

## Life and Death in a Cliff Swallow Colony

by Nikki Weaver

While many San Diegans were mildly annoyed with this year's prolonged "May gray/June gloom" weather conditions, it was another story at the Discovery Center. For the staff and volunteers at the Center the unusually long period of damp, cool and overcast days resulted in a deeply moving first-hand experience of the profound impact climate change can have on delicate ecological systems. Those of you who have visited the Discovery Center know that we have a very large colony of cliff swallows who nest here in the spring and summer, at times numbering as high as 500 birds. These busy birds have been a source of awe and delight for Center visitors, passersby and cars driving past on Cannon Road.. However, our daily dose of entertainment was severely impacted one day in early June when staff arrived to find over a hundred dead birds – babies, fledglings and adults - on the grounds and garden around the Discovery Center. While we were able to save about a dozen birds, in the ensuing days close to 1/3 of the colony's population of approximately 500 birds were found dead. After many phone calls, internet research and consultations with wildlife experts, we learned that the die-off was called "colony collapse" and was a result of the prolonged cool weather and accompanying moisture. Swallows must catch and eat a thousand insects a day to feed themselves and their babies. While the Center's native garden and the nearby wildlife preserve offer an ample supply of insects, in cool weather insects stay near the ground where it is harder for swallows to catch them. Even in warm weather, some swallows do not catch enough insects to survive. In prolonged cool weather, starvation can occur within 48 hours. In addition, the light rain and sustained moist air resulted in the collapse of many of the mud nests containing the baby birds, causing them to fall to the concrete below. All in all, it was an emotional experience that reminded us of how life in the wild hangs in a balance so delicate, that an event only slightly inconsequential to the human species can result in death on a massive scale for others.