



BIRD STUDIES
ÉTUDES D'OISEAUX CANADA



Public Asked to Join Ontario-wide Search for Vanishing Swifts

As their name suggests, Chimney Swifts make their homes in chimneys in urban neighbourhoods throughout Ontario. Chimney Swifts are experiencing steep declines across their North American range. Bird Studies Canada is looking for volunteers to help search for nesting locations.

24 July 2012 – The Chimney Swift is a small, sooty-coloured bird that makes its home in open brick chimneys in small to large towns and cities. It can be observed in most urban areas, flying overhead in quick, jerky movements, making a high-pitched chittering call. Unfortunately, this bird is federally and provincially designated as a Threatened species. Chimney Swift numbers have declined by over 90% over the last four decades. The species was recently highlighted in the *State of Canada's Birds 2012* report as requiring urgent attention.

Since European settlement, Chimney Swifts have preferred to live near people, nesting in chimneys rather than the cavernous trees they once inhabited. You are most likely to observe swifts using larger chimneys attached to buildings such as hospitals, churches, and schools. Some chimneys are roosting sites where swifts gather in large numbers. By late summer, you will see the number of birds at roosts increasing, with some sites offering spectacular displays of hundreds, or even thousands, of birds entering a chimney at nightfall. Then, suddenly, Chimney Swifts depart, migrating south for the winter.



Photo: Frank Horvath

The Chimney Swift is an aerial acrobat that belongs to a special group of birds called 'aerial insectivores.' These birds forage on insects, such as mosquitoes, while in flight. The *State of Canada's Birds* report notes that aerial insectivores are declining more steeply than any other group of birds. These declines are likely caused by a combination of factors, in Canada and in their wintering areas, including reductions in insect numbers, habitat loss, pesticide use, and climate change.

Bird Studies Canada has partnered with community groups across Ontario to learn more about the declines and their causes. We are looking for help pinpointing Chimney Swift nesting locations. Over the next few weeks, keep an eye on the sky, and on chimneys. If you happen to see or hear swifts, especially near sundown, look for an open chimney (no cap) in the vicinity, and note the address. If you have a few minutes, wait and see whether any birds enter the chimney. If they do, please report it online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/OntarioSwiftWatch> or email OntarioSwiftWatch@birdscanada.org.



Photo: George Peck

“Whether you see a single Chimney Swift or several of them entering a chimney, it is important that we know about that chimney,” states Kristyn Richardson, Stewardship Biologist for Bird Studies Canada. “Ontario supports more than 50% of the Canadian population of Chimney Swifts, so there are thousands of sites that have yet to be discovered.”

For more information about swifts, how to look for them, and how to help them, visit our website at www.birdscanada.org/research/speciesatrisk/chsw or our Ontario SwiftWatch Facebook page (www.fb.com/ontarioswift).

Ontario SwiftWatch is a volunteer-based program in which community groups, volunteers, and professional biologists work together to search for and describe Chimney Swift locations.

Bird Studies Canada (www.birdscanada.org) administers regional, national, and international research and monitoring programs that advance the understanding, appreciation, and conservation of wild birds and their habitats. We are Canada’s national body for bird conservation and science, and we are a non-governmental charitable organization.

For further information contact:

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CHIMNEY SWIFT FACTS

What is a Chimney Swift? Chimney Swifts are small, sooty-coloured birds that make their homes primarily in chimneys. They are found in small to large urban areas. Chimney Swifts feed on flying insects, and spend most of their time in the air.

How do you identify a Chimney Swift? Chimney Swifts have a unique cigar-shaped body, long narrow pointed wings, and a very short tail. They nest and roost in chimneys. Their nests are built of small twigs secured to the chimney wall. They can be seen and heard flying above the urban core, or near larger institutions or industrial buildings. They do not perch on trees or wires, but cling to the interior walls of chimneys.

Is this species in trouble? The Chimney Swift is federally and provincially designated as a Threatened species. Its population has declined by over 90% over the last four decades. It was recently highlighted in the *State of Canada's Birds* report (www.stateofcanadasbirds.org) as a species requiring urgent attention.

I think there might be Chimney Swifts in my chimney ... now what? Chimney Swifts are relatively clean and quiet house guests. They are often mistaken for bats or other species. The Ontario SwiftWatch webpage (www.birdscanada.org/research/speciesatrisk/chsw) includes two factsheets that will help you determine whether you have Chimney Swifts, and what your next steps should be. Please see “*Are There Chimney Swifts in Your Chimney*” and “*How to be a Good Chimney Swift Host*.”

What is Ontario SwiftWatch? Ontario SwiftWatch is a volunteer-based program in which community groups, volunteers, and professional biologists work together to search for and describe Chimney Swift locations. In addition to studying swifts, the program engages volunteers in stewardship and outreach activities, and participants become part of the conservation process. Another component is School SwiftWatch, which was developed in 2011-12 to engage students in bird conservation.

What have we learned so far? Bird Studies Canada used Ontario SwiftWatch data to identify the Chimney Swift habitat requirements. We found that Chimney Swifts prefer to use larger and longer chimneys, attached to non-residential buildings. We also found that artificial towers do not provide a suitable environment for nesting swifts, which is likely why artificial towers in Canada have not been successful.

DATES

Swifts arrive in Ontario: Early May
Nesting: June 9 to 25

Eggs: 3-5 eggs hatch, 20 days after laying

Fledging: 30 days after hatch

Roosting: July 7 to 23

Swifts leave Ontario: Mid-September to early October

How can I help? We ask that urban residents watch and listen for Chimney Swifts. If you see them or hear their chittering, look for any nearby open (uncapped, unguarded) chimneys, and take a few minutes to watch for swifts entering or exiting. You can watch any time of day, but will have a much better chance if you return at sunset when the swifts are entering for the night. If you see swifts using a chimney, please tell us through the Ontario SwiftWatch online data form (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/OntarioSwiftWatch>). Whether you know about one chimney, or 100, they are all important in helping us to better understand this unique member of our urban communities!

Do you need more information? For additional resources, fact sheets, survey guidelines, and data submissions, visit the Ontario SwiftWatch website (www.birdscanada.org/research/speciesatrisk/chsw) or contact: Kathy Jones, Ontario Volunteer Coordinator, volunteer@birdscanada.org, 1-888-448-2473 ext. 124 (toll-free).