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GWICH'IN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: BANK  
SWALLOW

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# GWICH'IN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: BANK SWALLOW

## INTRODUCTION

In February of 2015, the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI) received a request from the Gwichya Gwich'in Renewable Resources Council (GGRRC) to provide Gwich'in traditional knowledge on Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*), from their existing digital archives. The GSCI's archives contain transcripts and other research materials from numerous projects, including place names, oral history, ethno-archaeology, traditional ecological knowledge (TK), and many others. The archives were searched using ISYS search software, and information relating to swallows was extracted and summarized by the GSCI. Search terms included "swallow" and "bird *NEAR* cliff."

**There have been no Gwich'in TK projects which focussed on bank swallows or even birds, and as such, it is likely that there is much more comprehensive Gwich'in TK which has not been recorded.**

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**The GSCI would like to thank the Elders and harvesters who have graciously provided their knowledge through interviews and workshops throughout the years. *Mahsi' chool!***

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## GWICH'IN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: BANK SWALLOW

Several types of swallows come to the Gwich'in area in the summer. Gwich'in interviewees tend to refer to them as 'swallows' in general, or 'cliff swallows', 'bank swallows' or 'tree swallows.' The barn swallow is also known for making nests on buildings in Inuvik. There is a Gwich'in name for Swallows in both Gwich'in dialects spoken in the NWT (Table 1).

TABLE 1. BANK SWALLOW TRANSLATIONS IN GWICH'IN DIALECTS<sup>1</sup>

Name	Dialect	Translation
chehtsadh neet'aa	Gwichya Gwich'in dialect, spoken in the community of Tsiigehtchic	(Tree, bank, or cliff swallow) Literal translation: unknown.
shehtsoo vee	Teet'it Gwich'in dialect, spoken in the community of Fort McPherson	(Bank or tree swallow) Literal translation: 'Along the light colored gravel.'

## MIGRATION

Swallows migrate into the Gwich'in settlement area, arriving in the spring time and leaving again in the fall. They're usually the last birds to come and they're usually the first ones to leave. **"Swallows this year, I never noticed too many, again. They come in the spring too. Then they leave about, August 10<sup>th</sup>, you'll start seeing them bunching up on the wires and ... getting ready to take off. All this about the 10th, after the 10th you don't see them."**<sup>2</sup>

When swallows migrate south, they leave at around the same time. Before they leave, they start to congregate in bunches. **"Well, any bird is like that. Even these little spring birds ... seagulls you notice them in the fall in August, late in August. You're going to see them, even swallows you're going to see ...them bunch up, you notice swallows bunch up towards fall time in August. Well, they're getting ready to migrate."**<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> From Gwich'in Topical Dictionary 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 2009. Gwich'in Teaching and Learning Centre.

<sup>2</sup> Gwich'in TK of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area (GSCI) Alan Koe, Aklavik, November 17, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Gwich'in Environmental Knowledge Project (GRRB) Alan Koe, Aklavik, 05/15/96



Swallows, along with many other birds, seem to leave the area very suddenly.

*[Robins] sing all summer long and all at once, by fall time, it disappears. It takes off back south and you don't hear [them any]more. Same with every other bird, like loons and stuff, you can hear them back in the lakes all summer. All at once they disappear and that means they're going back down south. Their work up here is finished for them for the year and they go back down south. You always see [robins] every spring – when swallows start flying, you see robins and everything. Funny how they come all the way up here to raise their young. By fall they all disappear. Like swallows, and everything too you see the power line just full of swallows and all at once by mid-summer they all disappear. Some of them come from long ways. Some of them birds are from way down [in] South America and that. Just imagine how far up they fly to get here.*<sup>4</sup>

## POPULATION TREND

Interviewees had differing ideas about whether or not there has been changes in the population of small birds such as songbirds and swallows, in the area. Some felt that these birds were stable or unchanged.<sup>5</sup> Some felt that the population declined in recent history, but that it has started to rebound.

**Songbirds? Well for a long time...they weren't singing like they used to, like when I was a kid in ... the fifties and even sixties, there were a lot of birds and birds singing... And the last ten years or so, there weren't that many. But there's starting to be a little bit more birds, like this summer [2004]. They must be coming back, too. Robins and all kinds of different birds, you know, the sparrows and swallows—there's quite a bit of swallows around, too—bank swallows and tree swallows... Yeah, there's lots of bank swallows—more bank swallows...there's a few tree swallows—they're kind of a blue colour.**<sup>6</sup>

Some interviewees felt that swallows have experienced a decline in population. **"In the spring, there use to be [swallows]. Now, there's none."**<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gwich'in Environmental Knowledge Project (GRRB) Charlie Stewart, Aklavik, 02/17/98

<sup>5</sup> Gwich'in TK of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area (GSCI) Russell Andre , Tsiigehtchic, November 2, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Gwich'in TK of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area (GSCI) Willie Simon, Inuvik, November 23, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Gwich'in TK of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area (GSCI) Pierre Benoit, Inuvik General Hospital, November 25, 2004.



*And summer birds, we get all type of birds which we don't see anymore. A lot of them, there used to be a lot of summer birds, but not anymore. The robins, it used to be noisy with them. You don't hardly hear them anymore. You get the swallows, the little canary, the little yellow birds, [you] used to see a lot of them. You don't see them anymore too.<sup>8</sup>*

## DISTRIBUTION

Interviewees most often see bank swallows **“in...banks, cut banks and river banks I see lots in most of the places around. I see it in the Mackenzie, too.”<sup>9</sup>**

## PREDATION

Swallows are hunted by other birds, likely including ravens and eagles. **“They just [go] inside of the swallow nest and they just eat it; kill them. Yeah,...there are birds like that.”<sup>10</sup>**

## SOURCES

Interview transcripts from the following projects were accessed for this report:

1. ***Gwich'in Environmental Knowledge Project*** (GEKP). Led by the Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board, interviews for this project ran from around 1995 to 1998. The focus of the project was Gwich'in Environmental Knowledge.
2. ***Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area***. Led by the GSCI, interviews for this project were conducted in 2004 and 2005. The focus of the project was Gwich'in knowledge and traditional use.



<sup>8</sup> Gwich'in TK of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area (GSCI) Peter Ross, Tsiighehtchic, December 14, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Gwich'in TK of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area (GSCI) Fred B. Jerome, Inuvik, November 26, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Gwich'in TK of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area (GSCI) Fred B. Jerome, Inuvik, November 26, 2004.

