THE TRUTH IS HERE

ABOUT THE RETURN OF OUR SWALLOWS

Yes, it is true, urbanization has caused a reduction of swallows at the Mission in recent years, but they are beginning to return and build nests—thanks to the Swallows Vocalization Project that began in 2012.

The vocalization project, now in its third year, will commence on February 1st when speakers playing swallows courtship calls and songs will be erected behind the Fuerte Serra statute on the Mission grounds.

The idea came from swallows expert Dr. Charles Brown, who was summoned to the Mission in 2012 from the University of Talca, where he is a professor of biological sciences.

Dr. Brown’s idea is to lure the swallows using recorded courtship calls and songs that have worked. Swallows that were flying overhead and might not have found the Mission and considered it as a place to nest are now descending to the Mission grounds and building nests.

“The recording is of courtship songs that males use to attract females. And males would be attracted too because they are very social birds,” Dr. Brown said. “It’s a matter of attracting them to where we know they are overhead and in the area.”

Dr. Brown will be at Mission San Juan Capistrano to give a lecture on March 39 during the St. Joseph’s Day and the Return of the Swallows celebration.

HISTORY OF ST. JOSEPH’S DAY AND THE RETURN OF THE SWALLOW

The swallows are said to migrate annually to Goya, Argentina in October, and to return to their spring and summer home in San Juan Capistrano each March.

The Swallows Celebration began centuries ago when Mission padres observed that the birds return roughly coincided with St. Joseph’s Day on the church calendar, March 19. The celebration has achieved international prominence since then.

In his book, Capistrano Nights, Father St. John O’Sullivan, Pastor of Mission San Juan Capistrano 1910-33, relates how the swallow’s return is the first sign of spring to the Mission home.

One day, while walking through town, Fr. O’Sullivan saw a shopkeeper, broomstick in hand, knocking down the conically shaped mud nests that were under the eaves of his shop. The birds were darting back and forth through the air squaling over the destruction of their homes.

“What in the world are you doing?” Fr. O’Sullivan asked.

“Why, these dirty birds are in my eaves and I am getting rid of them!” the shopkeeper responded.

“T’ll tell you why,” Fr. O’Sullivan replied.

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” he replied, shading away with his pole. “But they’re no business here, destroying my property” Fr. O’Sullivan then said, “Come on swallow, I’ll give this bird how it’s made.”

“T’ll tell you why,” Fr. O’Sullivan replied.

“There’s room enough there for all.”

The very next morning, the padre discovered the swallows busy building their nests outside the newly restored sacristy of Father Serra’s Church. Another favorite spot was the ruins of the Great Stone Church, which was once lined with hundreds of swallows’ nests.

Fr. O’Sullivan noticed that the small birds migrated south in the autumn and returned to the mission in spring on St. Joseph’s Day, March 19th. Upon their arrival, the swallows immediately went to work patching up their old nests, building new ones, and disputing possession of others with “vagrant sparrows families” as they may have taken up illegal quarter there during the swallows’ absence.

With a great flitter of wings, the swallows would peck at the soil, fly with their beaks and mud from the Mission lagoon to the northeast of the buildings. Using the water they made a paste of the earth in their beaks, amid more flittering of wings to the points where they then flew to the eaves of the Mission to deliver their loads of mud plaster for the walls of their inverted houses, and, as O’Sullivan observed, “receive the zealous congratulations of their mates.”

Join us Swallows Day March 19th, annually!