near water in NH

Nest Site: Uses a variety of cavities in river banks, including Bank Swallow and Belted Kingfisher holes. Will also nest in drainage pipes below bridges or other small openings in vertical surfaces.

Coloniality: Generally solitary, although 1-2 pairs can often be found associated with Bank Swallow colonies.

Arrives in NH: mid-April (12-20)

Distribution in NH: Statewide, but local because of habitat needs.

Winter Distribution: Gulf Coast, Mexico, and Central America

Population Trend: Generally stable or slowly increasing in most areas.

NH Status and Conservation: The Northern Rough-winged Swallow is the only member of the swift/swallow group which is not declining in New Hampshire; instead it is showing a small but statistically non-significant increase. As a result it is of relatively low conservation concern. Because rough-winged swallows tend to nest singly, they are not well-suited for a colony register program, but should be monitored when they co-occur with Bank Swallows in an effort to determine how the two species differ in habitat use, diet, or other aspects of their ecologies.



Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*)

Description: Dark brown above and pure white below. Distinguishing feature is a brown breast band. This is also the smallest of the N.H. swallows.

Habitat: Sand banks along rivers and lakes; also sand and gravel pits with exposed surfaces.

Nest Site: Digs burrows into sand or dirt banks along rivers or at sand/gravel pits.

Coloniality: Highly colonial, with some colonies consisting of over 100 holes.



Arrives in NH: last week in April (25-30)

Distribution in NH: Statewide, but local because of habitat needs.

Winter Distribution: Primarily in northern South America, but also parts of western Mexico.

Population Trend: Declining over most of breeding range except Rocky Mountains. Declines are most significant in the northeast U.S. and eastern Canada, but have also been documented west through the Great Lakes states to the northern Great Plains.

NH Status and Conservation: A “Special Concern” species in New Hampshire. In addition to the Purple Martin and Cliff Swallow, this is one of the highly colonial species that breeds in New Hampshire, and like those two species it is undergoing a persistent decline. NH populations are decreasing at almost 4% per year. Bank Swallows historically nested in exposed banks along moderate-to-large rivers, but also began to use gravel pits and sand mines as these became available on the landscape. As is the case with many of the swallows, reasons for the long-term decline are unclear, but could involve gravel pit reclamation, increased riverine erosion, and the same climate, food, and pesticide issues proposed for other species. Because this species is both strongly colonial and restricted in habitat, a comprehensive survey of existing colonies is more feasible than for any other species, and the Bank Swallow is a focal species for Swallow CORE.

Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

Description: Dark above and pale below, with a pale buffy rump. Additional field marks include a pale forehead and dark reddish throat. This is the only swallow in NH with a squared-off tail.

Habitat: Open areas including agricultural fields and river valleys, assuming suitable nesting sites are available. Often near water.

Nest Site: Builds a gourd-shaped nest of mud, usually on bridges or the walls of barns or sheds.

Coloniality: Highly colonial. In some parts of range colonies may contain thousands of birds, but in NH very few contain over 20 pairs.

Arrives in NH: late April to early May (4/22-5/2)

Distribution in NH: Formerly statewide, but most colonies now in northern half of state. Colonies in southern NH tend to be small and scattered.

Winter Distribution: Northern South America

Population Trend: Slight increases over most of breeding range, but consistent declines in southeastern Canada and northern New England. Unlike many of the other swallows, the Cliff Swallow is not declining over as broad a range, with the strongest declines in the northeast US and scattered spots in the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountains. Elsewhere the species is doing well, and still occurs in large colonies containing hundreds if not thousands of nests.

NH Status and Conservation: A “Special Concern” species in New Hampshire. The Cliff Swallow has the dubious honor of being the most strongly declining aerial insectivore in New Hampshire, with BBS data indicating an almost 10% annual decline since 1966. Combined with the loss or shrinkage of several formerly large colonies, this decline led NHFG to list the species as “Special Concern” in 2009. To some extent, the Cliff Swallow may be following a pattern shown by several grassland birds, in that it increased following agricultural expansion in the 1800s, and is now declining as New England reverts to forest. However, its disappearance from formerly successful colonies in areas that are still largely agricultural remains cause for concern. Current data suggest that the majority of colonies are in the northern half of the state (north of Lake Winnepesaukee), with scattered smaller



colonies in the south. A key initial need is current data on the status and size of both active and historic colonies, so that we can develop a more complete picture of the species' current distribution in the state. Once sites are identified, the next objective is to monitor them for both yearly productivity and between-years variation in numbers. With site specific data on individual colonies in hand, it will hopefully be easier to assess some of the factors proposed for the declines, which in this case can be expanded to include changes to building characteristics and outright persecution (e.g., knocking nests off barns). This species is part of the Swallow CORE project; please report any sightings of breeding birds.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

Description: Unmistakable due to the long forked tail present in both sexes. Uniformly glossy blue-black above with buffy-orange underparts.

Habitat: Almost any area that provides a mix of nesting substrate (below) and open areas for foraging. Most frequently encountered in agricultural areas and along rivers and lakeshores, but will also use smaller openings in forested or residential landscapes.

Nest Site: Builds a cup-shaped mud nest on a horizontal surface. Often uses barns and bridges, but will also build nests on porches or under the eaves of houses. Historically nested on cliffs or rock crevices, and may occasionally do so in NH.

Colony: Loosely colonial. Barn Swallows typically nest in colonies of 5-20 pairs, but they will also nest singly when nest sites are limited.

Arrives in NH: mid-April (11-20)

Distribution in NH: Occurs statewide except high elevations of the White Mountains.

Winter Distribution: Primarily in South America, with lesser numbers in Central America and southern Mexico.

Population Trend: Although increasing in the southern US, long-term declines in the north result in an overall decline across the breeding range. Along with the Chimney Swift, this is the aerial insectivore that is showing declines across the majority of its range in North America. As such it should be considered a conservation priority even though populations are still relatively high compared to other species of swallow.

NH Status and Conservation: The NH population is declining at 5% per year. Unlike Bank and Cliff Swallows, Barn Swallows tend to occur singly or in small colonies, and while this makes it harder to track a significant portion of the population, anecdotal data suggest that most of New Hampshire's larger colonies have declined significantly. The focus of Swallow CORE with respect to Barn Swallows is to find and identify as many of the larger colonies as possible, while not ignoring smaller sites that may end up comprising most of the state's population. As is the case for Cliff Swallows, consistent monitoring of a subset of all sites may be the best way to collect the data needed to better understand the species' decline.



To help us track the populations of NH's swallows, consider participating in "Swallow CORE."

More details are available at:

NH Swallow CORE, c/o Pamela Hunt, NH Audubon, 84 Silk Farm Rd., Concord, NH 03301

Or email to: phunt@nhaudubon.org