

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

A CAVE SWALLOW EVENT ALONG NEW YORK'S LAKE ONTARIO SHORE

The morning of 23 November 2010 dawned a balmy 50° F with a forecasted high of 60-65° F at Hamlin Beach State Park, Monroe County, New York. It was partly cloudy with a SE wind at 5-7 m.p.h. By 9:15 the wind had switched to SSW at 10-20 m.p.h. in front of a fairly strong cold front. It was the classic set-up, a low pressure system riding a strong jetstream flow out of the northern Mexico/Southwestern U.S. area. In past years, weather like this had preceded incursions of Cave Swallows along the Lake Ontario shore (Spahn & Tetlow, 2006, *Kingbird* 56: 216-225)—but always from late October through mid-November, never this late. The question was would Cave Swallows come this late into the fall?

The answer came at 9:30 when five Cave Swallows passed Hamlin Beach heading west. Over the next hour and 42 minutes a total of 46 birds was counted, all heading west. At approximately 11:20 the front passed, switching the wind to the NW at 15-25 m.p.h. and dropping the temperature 10° F in about one minute. After about 30 more minutes of watching, it appeared that the flight was over as no birds were observed. At that point I decided to go west along the lakeshore to see if any birds may have stopped anywhere to feed.

Travelling west along the Lake Ontario State Parkway, a flock of 11 birds was encountered heading west on a line about 0.5 miles inland from the Lake Ontario shore. The birds at Hamlin Beach had all been on a line anywhere from 100 feet out over the water to about 300 yards from the shore. So as we have seen in the past, wind direction and speed definitely influence what line these birds take when moving. Going as far west as Oak Orchard River, which is approximately 15 miles west of Hamlin Beach, only one bird was encountered flying west past the river. Checking for feeding birds in the gorge proved fruitless. A decision was made to go back east and pick a vantage point 0.5 miles from the shore and see if any birds were still moving on this line. This proved to be the right choice. Between 12:15 and 2:36 a total of 111 birds was seen heading west. These would be the last westbound birds seen on this day.

At 2:54, 16 birds were seen and heard moving east in a tight, swirling ball. This configuration was contrary to the typical one, a line of birds all streaming in one direction. Nine minutes later a ball of 14 was seen and heard moving east. It was assumed at this point that the birds were done moving for the day and were now looking for a place to roost. The vocalizing was undoubtedly the birds communicating this to each other. About 10 minutes later, 25+ birds appeared swirling and calling. This time they paused and checked out the parkway bridge where all of the afternoon observations had taken place. These birds moved on after a few minutes and were never found to have used this particular bridge to roost under.

Again a decision was made to move on and check other bridges for roosting Cave Swallows. Six bridges were checked and birds were found under all but one. On these bridges a total of over 110 birds were encountered. Unfortunately, darkness did not allow for a thorough check of all parkway bridges that evening. That night a morning roost departure survey was organized, with individuals stationed at as many bridges as possible. Eleven bridges, spanning approximately 80 miles along the lakeshore, were observed from before first light through sun-up. Only five bridges had birds on them that morning, with a total of only 39 birds counted. Several of the bridges that had the most birds on them at dusk the evening before had none the next morning! Where did these birds go? What time did they leave the bridges? Unfortunately we cannot answer these questions. There was a nearly full moon with scattered clouds that night that produced extremely bright nighttime conditions. Speculation is that these birds left after getting some rest because it was certainly bright enough for them to see. This raises yet another question. Were the birds that left that night in better shape and less stressed than the ones that stayed, or the other way around? After more than a decade of these late fall movements of Cave Swallows, there are still probably more questions than answers surrounding these birds.

On 25 November, residual birds were found at three locations. One of these was a water treatment facility where 16 birds were present. These birds gradually succumbed to the weather, with three birds surviving until 5 December. These birds were viewed at close range for long periods of time allowing for excellent study. All birds displayed obvious retained juvenile flight feathers, coverts, and scapulars contrasting with fresh feathers, presumably indicating hatch-year birds. We hope to learn more in the near future to help answer all of our questions regarding these rather remarkable avian events. Thanks to Doug Daniels, Kurt Fox, Kim Hartquist, Jerry Lazarczyk, Celeste Morien, Dominic Sherony, Jeanne Skelly, and Kim Sucy for helping on the bridge surveys. Thanks to Andy Guthrie for reviewing a draft of this article.

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