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# Protecting The Wild Things at Wilder

*By Chris Lavin*



A juvenile swallow waits for a meal from mom or dad at the Wilder sports complex in Orinda. You know that it's a juvenile, according to birder Erica Rutherford, because of the yellow lines across its bill. Soon it will fledge and leave the nest. Photo Chris Lavin

With civilization encroaching on lots of land throughout Lamorinda, it's no surprise that a protected band of cliff swallows has taken up residence at the sports complex in the Wilder housing development in Orinda, seeking out their personal territory. They are living right over bathrooms, not something humans would necessarily choose, but it suits their needs just fine.

"This Spanish architecture is perfect for them," said Erica Rutherford, a birder who lives in Oakland but frequents the Wilder territory. She started pointing out the supports for the roof of the bathroom and the substructure, getting about as excited as one of the swallows flying by her head. "This emulates exactly what their natural environment would be, on a cliff, protected by an overhang."

Unfortunately, the swallows' new environs at the bathrooms are also directly adjacent to the Wilder sports complex, home to soccer, baseball and other child-related activities. While most of the human homes in the area are still unbuilt, the swallows have built their own condo complex beneath the eaves of the human-built bathrooms, and some of the nests have been knocked down and destroyed.

"Maybe by baseball bats," said Rutherford, surveying the damage and detritus on the ground. "This doesn't look natural."

Like other natural occurrences in the natural environment, cliff swallows have remained, with their cousins the barn swallows, living in the nooks and crannies of Lamorinda's historic cliffs and wallows. But when a new sports facility crops up in the midst of their environment, a new condo-like development of birds is not uncommon. The community is diverse, as well - one team of Western bluebirds has taken charge of one of the swallows' nests and is now raising their own young in one of them.

"This is a perfect environment for them," Rutherford said of all the birds under the eaves, as she watched a bluebird flying into one of the nests built by swallows. (Bluebirds are one thing. When asked about the difference between a cliff swallow and a barn swallow, Robinson said barn swallows used partly hay to build their nests.) The problem is the Orinda nests are being destroyed, and it's nesting season. The Audubon Society, the City of Orinda, and birders are worried.

"We are concerned about it," said Alex Ramirez, of the Orinda Parks Department, who came by to survey the damage to the nests. The sports facility is on Orinda city land, so he can do something about protecting it. Talking with the activists, a plan was concocted to put up an interpretational sign that would explain why there is bird poop on the ground near the bathrooms, and why the birds should be protected. "I'm definitely interested in protecting these guys," said Ramirez.

Cliff swallows are fast, small darting-like birds that flit by in less than a second. They are all around cliffs. They nest in crevices and need a water source, like a creek nearby, to build their houses. They take up a hunk of dirt, said Rutherford, put some water in their bills, then deposit the bit of gunk on their nests. Thus, home is built of what looks like chewed pieces of gum stacked atop.

All that cliff swallows need is available at the Wilder sporting grounds - a nearby creek, dirt, and overhangs. The message is: Please do not disturb them.



Nesting cliff swallows at a separate location, outside of Wilder. Photo John Ehrenfeld

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