

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW NESTING IN AN AMERICAN BEAVER LODGE

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Of the seven swallows found in British Columbia, the Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) is the most overlooked species. Although fairly common throughout its breeding range across southern portions of the province, little is known about its nesting behaviour. In fact, much of the breeding information for this species is still derived from a detailed study in Michigan over 45 years ago (Lunk 1962).

The Northern Rough-winged Swallow is a burrow-nesting species that nests singly or in small groups and prefers vertical surfaces (Dejong 1996). In British Columbia, natural burrows may occur in cutbanks, gravel pits, and sea cliffs. It is also an

adaptable species and in recent years, nests have been found in crevices and cavities in human-made sites such as buildings, bridge abutments, rock walls, drainage pipes, abandoned blasting drill holes, sawdust piles, and occasionally nest boxes (Campbell et al. 1997).

While surveying nesting waterbirds near Ahbau Creek, British Columbia, on 3 July 2007 I noticed a Northern Rough-winged Swallow fly from the vicinity of an American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) lodge with a fecal sac and drop it in the water about 20 m away. Since there were no vertical surfaces nearby that could contain a nesting burrow I decided to watch for additional swallow activity. Over the next 15 minutes I observed two adults flying and foraging over the marsh. One swallow soon returned with food and disappeared into the top of the beaver lodge (Figure 1). Shortly afterwards it flew out with another fecal sac and dropped it in the water some distance away.



Figure 1. American Beaver lodge (left side of photograph) used as a nesting site for a pair of Northern Rough-winged Swallows. Ahbau Creek, BC. 1 July 2007 (R. Wayne Campbell). BC Photo 3554.

Being curious I waded out to the beaver lodge and discovered a small burrow among sticks within 0.1 m (1 ft) from the top of the lodge and 1.8 m (6 ft) above the water. The burrow was excavated in a layer of soft, dry mud surrounded by dry *Sphagnum* moss that was packed between many overlapping sticks and twigs (Figure 2). I checked the burrow and



Figure 2. Northern Rough-winged Swallow nest burrow near the top of an American Beaver lodge. Ahbau Creek, BC. 1 July 2007 (R. Wayne Campbell). BC Photo 3554.

found five nestlings, about four days old, resting on a small pad of dry grass stems and leaves. The burrow, about 0.3 m (14 in) long, angled slightly upward to end in the nest chamber.

It is not known if the swallows actually excavated the burrow, if some other animal was responsible, or if it was a natural structure that was created when the lodge was being built by the beavers. Lunk (1962) suggests that the Northern Rough-winged Swallow does not excavate its own burrow although recently Peck and James (1987) suggest that at times the species does excavate its nest burrow.

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