The meaning of the swallow to San Juan Capistrano — symbolic, educational or a reflection of our community?

During this time of the year, all who love and support the historic landmark, Mission San Juan Capistrano, are infused to the core with the idea of "homecoming" of "freedom of flight," "freedom of faith," "stalima," or the "renewal," "love" and "family building." It has been well over 100 years since the swallow's first fall was first captured on the cover of Leon Rene's hit album, "Swallow". Ever since, this small agricultural community was an area over and over the decades, the birds' image continued to appear in graphic themes, songs, and even fashion styles. For the Mission, the signature swallow depicted in graphic form always has been the in-flight fork tail swallow. This swallow is also used to place with the Mission's Silver Anniversaries as well as its 150th year. Perhaps generations ago, those focusing on developing the town's commercial area would use these graphics to build upon this swallow image. There has never been a record as to why the fork tail version is preferred, but just that it was. From staff's research, the Mission knows that this type of swallow art is unique to the Mission San Juan Capistrano brand because of its popularity in the 1950s and usage in vintage and historic memorabilia. Maybe there were concerns at some point that in using another graphics version of the bird, folks would certainly think of them as sparrow or doves. We know that if you visit the Antique Barn in historic downtown, you will see scores of historic postcards that use this very image. As a result, the American public, and even the world at large, have come to associate the Mission San Juan Capistrano landmark as the home of these famed birds.

In consulting with bird experts, the Mission has learned that there are actually three kinds of swallows in the area, and even the fork tailed swallow exists locally. This knowledge has come as a surprise and is one of the reasons the Mission contracts with ornithologists to ensure it properly understands the status of these birds in our community.

However, in the community there has never been a mandate that everyone do the same thing and use the same swallow. Perhaps there is an element on the part of the community to have its own unique symbol. For instance, today one can see the swallow in all of its diversity on such businesses and images or logos at L'Illorredella Restaurant Mission Hacienda Plaza Public traffic signals at key intersections in downtown Interstate 5 freeway walls Downtown Directional Signs Las Colinas Banners Fongl Assoc logo Fiesta Association logo World Famous Baja Restaurant Swallows Inn The San Juan Chamber of Commerce Ortega's Trading Post Whichever the Mission is focused on the environmental message and habitat protection for these birds, the organization uses the photo images of the birds that they themselves select. Whatever the swallow, its history or the demands for some sense of perceived accuracy, we believe the public and the locals specifically are smart enough to differentiate "ear" versus "swall." For instance, the public does not misunderstand the California bear shown on freeway off-ramp signs as a literal interpretation of the California bear sketch on the front of the Elliot Heit cover that appears on home decor items sold at discount stores as the actual real Elliot Heit "bear art." Indeed, the birds have a strong image here and it is key.

What matters in this discussion is ensuring that we do our part to protect the habitat, the traditions and the meaning of the birds and their relationship to the identity of this community. This effort can be done by showcasing the unique characteristics of our feathered friends. The swallow image is as diverse and eclectic as the history and people of this community.