

Chaetura

SPRING 2004

Driftwood Wildlife Association

Volume 9 Issue 1



Anyone who builds a Chimney Swift Tower knows first-hand that it is a whole lot more work than hanging out a nest box for wrens, attaching a bluebird box to a post or even setting up a Purple Martin house. And after all of that work, there is still no guarantee that the swifts will actually use it right away. However, the old adage of “patience is a virtue” seems to apply to those of us who build Chimney Swift towers.

Several towers that were built when the Nest Site Research Project was young and stood vacant for years were active for the first time in 2003 — including the prototype Kiosk Tower at the Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory in Austin, TX.

If you have the interest, the time and the will ... build a Chimney Swift tower in a community park, at a school or in your backyard. When the swifts do come, you will be glad you made the effort.

Paul Kyle, Editor

A Community for Chimney Swifts

In the fall of 2002, the Lower Colorado River Authority’s (LCRA) Thomas C. Ferguson Power Plant’s Clean Texas Committee was looking for additional environmental outreach projects in which to become involved. The committee is a citizen advisory panel established by Ferguson staff as part of Ferguson’s involvement in the Clean Texas program operated by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

In Granite Shoals, Texas, the Highland Lakes Elementary School was beginning to develop a nature trail and outdoor classroom on its campus. The school had several acres of undeveloped land at the edge of its property. The students put in a nature trail and have worked to bring in wildlife and restore species diversity. The Clean Texas program at Ferguson knew of the work the Driftwood Wildlife Association (DWA) was doing at other LCRA areas for creating habitat for Chimney Swifts. The wildlife association was asked to come and evaluate the school trail for nesting sites and identified two sites. The Ferguson Clean Texas program then went looking for a partner to sponsor building a tower and found one with the Marble Falls High School construction technology class. The teacher of the class was approached and asked to look at the plans and determine whether the project would fit into his teaching program. The teacher thought it would be a great project for his students. The teacher, Mr. David Smith commented, “The Chimney Swift nesting and roosting tower has many facets of construction that I could not show my students without building a whole house. This project is great for my classes and for the birds!”

The tower was completed and erected in April of 2003. The third grade class then researched the swifts and reported to the other grades what they had learned.

Students drew pictures of the swifts in various stages of life and put them up on the kiosk panels of the tower.

In October, the tower was checked for swift occupation and a partially built nest was discovered. But no birds hatched, most likely due to fire ant



(Continued on page 9)



Report From Chaetura Canyon

Chimney Swift research began at Chaetura Canyon in 1989 with the construction of two large wooden towers. After 13 years the two structures were beginning to deteriorate, so in October 2002, we began dismantling them. Reconstruction was completed on March 11, 2003. The interior dimensions were increased to 24" x 24" x 20' to accommodate fiberglass drain pans installed at the base. The larger dimensions had the added benefit of providing easier access for our aging bones -- we just aren't as flexible as we were in our 30's. The top openings were reduced to 10" x 15" to limit the amount of direct sunlight and rain that could enter the towers. Since swifts had nested in both of the original towers every year for more than a decade, we assumed that they would readily accept the new structures...but we were not certain.

To date, fifteen structures are available for swift habitation. In 2003, seven of those towers (including the two newly renovated ones) were utilized by swifts. Three of the mated pairs produced two separate clutches of eggs. A grand total of 42 eggs were laid. 35 of those hatched and 32 swifts fledged. Three of the structures are equipped with miniature surveillance cameras providing an intimate yet unobtrusive look into the activities of the swift occupants.

Here and there...

Austin, TX

The Center for Environmental Research at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant now has three swift towers. The prototype design of our kiosk tower was designed for this facility and constructed near the bird blind at the site in 2000. It remained unoccupied...until this year! Two new fledglings were produced. Another kiosk tower adjacent to the management headquarters has been occupied every year. This year, the nesting swifts fledged five young. The family roosted in the structure until the fall in spite of a large nest

of wasps that had built a nest under the top cover of the tower. The third tower, an 8' tall tower was unoccupied.

A twin 8' tower to the Hornsby Bend tower, constructed on the same day, did attract a pair of swifts. The tower is located on the grounds of St. Edward's University. Four of the five eggs laid hatched and fledged.

Carolyn and Pat Powers' patience finally paid off! Swifts nested in their eight-foot tall tower for the first time since its construction in 2000. A nest with 4 eggs was discovered in June. The Powers own and operate Austin

German Chimney Cleaning Company and have been advocates for swift conservation for many years. They are currently working with a neighborhood group to construct a kiosk tower at a new park. "The Austin chapter of the Texas Chimney Sweeping Guild will take on the responsibility for constructing the tower and its annual maintenance."

The Ridgelea Park Kiosk Tower was once again occupied. Three of the four eggs laid hatched and fledged. The garden around the structure attracted butterflies, hummingbirds and many neighborhood residents, as well.

Here and there 1.1



Photo by Brock Hutchins

Fayetteville, GA

Brock Hutchins wrote: "Here is a picture of the Highlands Biological Station Chimney Swift Tower. It was completed in May but there are no Chimney Swifts using it yet. We are having an unusually cold and wet spring. I hope that will change and we can get some nesting swifts."

Huntsville, TX

The tower at Huntsville State Park is "by the nature center and is really being utilized by the swifts. There were a large number there last summer and I think that this will also be the case this summer as well. I hope to have our park naturalist start doing more programs on the tower and the purpose it serves." Oscar Carmona



Photo by Tom Heine

Fairmont, WV

Tom Heine wrote: "I have completed my birdhouse according to your plans for a 12 foot chamber. I extended the legs and buried the reinforced concrete slab in a hole 3 feet deep. The outside is finished in white vinyl siding and corners. A 2 foot wide white aluminum predator guard is at the top. I'll let you know when the swifts find it."

Carters Lake, GA

Paul Jastram reports: "We built and installed 3 additional towers this past winter. We now have 5 on the project. Tower 1: nest was built but the birds did not return. Tower had an empty nest for the rest of the summer. Tower 2: three young hatched on June 27. All fledged. Tower 3: no nest; Tower 4: Four young on June 16. All fledged. Tower 5: Strangest of all: Swifts built a nest and sat on the nest for weeks. No eggs were

in the nest. There was no activity for maybe 2-3 weeks. Then a bird was on the nest again. This time she was sitting on 3 eggs. She abandoned the nest after a few weeks with the eggs still in place. The first week of September, she laid 4 more eggs in the nest. The eggs hatched and she fledged them in late September.

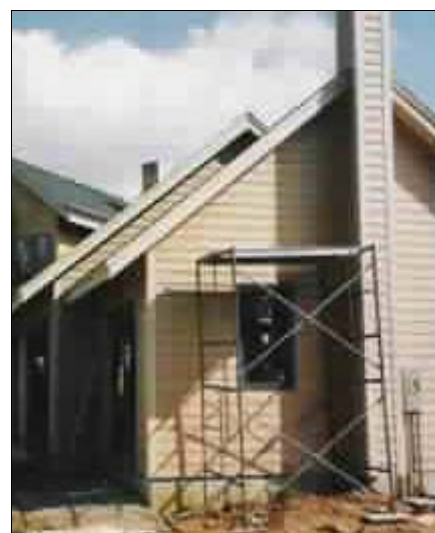


Photo by Grace Storch

Elizabeth, IL

Grace Storch reported "I put up a false chimney on the new house I had built 3 years ago. Chimney Swifts took to it immediately even before the house was finished and seemed excited to find a "home". That first year, heavy rainstorms knocked down part of the nest and 2 nestlings with it, but last year, all seemed well the whole season. I delight in having them around. They have to negotiate a TV antenna to get into the "chimney" but it doesn't seem to bother them."

Here and there 1.2



Photo by Clyde Gurney

Rockland, MA

Clyde Gurney built and donated this 16-foot tall, 13-inch square tower. It is mounted on the side of an old shed at the Daniel Webster Audubon Sanctuary in eastern Massachusetts. Chimney Swifts occupied the tower and raised young.

Liberty, TX

Michael Blessington reported from the Trinity River NWR “I finally had a chance to check our swift box. There was a nest in it, so it is being used [for the second year in a row]. I hope that we will now go forward with a second and third”.

Galveston, TX

Gordon Nunn reported that “we had another nesting – 4 years in a row. We’re doing something right!”

Eastover, SC

William Fick and Mark Johnson have created a backyard wildlife habitat that has been certified by the National Wildlife Federation. “In spring 2003 we found out that Chimney Swifts were quite happy with wooden chimneys, that it was the fires that required bricks. We promptly set out to build them one.”



Photo by Dave Patton

Lafayette, LA

Dave Patton “ran across a large group of Chimney Swifts entering an old chimney on Monday night (June 16). It was the old incinerator behind an abandoned grocery store. The top had rusted off of the steel chimney that was about 2 feet wide and 30 feet tall. The bottom half was the fire box that was about 6 feet square and 12 feet tall. It was completely rusted with the oven door rusted half open and old cardboard box ashes spilling out. It made a perfect roost -- Probably too hot on a sunny summer day for nesting though.”



Photo by Paul Kyle

Bellaire, TX

Staff naturalist Maura Maple at the Nature Discovery Center in Bellaire wrote: “The construction of the tower and kiosk was completed in the Fall and Winter of 2002-2003. The materials were provided by Bellaire Southwest Houston Rotary and the construction was completed as two separate Eagle Scout projects. Materials for the tower and kiosk were supplied by the Bellaire Southwest Houston Rotary Club.”

The chimney swift tower and kiosk were completed in the fall of 2002 (tower) and winter of 2003 (kiosk), hosted a nesting pair in the summer and a fall roost of more than 10 swifts.

Elgin, TX

David Brock again had a successful nest in his 12 foot Textured 1-11 tower attached to a metal roofed outbuilding.

Here and there 1.3



Photo by Brian Bockhan

Wake Forest, NC

Brian Bockhahn, Park Ranger at Falls Lake State Park, contacted us last March. He reported: "I will be installing six towers at the state park picnic shelters. Swifts use our chimneys in the shelters, and get smoked out or worse when the public builds a fire." An update in mid June stated: "Dan Ryan, an eagle scout, did the construction and installed two of them at our picnic shelters, (the ones that had the most mortalities from visitor fires). He built them 5' too tall and max width, which resulted in a monstrosously heavy tower!!!! There were 20 or so folks with ropes and pulleys to get it into place. It was quite an ordeal!!" Then on June 28 Brian reported: "I was pleased today to find that there was ALREADY a nest in one of the towers!! I added it to my research web site project:

<http://www.geocities.com/falarangerbb/chswift>".

We thank all involved for their efforts and dedication to providing safe habitat for Chimney Swifts.



Photo courtesy of John Cely

Columbia, SC

John Cely from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources reported: "Thought you might be interested in having some "positive data" from Columbia. We have swifts currently using one of two towers here at Clemson University's Sandhills Research and Education Center. And I'm chagrined to admit that they were using it last year (2002) as well as evidenced by the old nest that had fallen to the bottom. Somehow the nesting birds gave me the slip last year as I never saw them going in or out.

This tower is 12 feet tall and based on your plans except we used 14 foot 4x4s of treated wood for the corners and anchored them in the ground with cement. I used 1/2 inch square hardware cloth for a bottom and tacked it very securely all around to keep rat snakes out. Finally, I made a removable bottom of plywood to go under the wire bottom to keep it as dark as possible but cut 4 large drain holes to allow water to escape. These drain holes

also created a draft effect and kept the chimney cool. Thanks to Lowe's for donating the materials.

As a wildlife biologist that has specialized in birds for 25+ years, I'm constantly amazed at how little the average public is aware of Chimney Swifts despite their literally living in the same house as us."



Photo courtesy of Alan Stanevich

Beecher, IL

Alan J. Stanevich reports: "I did the project myself, it took some time! My family thought I was crazy, "Wondering if the swifts will come." My brick birdhouse ended up being 20' 5" tall. Outside dimensions of 44 1/4" x 44 1/4"; Inside is 28" x 28"."

Driftwood, TX

Steve Janda's 12 foot tower hosted a mated pair and an additional two helper adults. They raised 4 or 5 nestlings. Steve reported on June 30 that the young were "noisy all day".

Here and there 1.4



Photo courtesy of Mary Penn-Sorano

Staunton, VA

After rehabilitating Chimney Swifts and other species for many years, long-time supporters Mary Penn-Sorano and her husband Bill joined many other of our Research Associates in erecting a tower of their own in 2003.

Holt, MO

Joyce and Bill Rosson's first wooden tower attached to the north side of their metal barn hosted a nesting pair of swifts again this year. "Five eggs were laid, all five hatched and fledged. The nest was built on the same spot for the last five years." Their second tower, on the west side also produced fledglings. "Three eggs were laid, three hatched and fledged. This nest was built in the same spot as last year. We also had two nestlings in our fireplace. It is a brick chimney with rough tile, about 12 feet from the nest area to

the top. The first nesting was in May, the second was in July. It was another productive year for us. No swifts roost in the chimney, they all head for the towers. The North tower hosted 25 to 30 birds; the West tower had up to 300. The towers were occupied for 170 days."



Photo courtesy of Ruth Simmons

Lee's Summit, MO

Inspired by the Rosson's success with Chimney Swift towers, Ruth Simmons hired a builder to construct a tower. The builder made a few modifications to the plans. Ruth stated that the "worst thing I've had to do was pound a long nail, that the builder left sticking out into the nest cavity, back into the wall. I had to stand tippy toe on top of the ladder and swing a sledge hammer (the only thing long enough and heavy enough to do the job) and knock it back into the wall. The swifts must be safe!"

Driftwood, TX

All of the six Chimney Swift nesting towers were used in the spring. Additionally, Ann and Don Connell had an impressive roost of over 180 swifts in September / October.



Photo by Paul Kyle

Johnson City, TX

The Middendorf Tower hosted a swift family. Four eggs were laid and all four hatchlings fledged. The family roosted in the structure throughout the summer and fall. This was the first successful nesting since the tower was built in 1995.

Brighton, IL

A note from professional chimney sweep Paul Hempel of Brushes and Brooms: "I have swifts nesting in BOTH of my chimneys this year. They finally moved into the fireplace chimney and they are also once again nesting in the small, round furnace chimney. We seem to be keeping a group of between 5 and 7 regularly and up to 12 on some days."

Here and there 1.5



Photo courtesy of Mike Hartwick

Turner, OR

Mike Hartwick built a tower for Vaux's Swifts in his back yard. "This was mainly a response to my wife's complaints about the noise from Swifts nesting in our chimney, which I screened. She wasn't terribly thrilled about the tower at first, but she has grown to accept it. Not so with the birds."

"In two years, I haven't witnessed a Swift anywhere near it. I've grown concerned that I did something wrong in the design or the construction of the tower."

"The tower is rough-sawn cedar fence boards on corner struts of cedar 2x4" stock. It's 12' tall, not including the base, and about 18" square. The opening in the top is about 6" x 6". About two dozen assorted bits of cedar scrap are mounted on the inside."

We suggested to Mike that he increase the top opening of the tower to 6" x 12" and encouraged him to remain optimistic.

Naperville, IL

John Adair is a chimney sweep who shared a story about a customer. "They called about birds in the chimney and I was able to identify them quickly. The wife was scared to death about them and did not like it one bit when I told her we had to leave them alone. I gave her the information from your web site that I have used before and changed her mind! After the swifts left in the fall we came to clean out the flue and put a cap on but to our surprise, they decided against the cap. The family enjoyed the birds and now the swifts return every year to the same home and chimney and everyone is happy!"

Round Mountain, TX

A Kiosk Tower built in 2002 at the Westcave Preserve was occupied for the first time by a successful nesting pair. Like several other towers, this one was also occupied by a colony of wasps that built a large nest attached to the inside top of the tower. Because the wasps' activities are in and around the top section of the towers, they apparently have no adverse effect on the nesting swifts.

Austin, TX

For his Eagle Scout project, Nick Austen built a 12' tower at Bartholomew Park. Funding was provided in part by the Austin Parks Foundation — an organization that has helped make several Chimney Swift towers possible in the Texas capital.



Photo courtesy of Cory Croft

Pine Mountain, GA

Cory Croft reports that "... at Callaway Gardens, the tower at the Steeple Chase track has a new nest just below the old nest. There were four fledglings in the nest and one whole egg in the bottom of the tower. The tower at East Farm Barn had one new nest that was in poor condition. The nest was hanging down only connected to the wall by a small section. There were six whole eggs and fragments from approximately four more eggs in the bottom of the tower. We have had unusually high rainfall this year that may have washed out the nest on more than one occasion."



Photo courtesy of Cory Croft



REPORT YOUR SPRING CHIMNEY SWIFT SIGHTINGS

For the fourth year we will be posting and mapping first spring Chimney Swift sightings all across North America. You can follow these sightings as we update the map on the DWA web site. Contact us with your first spring sightings!

Email: DWA@austin.rr.com
Phone: (512) 266-3861

COMING IN 2004

We currently offer a 40 page illustrated booklet entitled "Rehabilitation and Conservation of Chimney Swifts" on the Driftwood Wildlife Association publications page. Coming later in 2004, look for this information to be available in PDF format from:

www.chimneyswifts.org



CHIMNEY SWIFT WEB CAM

For the past 5 years we have been using surveillance cameras to monitor and record the Chimney Swift activity in the Observation Towers at the Mansfield Dam Bird Banding Station. We have recorded remarkable and previously unknown behavior such as aggressive defense of the nest tower by nesting pairs — against other swifts!

The web cam will provide a live feed in real time beginning May 1st and will be active from dawn until dusk (approximately 7:00 am through 8:00 pm CDT). In the event of thunderstorms in our area, it will be shut down.

Visit the Driftwood Wildlife Association web site at
www.chimneyswifts.org
and "bookmark" the Chimney Swift web cam now!

SPREADING THE WORD

We wish to express our gratitude to the many individuals that have helped spread the message of Chimney Swift conservation by providing articles for publication and providing links to the DWA website. Among those in 2003 were:

- *Chimney Swifts are back from the Amazon Basin* by Ro Wauer for *The Advocate*, Victoria, TX
- *Monument for the Birds* by Trina Darling for *The Leader-Herald*, Northville, NY
- *Birds and Birding* - Gary Phillips' weekly column for the *Myrtle Beach Sun News*
- *Chimney Swift* in the Animal Corner Spotlight on Critters in the *Kansas City Star*
- *Area woman says chimney swifts can keep mosquitoes away* by Janese Heavin for *The Kearney Courier*, Kearney, MO
- *My love of Chimney Swifts* by Joyce Rosson for *Nature's Window* the newsletter for Friends of Lakeside Nature Center, Inc. of Kansas City, MO
- *So...what do I say now?* column by Carol Carr concerning Chimney Swifts in the August Volunteer Update for the Friends of Lakeside Nature Center
- *Habitat Highlight*, South Carolina Wildlife Federation *Out of Doors*
- *What's in a Name?* by Ken Damro for *Birdscapes* magazine
- *When Chimney Swifts Return* in *Birders World* magazine
- *A Room with a Flue* by Cynthia Berger for *National Wildlife* magazine
- *There's No Smoke in this Chimney* by Glenn Savage in *Birds and Blooms*

SLIDE PROGRAM



We have a 50-slide presentation complete with a printed narrative to guide you through your own presentation about Chimney Swifts and the North American Chimney Swift Nest Site Research Project. The program includes close ups of nestling, fledgling and adult Chimney Swifts. There are also slides of several of the tower designs which have proved successful. The program is available for rent or purchase. For more information contact Paul or Georgean Kyle by phone or fax at (512) 266-3861 or by e-mail at DWA@austin.rr.com.

(Continued from page 1)

activity. The tower has since been treated with a non-toxic [Tangelfoot] insect barrier.

The Ferguson Clean Texas program and its citizen advisory panel are committed to continued support of environmental outreach programs and are already communicating with Llano High School to construct a chimney swift tower this fall.

LCRA's Thomas C. Ferguson Plant's Clean Texas program is administered through the Environmental Supervisor, Michael Lewis. He can be reached at 830-598-2525.

*Jerry Cunningham
Marble Falls, TX*



TRADITIONAL NESTERS PROJECT

Last year Ken Damro initiated a volunteer research project to locate swift nest or roost sites in hollow snags, stumps, etc. In July 2003 he sent out an update:

“We have recorded our first active traditional Chimney Swift nest site! It was found by Mike Riegert and Jon Zellmer. The active Chimney Swift nest site was in a large hollow maple in the Chequamagon National Forest. Mike was in this particular area performing other bird surveys when he heard and saw a handful of swifts in June. He thought these swifts might be traditional nesters because the nearest human structure was at least a mile or two away. He watched them in June for some time, while they circled the area, faded away and circled the area again. Returning to this spot again in early July, a search for a good-looking snag came up empty. Mike even went to the bother of talking to area farmers to see if they had seen swifts in their chimneys. Almost completely discouraged, Mike decided to return to the area with a fellow birder. There was an old maple tree that he thought could be a nest site, but the opening was at the end of a large lateral limb – an unconventional site to say the least. It wasn't long before they spotted a swift exploding from the huge limb. The swifts returned on average of every 15 minutes to feed young, and stayed in the cavity for less than a minute. Mike said the appearance of the cavity entrance reminded him of a raccoon den opening.

This is a particularly exciting find in that it is located within a tract of managed forest near a swamp. The US Forest Service left this tree standing throughout the years and it paid off in an exceptional tree cavity site. It is my belief and hope that we can create such quality wildlife habitat within managed forests – and this to me, is proof.”



For more information about the project, contact:

Ken Damro at P.O. Box 543

Florence, WI 54121

(715) 696-6630

Traditionalnesters@yahoo.com

GLADYS BLACK MEMORIAL GARDEN in Cora Shadle Park Pleasantville, Iowa



Photos courtesy of Leland and Sally Vander Linden

It was because of an article and then a letter in the *Birds and Bloom* magazine from Joyce Rossen that we became interested in building a tower.

We were looking for something special to be the center of a tribute to a wonderful lady who helped so many students and adults appreciate wildlife in general and birds in particular. In addition, we spent many hours on Leland's mother's front porch across the street from the local schoolhouse watching Swifts do their wonderful dance at dusk before descending into the chimney.

We made a trip to the Rossen's to see their two towers and were duly impressed. We wanted our tower to be different; I hope not too different, but my husband is a contractor and started his business almost 40 years ago as a brick layer; so he thought that the tower would stand up forever. He told the block layers to "slop" plenty of mortar on the inside of the tower for the Swifts to roost.

Gladys Black was an admirer of Althea Sherman, and on one particular book signing trip to Iowa City, IA., she was invited to see the Sherman tower, awaiting funds for rehabilitation in a barn near there. Also, the Iowa Historical Society has devoted a large space in their museum to tell her story and show a giant picture of the tower.

On May 15, 2004, we will dedicate the tower which will feature four permanent sign boards. One will tell about Chimney Swifts and their importance; one will feature silhouettes of birds of our area and their identification; one will tell about Gladys and her lifetime of accomplishments and one will be a donor board to recognize those who contributed to the \$50,000 project. The tower and shelter cost approximately \$20,000 to construct and the sign boards were an additional \$20,000.

We would certainly invite anyone in the area to attend the dedication and then hang around to see if the Swifts are as excited about their new home as we are!

Leland and Sally Vander Linden

A Swift Night Out

A Swift Night Out is a national effort to raise awareness about Chimney and Vaux's Swifts by drawing attention to the spectacle of fall roosts. Swift watchers from 20 states and from Ontario, Canada participated in locating and monitoring communal roosts. In 2003, we selected two weekends for the count. August 14, 15 and 16 were chosen to accommodate counters in the northern reaches of the swifts range. The first weekend in September was designated for the final count.

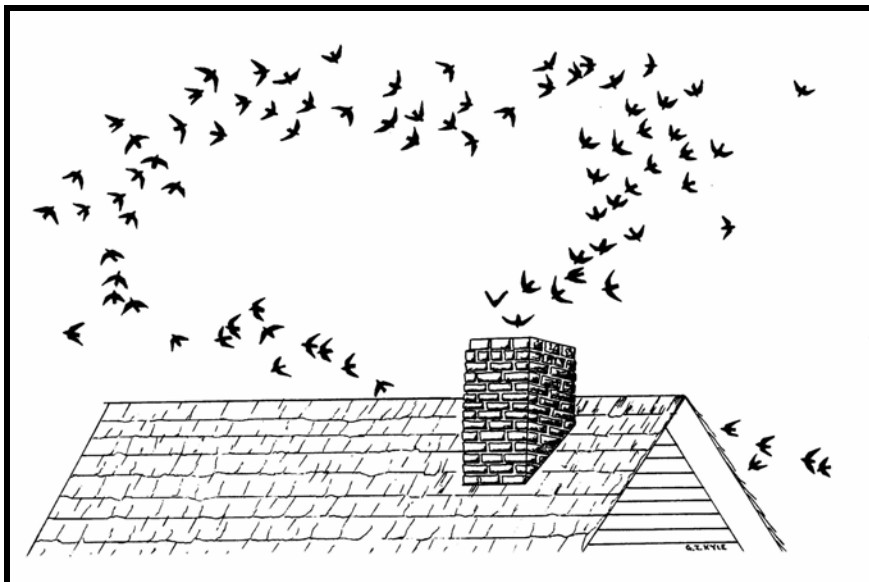
Many participants elected to count different roosts on both weekends. Some chose to count at the same location on multiple days. Following are some of the counts from a single roost. You may find the fluctuations interesting.

	August			September		
	14	15	16	5	6	7
Chapman, OR				5500	9400	6300
Vermillion, SD		~1000			12	
Mt. Vernon, PA	156			1086		
Baltimore, MD				7403	5724	3975
Memphis, TN			426	902		
St. Joseph, MO	~400	~250		760	835	
Fayetteville, SC		475			696	
Travis Co., TX	109		141	142	160	181
Austin, TX			500			1160
Miami, FL					600	1160

We sincerely appreciate all of the interest and time spent from the numerous swift watchers across the country. Many reporters indicated that swift numbers were dramatically reduced compared to previous years.

Mark your calendars now. A Swift Night Out for 2004 will be held on August 13, 14 and 15 and again on September 10, 11 and 12.

The easiest method we have devised in counting swifts entering a roost is by using an athletic lap counter. Each click can indicate an individual or a group of 5, 10 or 20 birds. An alternate method of counting swifts was devised by Dick Tuttle. He "...dropped a penny into a can for every 20 swifts counted. When the birds were finished dropping into the chimney, I counted the pennies and multiplied by 20. This was the best method for me."



For a complete list
of sightings and reports, visit
www.chimneyswifts.org
and click on
A Swift Night Out



Coast to Coast Swift Events

Residents in Northville, NY have been celebrating the return of Chimney Swifts in spring for nearly half a century. “The birds always arrive on May 6th and occupy the Hubbell Chimney. Ray Hubble (born on May 6) owned and operated the Hubble Glove Company. The building was destroyed by fire in January, 1918 leaving only its tall, stately chimney.”

Linda Mosher reports, “...that about 350 swifts utilize the chimney. The town celebrates the swifts return with music, popcorn, cotton candy and a guest speaker. The event ends at about 8:20 when the last birds enter the chimney. There is growing concern about this site. An earthquake caused a split in the top of this privately owned structure. The Historical Society would like to restore and preserve the chimney.” We hope they are successful in their efforts.

On the other side of the country, in Independence, OR, another celebration occurred last fall. The “Independence Hop and Heritage Festival” enjoyed two migrations. One was the “migration of the City Library to new quarters, the other was the preparation of Vaux’s Swifts migration to Central America. Participants at the “Vaux Social” were invited to sit back, relax and try to count the birds as they swirled in their vortex down the chimney of the old library building”



One Year, One Tower: Two Nests!



Note the original nest from earlier in the season.

Photo by Carla McRee

2003 was a very interesting year for us regarding swift nesting behavior. The house chimney was not used for an attempted nesting site this year - and I do not believe a single swift even entered the structure. The year previous eggs were laid in an old nest (I was not able to get to it to remove it) and the eggs were abandoned resulting in a failed nesting attempt. I strongly considered capping this structure due to other nesting disasters I thought had been remedied - but ended up leaving it an additional option for the swifts.

The news regarding the tower for 2003 is, fortunately, much different. Our first swift sighting here for the year was April 2. I believe there was a nest by the end of May and egg laying etc. proceeded as normal thru fledging. The summer continued and there seemed to be 'normal' activity in the tower... nothing for the chimney except flyovers / close looking- with groups of five swifts - sometimes as many as eight. During the end of July I had noticed swifts entering the tower during the day and was curious at such behavior - this prompted me to take a look at what I thought was a usual end of nesting season. To my amazement I saw a second, completely different nest underneath the first nest (I cleaned the previous year's nest out of the tower prior to the beginning of the 2003 season) - along with a roosting / resting (young?) swift. We had groups of 12 - 15 swifts fly over the tower each evening until just before the sun would slip away until September 15th - seemingly thinking about entering to roost for the night, but they would fly away at the last drip of sunlight. I took the bottom off of the tower late September to investigate and discovered that the first nest had fledged at least three young as well as the second nest!

Carla McRee - Lockhart, TX

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS...

"If one were building a new house, it may not add much expense to construct a 2 in 1 chimney. That's one for smoke (often just a metal pipe inside a much larger box frame) and one for Chimney Swifts. The smoke side could have the usual screen wire to prevent entry, while the Swift side could be open.

I wonder if the Swift side should have any cover? My aunt in Magnolia, MS had hundreds that used her masonry chimney. I believe it was wide open at the top. What fun to see the swifts zoom into it in the evening, after circling a while! They entered with much speed. Today, people would probably prefer it to have a cover to keep the rain out, if it would not bother the birds."

Your idea is one that we have considered for some time, and would work just fine. It would be a relatively simple matter to incorporate our existing wooden tower designs into new construction (see Elizabeth, IL on page 3). Chimney Swifts can and do use chimneys that have caps as long as the cap is high enough (at least 12") and not screened on the sides.

"...if the siding and cinder block is "rough" enough what about putting wire screen or hardware cloth in side PVC? I'm just thinking about ease, simplicity and affordability."

Screen wire and hardware cloth can be very damaging to the feathers and feet of the swifts. Chimney Swifts do not have scales on their feet and legs like

songbirds, rather they have delicate skin. Probably an aerodynamic adaptation for speed.

"I notice in the Chimney Swift brochure that a chimney or tower will have only one nesting pair of birds per season although many birds may roost in that same structure. The material sent me states that many designs of Swift habitat have/are being tried. I am about to construct a tower to be completed and erected sometime during this next fall and winter and so have a question about design. Would the following attract more than one breeding pair of birds? A 24" x 24" I D x 12' tower with the lower 1/3 partitioned into four 12" x 12" shafts or perhaps even the partitions running the complete height?"

Although your idea is a good one in theory, it is extremely unlikely that it would yield more than a single nest. We had plans for a similar structure, but after 20 years of experimentation with more than 100 towers, concluded that it would be a wasted effort.

Chimney Swifts will not build communal nests in any size structure or any configuration. In fact, we have never been able to get them to nest in towers that are less than 10' apart. They are solitary nesters that will actively defend a nest site from other would be pairs. They actually attempt to prevent a roost from forming early in the season. In spite of their communal roosting behavior, they simply have not evolved to tolerate another nesting pair in close proximity.

"Would it be possible to incorporate access doors at couple of points along the length of the structure to enable someone to conduct proper research where access to the nests is appropriate to qualified people - to check on nestling development?"

We would strongly recommend against installing access doors in smaller towers (i.e. 12' and smaller). Chimney Swifts can be catastrophically disturbed by interruption of their breeding cycle. Several problems that can occur are abandonment of the nest site (especially during the construction phase), frightening young that may fall to the bottom and be injured and force-fledging underdeveloped young that will perish as a result. We have determined that video cameras are the best way to observe these birds during the nesting season. These have become very affordable over the past few years and can be connected to VCRs, computers or used as web cams -- such as we have done on our web site. However, after the birds have migrated, much can be learned from the detritus that accumulates in the bottom of the tower over a season. The eggs shells, droppings and nestling fatalities remain in the tower after the birds have left.

"I at present have a family of Chimney Swifts in my chimney, I have had them there before, and not wanting to harm them waited until they had raised their young and left before cleaning out my chimney. My concern is just how safe from a health stand point is it

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to have these annual visitors living in my chimney. I know that birds can carry diseases and lice that are not beneficial to humans. Could you please enlighten me on this subject, so I can make an educated decision on what to do to preserve the health standards of my home without harming these little visitors.”

Chimney Swifts are not subject to heavy infestations of mites or lice. Nor are they known to carry any diseases that are harmful to humans. There is a far greater health risk from processing raw chicken in your kitchen than hosting a family of Chimney Swifts in your chimney.

The only thing that you need to do to prevent any health problems is to have your chimney cleaned once a year when the swifts are not in residence. This will remove any droppings and the old nest. You should also keep your damper closed during the summer months. This is not so much for your benefit as for the swifts -- to keep them from slipping into the fireplace where they can become disoriented and end up in your house.

“We have had swifts nesting in our chimney for the last 4 years. After reading about these fascinating birds, I feel we are somewhat blessed that they have "chosen" us. We are one of the few homes that has not capped our chimney. I am not sure, however, what to do about cleaning the chimney. I have read it should be done once a year in the early spring. We have been here for 12 years and have never had it

cleaned. We have occasional fires in the fireplace in the winter, but not a lot. If I were to have it cleaned, would this cause the birds to not return?”

The reason for cleaning the chimney is safety for you and for the swifts. Wood fires build up a layer of creosote on the chimney walls. This is flammable substance that can ignite if it gets to be too thick. It also makes it harder for the swifts to attach their nest securely to the wall, and a nest may break loose and fall down into the fireplace. As long as the cleaning is done while the swifts are not there, it will not deter them from nesting when they return from South America in the spring.

“My home is about twenty years old now and it does not have a screened chimney and now that the Swifts are here, we have no intention of screening it, in fact, I am hoping they will nest in there. I also want a bat house, but do Swifts and bats respect each others space?”

Bats and swifts do not conflict with one another because they feed at different times of day on different insects. However, their housing should never be in direct contact. For example, if you build a Chimney Swift Tower, you should not put a bat house on it.

“I have been observing a Chimney Swift roost site at the other end of our block here in Saint Joseph, Missouri. Last night I counted nearly 1000 swifts (991) entering the chimney on the church I have been watching. Great, their

number has quadrupled since I began watching them in August! This morning I decided to see how many I could count coming out of the chimney. I arrived at the site at 6:33 AM and they were starting to exit the chimney. From 6:33 AM until ~ 6:43 I counted 420 swifts leave the chimney. They did not fly away from the area (as they had been doing previously) but flew around, circling the immediate area. It was as if they were waiting for something to happen! What? I do not know! Then, I was bewildered as they began going back into the chimney, I estimated about 300 swifts reentering their roost. While ~ 100 of them kept circling the chimney area. Finally, the 100 swifts flew off and the area was clear of birds. The time now was 7:23 AM. I remained at the site to see if the swifts in the chimney would come out again. They did not! At 7:45 AM I left the area. Was this typical behavior or was it some sort of abnormality?

Late in the season, Chimney Swifts often remain in the roost during the morning hours. Some may venture out for food and water, but will then return to the roost. We have seen the swifts in our main roost stay until as late as 1:30 PM CDT. One school of thought is that the food supply is low, and too much energy must be expended to capture enough food to justify the effort. Certainly the swifts are storing fat for the fall migration, so we think they may be just conserving their reserves. The curious thing is that this "late rising" is unpredictable -- one day they will be up and gone at sunrise, and the next day they will

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS 1.2

"sleep in". We have not been able to determine what initiates their morning departure this time of the year. Chimney Swifts are an understudied species, and there is still much to learn about their behavior.

"We were leaving my office, here in Dallas, and when we walked out the door I was nearly struck by a low flying Chimney Swift. The area was full of them, all chipping in that rapid twittering sound and they were flying in a frenzied circular motion, and very low to the ground. We soon realized that they were in the midst of a huge "kettle" of dragon flies. Both the swifts and dragon flies were flying in the same frenzied, circular pattern, with the swifts frequently making "passes" at the dragon flies. We never saw a swift actually hit (or take) a fly but they were definitely flying at them. This continued for 3-5 minutes until the swifts gathered in a somewhat tight group and flew South. The dragon flies remained for another few minutes and just gradually dispersed. What was the behavior we were observing?"

Chimney Swifts feed on many of the same sized prey as dragonflies. I find it extremely unlikely that they were there to feed on the dragonflies themselves, as swifts normally feed on insects that are 1/4" or less in size. This comes from R. B. Fischer's 1958 monograph, and has also been documented in specimens that we have had examined. A very real possibility is that the swifts were competing with the dragonflies for the same morsel -- bringing them

in close proximity to one another.

"I recently read that swifts fly by flapping their wings alternately, and it's this that gives them their erratic flight path. Do you know where I might find more information on this unusual behavior?"

Actually this a myth that was dispelled with stroboscopic photography by D.B. Saville early last century, but the illusion is still very impressive. One thing that does contribute to the apparently erratic flight of Chimney Swifts is that, unlike most other birds, they may power on the upstroke as well as the down stroke. This is common in the flight of hummingbirds which are related to swifts. Another factor is that the upper wing bones of swifts are much shorter than those of swallows and other passerines. This gives them the ability to make the sharp, rapid turns that they are known for.

"I observed my first pair of Chimney Swifts at my acreage this year. Unbelievably to me, they were observed entering a hole in the side of my barn (approx. 12"x12") that is only 6-7' off the ground. The hole gives entrance to an old granary room within the barn that is approximately 5' x 7' x 6' tall.

To make a long story longer, several days ago I found a nest affixed to one wall of the room only 4 feet off the floor. Eggs have been deposited each day it seems to today's total of 3 eggs.

They are not currently being incubated, so am hopeful for another egg or two.

It is interesting to say the least, and I will continue to keep track of these wayward visitors. Is this an unusual set of circumstances, or not unheard of?"

Although they are more likely found in chimneys and other similar structures, it is unusual but not unheard of for them to nest as you have found them. In fact, the 1958 monograph "Breeding Biology of the Chimney Swift" by Richard B. Fischer was written solely on the observations he made from blinds in out buildings in upstate New York.

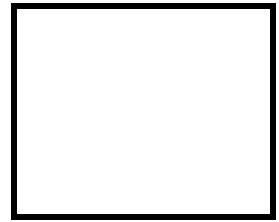
Here is a brief biological time table:

- one egg laid every other day
- incubation (by both parents) begins when the next to last egg is laid
- incubation lasts 18 to 21 days
- babies leave the nest at 14 to 18 days
- babies fledge from the structure at 28 to 30 days



Photo courtesy of Mark Heckenlaible

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Visit our web site at:
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In addition to learning more about the North American Chimney Swift Nest Site Research Project, you can:

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