

Bird, building balance sought

Returning cliff swallows find human neighbors at odds over nests

By Earl Bates

OVN contributor

When "The Swallows of Ojai" recently completed their annual return pilgrimage to their modern two-story stucco cliff dwelling at 402 W. Ojai Ave. they were barred by nets and wires from entering their ancestral nesting sites under the eaves of the building.

"It's so sad to watch these birds arrive, they have traveled thousands of miles to get here," said Cher Batchelor, an ecologist working at David Magney Environmental Consulting, an occupant of an upstairs office of this building that has been a preferred nesting site for many generations of cliff swallows.

The swallows hatched last year at these nesting sites left Ojai, perhaps in September, flew with their families to wintering grounds in Latin America and possibly as far as Peru or Chile. They return to Ojai and their exact nesting spots each spring.

The swallows delicately constructed mud nests, about 30 of them, were cleaned from under the eaves of this building while the birds were wintering down south this year. Then, the building was painted and a system of more than 40 exclusion devices, constructed from wires,



Photo by Brooks Smothers

A CLIFF SWALLOW rebuilds its nest under an eave at 402 W. Ojai Ave.

netting and an assortment of fastening hardware, was installed under the eaves in an attempt to keep the swallows from reconstructing their nests.

"That was pretty extreme," said Ken Niessen, Ojai resident and biologist at David Magney Environmental Consulting.

Shari Skinner, chief executive

officer and president of the new Ojai Community Bank, also a tenant in the building, responded, "We asked the owner of the building to consider swallow mitigation because they were making it extremely

Please see Swallows, Page A-3

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Swallows:

(Continued from Page A-1)

unsanitary across the front of the building. We asked her to do something to protect us from the mess that happened. It's very difficult to run a business that's covered with bird droppings."

The cliff swallows present no health hazard, according to Carl G. Thelander, biologist, ornithologist and owner of BioResource Consultants, and also a tenant in an office of the building. The birds' droppings could be washed off the building periodically and the entryways to the building could be protected by awnings, without interfering with the swallows' nests, he suggested.

"These are 'The Swallows of Ojai,'" he said, adding that they are a source of natural wonder and inspiration for many people and they perform a valuable community service by eating huge numbers of insects, including mosquitoes that could carry diseases including West Nile virus.

"It adds so much character to the building to have these birds here," said David Magney, president of David Magney Environmental Consulting. "All of my employees enjoy these birds. To me, the swallows are an asset to the community, they add to the biodiversity."

The wires and screens that have been installed under the eaves are not a solution. "It's not doing any good," Magney said. "The swallows will probably nest here anyway and it would be easier for the swallows to nest

without the wire."

Swallows are known to be very persistent; if the nests they used last season are damaged or missing, they typically go to work collecting little bits of mud and start rebuilding.

"The swallows have been checking out their old nesting site at the bank for several days, but today they are finally putting the mud up there," said Ojai architect Jon Dieges. He stopped by early this week to do some banking and visit the swallows. He found the swallows were rebuilding close to and sometimes in the recently installed wires and netting. "When I was there about noon they had already put a few square inches of mud at each nest location."

"I have no idea what the bank is going to do, the wire they designed is totally useless, it didn't deter the swallows at all,"

said Dieges.

"We need to understand the concerns of the community around this issue of the swallows," responded Bill Sechrest, one of seven board members of the Ojai Community Bank. "We want to do anything we can to accommodate the community and the birds, but at the same time there is the issue of people being inconvenienced by the droppings, so we have to find a balance."

"If the netting is not working, and if it's also creating a problem in the community, that's something we surely need to take into account," Sechrest continued. "It's a community issue and we have a certain amount of control, the landlord and the other tenants also have a say in this; it will have to be something of a joint effort if anything can be done."