

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

Chimney Swifts Are About To Return

Spring migration is already in progress. Swallows began congregating along the Gulf coast in the beginning of March, and it is time to begin searching the sky for chimney swifts as they return to us from their winter home in South America.

Swifts are neither song nor perching birds; they are instead more closely related to hummingbirds, having a similar wing structure, specially adapted for fast wing movement. These birds are so adept at flight that they eat, drink, court and mate on the wing. The only time they are not flying is at night, when they roost in chimneys or hollow trees. Because they cannot stand or perch upright, their feet and tails are especially adapted to their clinging habits on vertical surfaces. All four of their strong-clawed toes face forward. The tail is short, stiff and has needle-like bristles to provide added support.

Like many other migratory birds, chimney swifts have declined since the mid 1980's largely due to habitat loss. Historically these birds nested in great old hollow trees. As humans settled this country, clearing old growth forests, these birds adapted to building their nests in chimneys. In more recent years however, numerous historical buildings with suitable masonry chimneys have been destroyed, while many private homeowners have capped or screened their chimneys to exclude the birds.

Through banding research we have learned that chimney swifts are long lived, returning to the same nesting site for sometimes 11 years. When preparing for migration, swifts congregate in vast numbers and travel together. Scientists suspect that older birds lead younger ones to known resting sites on their journey between nesting and wintering grounds. Last September some of us got together with Jeff Horton, of the Nature Conservancy, to help count a large congregation of chimney swifts that were using the old smoke stack at the Windsor Hospital. We were able to estimate that 2,500 birds were roosting at that resting site along their migration route.

You can learn how to help these birds and also participate in a citizen science project that is at present plotting the progress of swifts as they make the long journey back to their nesting grounds. If you have access to the Internet go to <http://www.concentric.net/~Dwa/> or write: North American Chimney Swift Nest Site Research Project, Driftwood Wildlife Association, 1206 W. 38th Street, Suite 1105, Austin TX 78705.