

by Mike Danzenbaker

There are some groups of birds that are somehow underwatched by most birders. Swallows are one such group. In most places, and during much of the year, they are conspicuous and fairly easily “ticked” by birders seeking more interesting things. The fact that they are numerous, especially near breeding areas and at some locations on passage, contributes to their often being passed over. And yet, some of them are among the most brilliantly colored of all birds. But their stunning appearance is difficult to appreciate. Much of the time, they are flying around erratically, more often than not in unfavorable light, making them difficult to follow in one’s binoculars. At other times, they are hiding at their nest sites, usually cavities of one kind or another where the birds are mostly hidden from view.

It is a recurring goal of mine as a photographer to obtain images of difficult-to-observe birds doing what they do. Sometimes this means hiding, sometimes swimming, sometimes running, but in the case of swallows it means flying. Swallows are consummate fliers. They depend on their ability to maneuver in the air to catch all of their food. They need to fly fast and be able to change direction severely and abruptly when the most golden-snitch-like of insects pass by. My hope was (and continues to be) to make images of swallows in flight. I try especially for banking dorsal views, because in most cases these best show the brilliant colors.

In the case of the cover photo of a Violet-green Swallow, I was out walking one evening at a location where a pair of White-tailed Kites was feeding fledglings. I was trying to scout out the right time and place to photograph the kites.

While there, I was distracted by a group of swallows feeding around the slope of a distant hill. Quickly losing interest in the recalcitrant kites, I went over there to check things out. I spent a little time trying to figure out where to stand so that I might have some chances at a flyby in good light. Nothing really worked out that evening, but I returned the next evening. And the next. And the next. Still not having any particular success, I decided to try the site in the morning and was pleasantly surprised to find the activity a little more concentrated and the flight paths a little more predictable. The ideal photographic situation for for-



aging swallows is for them to be flying in something of a loop, and for the photographer to be able to situate himself or herself in the middle of the loop, so that at some point in the loop the birds will be in good light, and in the course of turning to follow their circuit will bank to show their upperparts.

After a couple of morning visits, I’d decided on the optimal place to stand. The birds sometimes flew by me close enough that my usual 500mm lens was too much, so I switched to a 300mm. Each morning I got a little closer to what I was trying for, but it wasn’t until about ten visits later that I managed pretty much what I’d envisioned: a male Violet-green completely banked, tail fanned, and in the right light to show off its incredible colors. What a privilege it is to be in the company of creatures like these, and to be allowed to share what I saw with others.

More photography by Mike Danzenbaker is available online <avesphoto.com>.