

## MOVE OVER CAPISTRANO – THE SWALLOWS HAVE ARRIVED AT AGUA HEDIONDA!

by Nikki Weaver, Discovery Center Director

Early one morning in May 2006, a large flock of cliff swallows swooped in and immediately set about the task of building an extensive colony of mud nests around the peripheral eaves of the building. The process was fascinating to witness, but the frenetic pace at which the birds worked was dizzying. Initially, an attempt was made to prevent the swallows from nesting on all four sides of the building. However that endeavor proved short-lived as our tenacious feathered-friends clearly had their own ideas and there was no persuading them otherwise. The Discovery Center now has over 100 gourd-shaped mud nurseries which are repaired and re-inhabited every spring between the months of March and August.

Cliff swallows are one of the few migratory birds who have benefited from the proliferation of man-made nesting sites. Once restricted to nesting on cliff faces and canyon walls, cliff swallows are now commonly found under bridges, culverts, overpasses, and in the eaves of buildings. Their population has increased along with the increase of suitable nesting sites. Four basic conditions are found at all cliff swallow colonies: (1) an open habitat for foraging (2) a vertical surface beneath an overhang for attaching the nest (3) a supply of mud that has the proper consistency for nest building (4) a body of fresh water for drinking. The conditions at the Discovery Center provide an ample supply of all of these.

Cliff swallows spend their winters in far away locations such as Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. Their 7,500 mile voyage takes 30 days to complete at speeds of up to 18 miles per hour. They begin their return trip north in early spring and fly non-stop from sunrise to sunset covering over 250 miles per day. Their migratory route has an abundant supply of insects so they can literally “eat on the fly.” Arrival dates can vary greatly depending on weather conditions. A definite homing tendency exists among adults who previously nested at a colony. These birds are the first to return, followed by adults who mated at other colonies in previous years and young birds that have not yet bred. A colony serves as an “information center” for feeding birds, as unsuccessful foragers may follow successful birds to food sources. It has been said that swallow colonies mirror the drama of human society with frequent disputes over nests and breeding outside of established pairs.

Parenting duties are shared by both sexes. Gourd-shaped nests are built from sand, silt and clay pellets that are collected in their beaks -- like wads of bubblegum -- from river and streambeds, ponds and ditches. The process is slow and tedious and takes 1-2 weeks to complete. A typical nest contains between 1000-1400 individually collected mud pellets that must be allowed to dry and harden before more pellets are added. The completed nests are lined with grasses, hair and feathers. Egg laying usually begins before the nest is completed. Each day one egg is laid until the clutch of 4-5 eggs is completed. Incubation occurs over a 14-16 day period with a 20-25 day fledging period after hatching.

With their graceful, acrobatic flight, chattering voices and sociable nature, it's a delight to watch the daily comings and goings of our colony of guests -- so come on down to the Discovery Center and join in the swallow-watching!!

**Cliff Swallows build gourd-shaped nests that are made out of hundreds of mud balls. The birds fly down, scoop up lovely beak-fulls of mud, and wad them into little balls, like we do with bubble gum. The mud balls are stuck under an overhang one at a time until a completely enclosed chamber, with a long entrance tunnel, is formed. Cliff Swallows were into adobe building long before it became fashionable.**

**Cliff Swallows nest in tight colonies. In the East (yes, we have Cliff Swallows around here) the colonies are fairly small, but out West, you can find thousands of them nesting in one location. A concentrated colony has both advantages and disadvantages. Occasionally some bonehead will decide that the birds are too messy and will wipe out the entire colony of nests, in the name of neatness. Jerk. On the other hand, by living together the birds are better able to find food. Birds that are having trouble locating food, which is flying insects - not baklava, simply watch the birds that are returning with a load of bugs for their babies. The hungry birds will then follow the successful hunters to the nearest swarm of insects and join the fun.**

**Cliff Swallows spend their winter months way down in southern South America. They begin to arrive in California in late February. The PR people at the mission want us to believe that the birds return each year on exactly March 19th. It's the miracle of Capistrano. In most cases the birds are back in the area much sooner than that, but I'm not going to rain on their parade. I don't want any earthquakes coming my way.**