



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Cliff Swallow *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Cliff Swallow is small, pointed-winged, aerial insectivore with a square tail, orange rump, and chestnut-colored throat. They historically nested in large colonies on cliff faces in the western United States, but are now found across much of North America, nesting in the east primarily on artificial surfaces such as bridges, culverts, and buildings.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Cliff Swallows have been steadily declining as breeders in Massachusetts and are now relegated primarily to small colonies in Berkshire, Franklin, and northern Essex Counties.

In the first Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas, the mountainous western areas of the state hosted fair numbers of Cliff Swallow colonies, both on natural cliffs and on human structures such as barns and bridges. The Connecticut River Valley had no shortage of such structures but had only 21% occupancy by blocks, likely

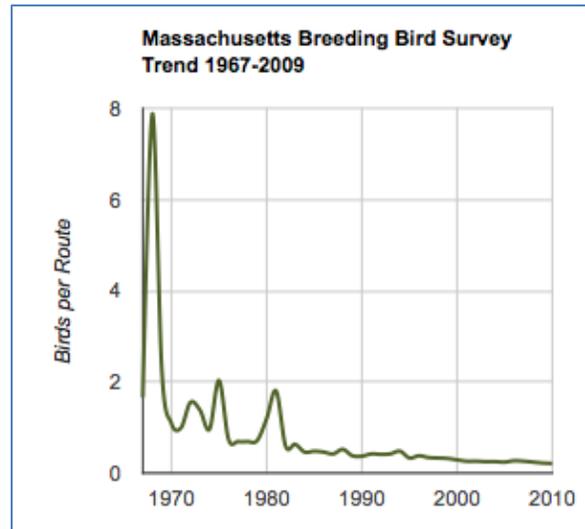


Figure 2: Massachusetts Breeding Bird Survey results, 1966-2009.

due to heavy infiltration of House Sparrows. Swallows were present in similar proportions across the Worcester and Lower Worcester Plateau regions, but Coastal Plains records were almost entirely restricted to the northern parts of the region. Only a handful of Cliff Swallow colonies were reported in the Lowlands and Cape Cod.

By Atlas 2, no Cliff Swallows were found in Norfolk, Bristol, Plymouth, Barnstable, or Nantucket Counties. The species entirely vacated the Worcester Plateau as well. The Cliff Swallows that were found in Massachusetts during Atlas 2 covered less than half the breeding footprint of Atlas I and were largely located in the west, where suitable nesting sites (i.e., old barns) could still be found, along with a few sites in northern Essex County.

The Cliff Swallow shows a significant decreasing Breeding Bird Survey trend in Massachusetts from 1967-2009 (Figure 2).

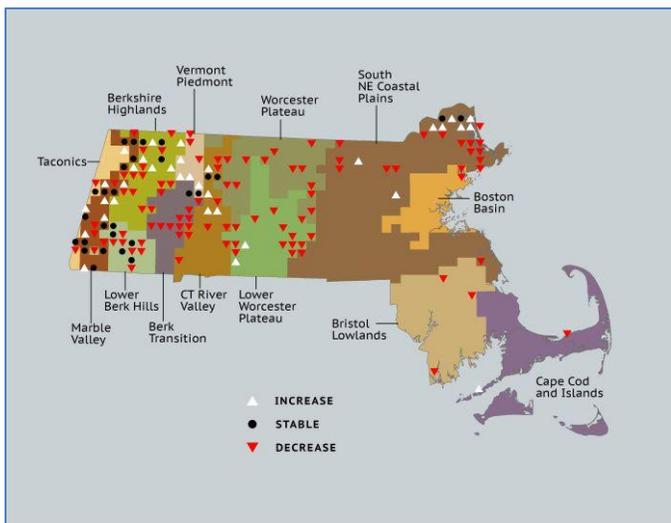


Figure 1: Changes between Breeding Bird Atlas 1 (1974-1979) and Breeding Bird Atlas 2 (2007-2011).

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Cliff Swallows nest in colonies, building their mud nests on the sides of cliff faces, buildings, bridges, and culverts. Colonies are usually associated with open area such as fields and wetlands, and are often in the vicinity of open water.

THREATS: Competition for nesting sites by House Sparrows is thought to be a primary limiting factor of Cliff Swallows.

MANAGEMENT: Controlling local House Sparrow populations has been shown to be effective in increasing Cliff Swallow populations.

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Prepared by C. Buelow, 2015

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