

Cliff Swallow

Hirundo pyrrhonota

Historic changes in the distribution and abundance of Cliff Swallows in Ohio reflect their close association with man. During the 19th century, their initial expansion into eastern North America was correlated with the clearing of virgin forests. These swallows first appeared in Ohio about 1820 and became well established summer residents by the middle of the century (Wheaton 1882). Most colonies were located under the eaves of barns and other outbuildings of rural farms where the adults foraged over the adjacent fields. Their statewide population undoubtedly peaked before 1880, and declined during the last decades of the century as a result of competition for nest sites with increasing numbers of House Sparrows (Jones 1903).

The numbers of Cliff Swallows continued to decline during the first half of the 20th century. Hicks (1935) cited breeding records from 41 counties, noting they were very locally distributed or absent in most of western Ohio. Even in eastern Ohio, very few counties hosted more than six colonies or 100 pairs. Very few of these colonies remained in existence for more than 2–3 years. Additional declines occurred during subsequent decades, and by the mid-1960s, breeding Cliff Swallows were limited to a few large colonies on Amish farms in Wayne and Holmes counties and a handful of scattered small colonies elsewhere (Peterjohn 1989a). The causes of this decline are uncertain, although competition with House Sparrows for nest sites combined with a shortage of suitable nesting locations on buildings may have been factors.

In the early 1970s, Cliff Swallows began to nest under bridges and on dams of large reservoirs. The adults foraged over the lakes as well as adjacent upland fields. This increased adaptability in the choice of nest sites allowed their populations to expand within Ohio and throughout eastern North America (Robbins, C. S., et al. 1986). This trend continued through the years of the Atlas Project, and also produced new breeding colonies on barns and other structures in upland areas.

The Atlas Project produced records from 41 priority blocks (5.4% of the statewide total), 8 special areas, and 21 other locations within 35 counties. These records were concentrated along the northern edge of the Unglaciated Plateau and adjacent portions of the Glaciated Plateau in Wayne, Holmes, Coshocton, Stark, Tuscarawas, and Carroll counties. Their relative abundance in these counties probably reflects the expansion of the few large colonies present in Wayne and Holmes counties during the 1960s. Breeding Cliff Swallows were also fairly numerous in the northeastern counties of Ashtabula, Trumbull, Portage, and Mahoning. Elsewhere on the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau, small numbers were encountered in Hocking, Fairfield, and Perry counties along with a few widely scattered records in the other counties. Cliff Swallows proved to be very locally distributed throughout the western half of Ohio where they were unrecorded from most counties. This distribution pattern, particularly their status in the southwestern counties, differs somewhat from that described by Peterjohn (1989a).

Most Atlas Project reports pertained to small colonies composed of 4–15 pairs with only a few records of isolated pairs. Larger colonies were infrequently encountered, although colonies with 30–75 pairs were scattered across the state. The largest colonies were restricted to Wayne, Holmes, Coshocton, and Tuscarawas counties, and totalled 100–175+ pairs. A current estimate of the size of this statewide population is unavailable. However, Atlas Project records indicate that a range

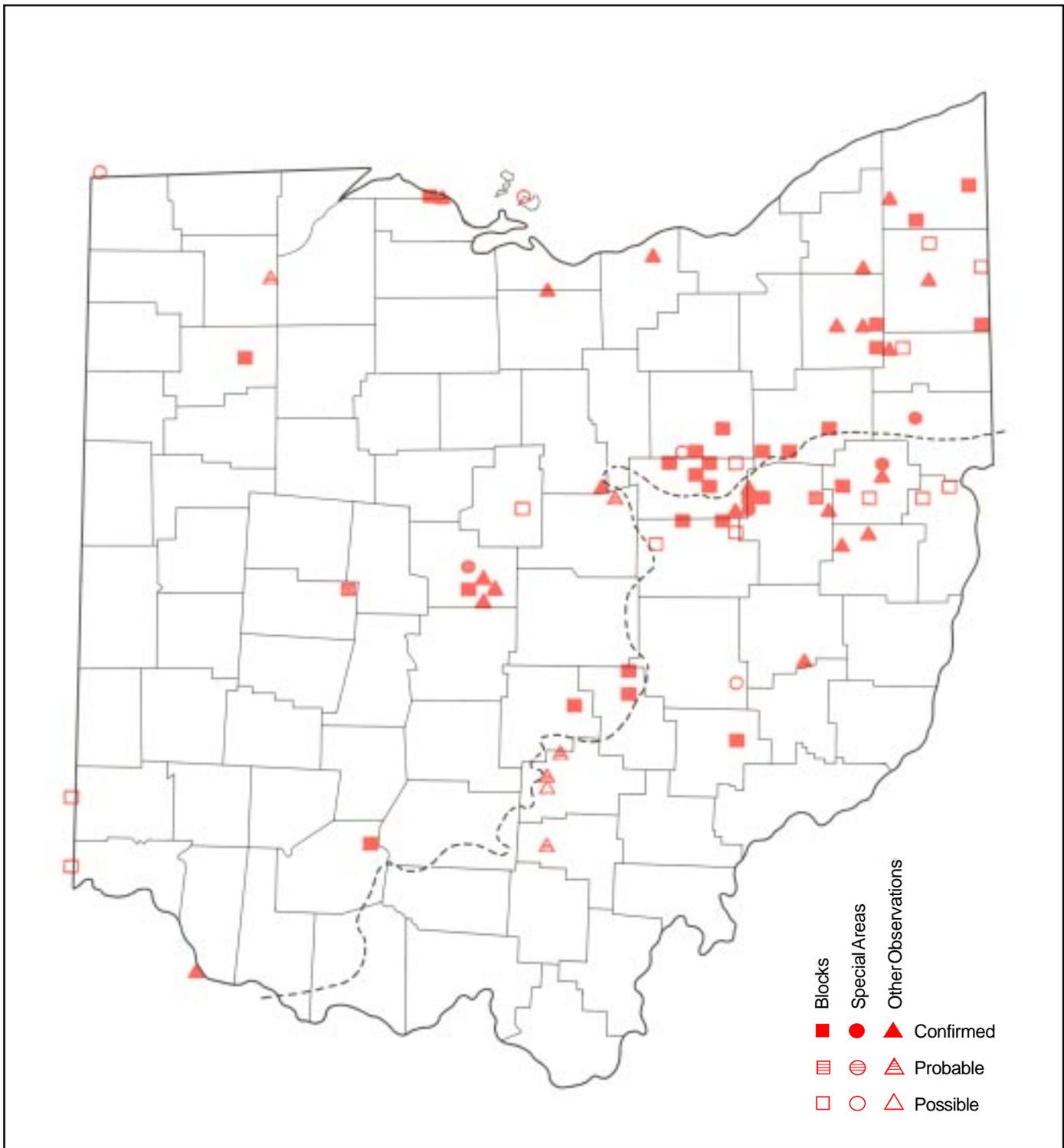


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of 1000–2000 breeding pairs may be a reasonable estimate for Ohio.

Confirmed breeders composed most Atlas Project records, primarily active nests on barns, bridges, and dams. Many colonies were segregated from other swallows, although a few pairs nested with colonies of Barn Swallows. Reports of adults carrying food for young and recently fledged young constituted the remaining confirmed reports. The “30” code was not accepted for this species. The few probable breeding records were observations of adults entering buildings where nesting was suspected but could not be confirmed. Reports of possible breeders were restricted to the period of June 1–July 20 to preclude migrants.

Cliff Swallows may begin nest construction during late April, although these activities are most prominent during May. Most nests with eggs have been reported during June, with the earliest clutches laid in the second half of May and late nesting attempts produce clutches into July. Nests with young have been reported as early as June 15–16 and fledglings by early July. Most young swallows fledge between July 15 and August 5 while late nests may produce fledglings during the second half of August.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	2	2.1	4.9	0.3
Till Plain	271	4	1.5	9.8	–
Ill. Till Plain	46	1	2.2	2.4	–
Glaciated Plateau	140	21	15.0	51.2	2.5
Unglaciated Plateau	212	13	6.1	31.7	–

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	41	5.4%
Confirmed	27	65.9%
Probable	2	4.9%
Possible	12	29.3%