

Swallow Summer

Charles R. Brown

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Distinguished avian ecologist Charles R. Brown has spent the last 15-odd summers in southwestern Nebraska netting, banding, measuring, observing, living, eating and breathing the notoriously colonial cliff swallow to gain insight into the bird's complicated life history. *Swallow Summer* is his blow-by-blow account of a typical season of field data collection, illustrated with a map of his study area and 26 photos. The author's ambitious objectives are to convey his passion for research, the challenges of field biology, and ecology of the cliff swallow to several audiences: The lay birding/science-interested public, professional ornithologists and ecologists, and students pondering a career in field biology. While the book indeed contains much material of interest to all targeted reading groups, it is fragmented by Brown's preoccupation with detailing each and every moment of each day in the field. The result is a tedious narrative in which nuggets of insight on ecological concepts and cliff swallows are embedded rather sporadically. Such nuggets are unfortunately easy to miss, as most of the book reads like field notes, and it is easy to drift away from Brown's rather dry accounts of field data collection. Sections which place the cliff swallow in an engaging ecological context are all too brief and occur mainly at the beginning and end of the book; discourse on the scientific method is equally fleeting. We are left wanting to experience more on what is obviously a remarkable animal with an intriguing ecological story to tell, rather than the sweaty, filthy, frustrating and often boring routine of biological field work. The book will be of value to fledgling field biologists, as it paints a completely accurate picture of field data collection. Otherwise, the wealth of flat prose devoted to misery afield may prevent all but the most devout birder from accessing this book at a fulfilling intellectual level.

DAVID SPEAS (July / August 1998)

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