

Texas Swallow Species By Celeste Silling

Swallows are some of the most interesting birds we have here in Texas. They are fascinating to watch, as they dip, dive, and swirl across fields and parks, and their ecology is interesting as well. We are fortunate to have 8 species of swallows here in Texas, and many of them can regularly be seen here in the Houston-Galveston region. This includes Purple Martins, Barn Swallows, Cave Swallows, and Cliff Swallows.

Although these species look similar, different Swallows have different behaviors and habitats. For example, if you have a pair of swallows building a nest on your porch, it is likely a pair of Barn Swallows. This species has adapted to human presence, and seem to like building their nests on the sides of buildings, especially with overhangs. Barn Swallows arrive in March, nest in the Spring and Summer, and migrate South in July-October. Barn Swallows are small birds that have a deeply forked tail, reddish brown face, blue head and back, and a white chest and belly.

Cliff Swallows are another commonly seen swallow species here. They have a reddish brown face, bright white forehead and neck, blue back and short straight tail. This species prefers to nest in large colonies under bridges. You can see their nests, which look like mud pots or tubes, sticking to the underside of bridges. The nests are completely enclosed, with only one small hole leading in and out. They do this by gathering wet mud off the side of a puddle with their beak, then flying up and placing it on the bridge. They do this several hundred times (with the help of their colony members) until they have built the shape they need. The mud dries as they go, allowing them to build up layers over time.

Cave Swallows are similar to the Cliff Swallows, but lack the white patch on their foreheads. Instead, they have an orange-brown colored forehead. Like Cliff Swallows, Cave swallows build their cup-shaped nests out of mud on the underside of bridges. They can also build their nests on the sides of cliffs and canyons, but we don't have those around here.

Purple Martins are the largest species of swallow that we have here in Texas. The males are an iridescent dark purple, and the females are gray. Both sexes have a forked tail. Purple Martins nest in colonies in Martin Houses, which are man-made structures specifically designed for these birds. Historically, they would nest in cavities in gourds, cactuses, trees, or cliffs. But these birds have since opted for a life of opulence in our man-made bird mansions.

There are other swallows that can be seen in our area as well, such as the tree swallow and bank swallow. Because they move so fast and look so similar, it can be hard to tell all of these species apart. But don't be discouraged! You can observe the nests and behaviors of these birds, and soon you will be an expert.

Photo: A Cliff Swallows perching inside and outside their nests
Photo by Marlin Harms