

AN APPARENT HYBRID VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW (*TACHYGINETA THALASSINA*) X CLIFF SWALLOW (*PETROCHELIDON PYRRHONOTA*) IN SAANICHTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Bruce Whittington
347 Millstream Lake Road
Victoria, B.C. V9B 6H5

Abstract — An oddly-plumaged swallow that visited a nestbox in Saanichton, B.C. appeared to be a hybrid between Violet-green and Cliff swallows. This appears to be the first probable hybrid between these species described and probably only the second reported case of potential hybridization between Violet-green Swallow and any other species.

Key words: British Columbia, hybridization, swallows.

Violet-green Swallows (*Tachycineta thalassina*) nest regularly in nestboxes in residential areas in southwestern British Columbia. In one such location in Saanichton on southern Vancouver Island, this species annually raised young in a nestbox affixed to the gable end of a garage, about three metres above the ground.

On 2 July 2000, two adult Violet-green Swallows were being observed as they brought food to nearly fledged young in the nestbox, when they became alarmed, calling agitatedly. In looking for the cause of their alarm, I noted a different swallow in the area. This bird flew back and forth several times, and then perched on the top of the nestbox. It spent about seven or eight minutes around the nestbox, moving from its top to the roof of the garage less than a metre away. It also perched at the opening of the box, and looked inside and at the surroundings, as Violet-green Swallows do when investigating a potential nest site. It did not interact with the juvenile birds in the nestbox. The adult Violet-green Swallows swooped at the intruding swallow several times (see Figure 1), and were obviously distressed. After a short time, the odd swallow left and was not seen again.



Figure 1: Adult Violet-green Swallow attacking apparent hybrid. Saanichton, B.C. 2 July 2000.

The odd swallow was similar in shape to a Violet-green, but was perhaps slightly larger. The tail was not noticeably forked. The upperparts showed some iridescent greenish, but were not as bright as on a male Violet-green, nor as olivaceous as on a female. The sides of the rump were mottled whitish, but it was not possible to determine whether or not this covered the entire rump. The underparts were white or nearly so. The head, chin and throat were washed entirely with warm ochre-buff, with a crown patch of iridescent greenish (Figures 2 and 3). There was at least a partial collar of white extending around the nape. The iris was dark brown, and the bill and feet dark. The bird was not heard calling.

The plumage pattern and greenish iridescence suggest a Violet-green x Cliff Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina* x *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*). It was very similar to a Violet-green Swallow in its appearance and behaviour at a nest site. The warm buff colouring should eliminate all but Cliff, Barn (*Hirundo rustica*), and the geographically unlikely Cave (*Petrochelidon fulva*) swallows. The behaviour at the nestbox, and unforked tail do not suggest Barn Swallow, whereas the buff forehead and throat suggest that one of the parents was a Cliff Swallow. During a visit to Victoria in November 2001, field guide author David A. Sibley examined my slides of this bird and agreed that it was probably a Violet-green x Cliff Swallow, although commenting that field marks alone could not eliminate Cave Swallow as a potential parent.

Terres (1980) reported single records of hybrid Cliff x Barn Swallows and Cliff x Tree (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* x *Tachycineta bicolor*) Swallows. More recently, a shift in habitat use by Cave Swallows has been accompanied by localized hybridization between them and Barn Swallows in Texas culverts (Martin and Selander 1975; Martin 1980), and an extralimital Violet-green Swallow bred with a Tree Swallow in Illinois, apparently without producing young (Johnson and Moskoff 1995). Johnson and Moskoff (1995) also mentioned a report of a female Violet-green Swallow copulating with a male Barn Swallow, but no such observation is mentioned in the source (Gullion 1947) cited by them. No previous reports of hybrids between Cliff and Violet-green swallows appear to have been published (Brown *et al.* 1992; Brown and Brown 1995; C. R. Brown personal communication; Pyle 1997).

The visit by this apparent hybrid swallow apparently had no ill effect on the survival of the young in this box, as they fledged successfully.

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Figure 2: Apparent hybrid swallow at entrance to nest box. Saanichton, B.C. 2 July 2000.



Figure 3: Apparent hybrid swallow on roof of garage, Saanichton, B.C. 2 July 2000