



On the wing most of the time,

The Bird

the Chimney Swift may be the most

in Your

aerial of birds — and one most closely

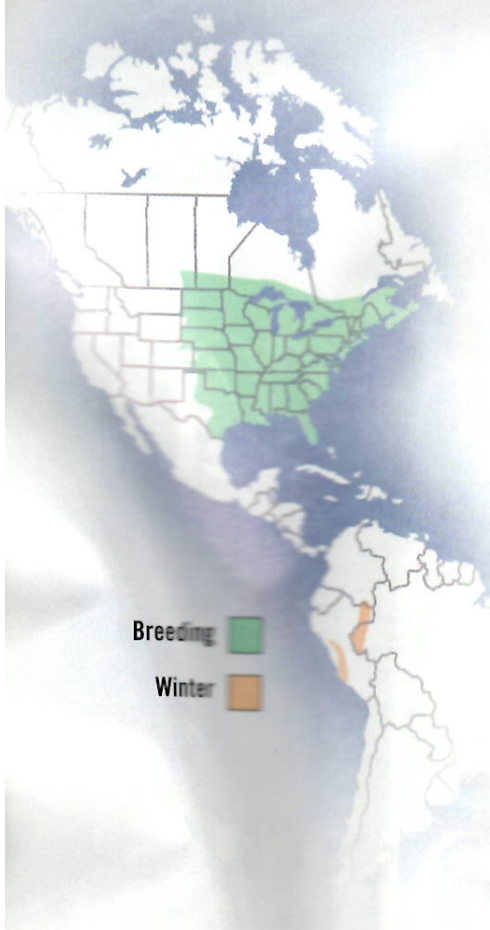
Chimney

linked to human habits. By Ted Cable

A Chimney Swift clings to a tiny nest of twigs glued to the inner wall of a chimney. The birds gather the twigs in flight.

Maslowski Photo





Cigars with wings — that’s how Roger Tory Peterson described Chimney Swifts. That’s a good metaphor. With their brown tapering body, ash-colored throat, sooty smudge in front of the eye, and small beak and tail, swifts resemble winged cigars.

Swifts are the drabest of birds, but if you live in a chimney, there’s no need for flamboyancy. Barn Swallow, another building dweller, would be overdressed for a chimney with its dapper orange-white plume.

These flying stogies are the Rodney Dangerfield of the bird world — no respect. Even avid birders often take them for granted because they are common and easy to identify and have a plain plumage. When not flying, swifts are anything but swift. The family name, *Apodidae*, meaning “without feet,” exaggerates their podiatrically challenged condition. Swifts have feet, but they are very small. The size limits the swift’s lifestyle by making it impossible for the bird to perch upright on a branch, take off from a horizontal surface, or hop along the ground.

Swifts don’t sing, either. Like their close relatives, the hummingbirds, a dry twittering is all they can muster.

Swifts are not mysterious denizens of some high-class pristine wilderness. They hang out in dark, dank, dirty chimneys. At dusk, during migration, flocks numbering in the thousands sometimes swirl above

large smokestacks, then spiral down to the opening of the stack. Collectively, the swifts form a dark, funnel-shaped cloud of birds. From a distance, it looks as if the smokestack is sucking smoke back down into the factory.

Homeowners smoke swifts out of chimneys with late-spring or summer fires. Sometimes this is done intentionally to rid chimneys of swifts because of the fear of fire or merely fear of the unknown. Other swifts are swept out by chimney sweeps, themselves floundering in fireplace ashes when disturbed. It does not help their cause that swifts suffer guilt by association with the most feared and misunderstood of all winged creatures — bats.

Swifts’ story would not be complete if we focused only on their apparent weaknesses. Jonathan Swift (no relation) once said, “Although men are accused of not knowing their own weakness, yet perhaps few know their own strength.”

A Swift’s Strengths

Their common name, possibly the most descriptive of all bird names, says it all — swift. They’ve been clocked at more than 100 miles per hour. Their flight is purposeful, direct and fast. With a businesslike manner befitting their business-

Chimney Swifts fold their wings behind them as they gather in a hollow beech tree. Summer roosts may hold hundreds or even thousands of birds.

Did You Know?

Other swifts: There are about 100 species of swift around the world. Four breed in North America: the spine-tailed Chimney Swift and Vaux’s Swift, and the White-throated and Black Swift, which have square or notched tails.

Range: Chimney Swifts breed in North America throughout the United States and in southern Canada east of the Rocky Mountains; appear as passage migrants in the West Indies and Central America; and winter in South America in Amazonian and coastal Peru and northern Chile.

Prey: Swifts eat flying insects and ballooning spiders and will concentrate opportunistically on swarms. The birds will gather several hundred insects into a large ball in a special pouch in the throat to carry back to their nestlings.





suit plumage, they go about their business oblivious to Frisbees, baseballs, toy rockets, and other inanimate objects that invade their airspace.

Swifts compensate for weak feet by living life on the wing. They eat, drink, gather nesting material, and yes, may even mate on the wing. Reproduction involves what presumably is a rather tense free fall during which timing is everything. Their aerodynamic design allows for both speed and the maneuverability to intercept the quickest flying insects, their primary food source. Swifts drink by skimming the surface of pools, ponds, and lakes. They gather nesting material by breaking off twigs in flight. Circumstantial evidence indicates swifts may even sleep while flying. These midair heroics rival anything seen during air-show acrobatics.

Even their much-maligned feet serve a purpose. Working in concert with specialized tail feathers whose protruding central shafts permit them to be used as a wood-

A pair of Chimney Swift nestlings appear to fill up this nest, which both parents have securely affixed to the wall using salivary cement.

pecker-like brace, the toes have strong claws that enable swifts to cling and crawl on walls and other vertical surfaces.

Swifts are social creatures. They live in small colonies with an established child-care system. Each pair has at least one male or female helper-swift that assists in feeding and caring for the young.

Swifts' modern substitution of chimneys for hollow trees as home sites illustrates astonishing adaptability. Inside the chimneys, swifts build remarkable half-saucer nests that they glue to the wall with sticky saliva. Some species even glue their eggs to the nest. Asian cultures use this saliva-like substance to make their well-known bird-nest soups.

Fueled by insect protein, these five-inch, 20-gram, winged marvels annually travel from the Amazonian forests of

Nests: Lacking suitable hollow trees and rock outcroppings, Chimney Swifts have been known to occupy abandoned buildings, ledges, airshafts, and silos as well as chimneys, and both the Vaux's Swift and the Chimney Swift will nest in cavities in trees created by Pileated Woodpeckers. Black Swifts nest on canyon walls near, and often behind, waterfalls.

Young: Chimney Swifts typically lay 4-5 eggs. Incubation is by both parents and lasts about three weeks. Young swifts beg loudly for food from parents, but only for a short time. The hatchlings climb out of the nest, never to return, after 20 days and fledge after 28-30 days.



Swifts and Chimneys

It is illegal to remove or disturb Chimney Swifts, their nests, eggs, or young during the breeding season. Here's what you should know about chimneys and swifts.

Cap metal chimneys. Only chimneys made of stone, firebrick, or masonry flue tiles with mortared joints are suitable for swifts. Since slick metal chimneys provide nothing to cling to, swifts (and other animals) that enter them will likely fall to the bottom and then be unable to climb back up. For this reason, metal chimneys should be capped.

Sweep regularly. Burning wood causes creosote residue to coat the inside of non-metal chimneys. Not only is the buildup flammable, it can prevent a swift's nest from adhering to the chimney wall. Only maintenance by a professional will keep your chimney clean and safe. The best time for cleaning is mid-March, after the wood-burning season and before the swifts return from their winter grounds.

Close the damper. A closed damper will prevent birds from flying into your house and keep nests and nesting materials from falling into the fireplace. (Parents will continue to feed young that fall.) The damper will also muffle sound. If you don't have a damper, wedge a large piece of foam rubber up into the fireplace.

What if birds fall? If you find birds below the damper and they are fully feathered and their eyes are wide open, gently place them on the wall above the damper so they can climb back up into the chimney. If you find younger or injured birds below the damper, contact wildlife authorities.

South America to my neighborhood and then back again. Swifts log an enormous number of frequent-flyer miles on their small, stiff, vibrating wings with daily local flights and their intercontinental migration. Scientists estimate that one banded nine-year-old Chimney Swift had flown 1,350,000 miles during its lifetime — almost the equivalent of three round-trip journeys to the moon.

Swifts don't return to my neighborhood until long after the tulips, daffodils, and redbud blossoms have disappeared. Their late arrival ensures that they will find a smorgasbord of insects. By midsummer, I notice a sudden increase in the number of swifts, the result of those soaring romantic rendezvous of May. I savor energetic aerobatics and ceaseless chattering, knowing that soon I will look up from my backyard barbecue and find an empty sky.

In autumn, as I put away the lawn furniture for winter, I wonder about my neighborhood swifts. Which villages do they swoop over now? What kinds of people, if any, are hearing their calls? What meanings do the swifts carry for Amazonian tribes? Do Kayapo people see flying bows and arrows, rather than flying cigars? Are forest Bora boys taking aim on the squadrons of low-flying swifts with sling-shot-propelled surface-to-air pebbles? Are the swifts oblivious to them as they are to the toy rockets of summer?

One of 'Our' Birds

Although we tend to think of backyard birds as "our birds," swifts, if they belong to anybody, belong to the residents of Amazonian Peru and the west coast of South America. Swifts merely visit us for a brief breeding period coinciding with peak insect abundance, only to return to their true home. For eight months of the year, many swifts fly over thatched, not shingled, roofs and revert to old ways of roosting in hollow trees, not chimneys.

Now because of the slash-and-burn destruction of tropical forests, much of the year swifts chatter over the ominous whine of chainsaws cutting forest trees, rather than lawnmowers cutting the grass. Swifts fly above logging trucks loaded with rosewood, rather than rose gardens. They fly above burning forests, rather than burning burgers.

I anticipate the return of Chimney Swifts and yet I am pleasantly surprised when I see the first swift of spring. Although swifts have adapted well to hu-

man-modified landscapes, we should not take them for granted. Their numbers are decreasing — almost one percent per year in Canada and 5.8 percent per year in the United States, according to North American Breeding Bird Survey results. Passenger Pigeons were once the most abundant bird on the continent. In the late 1800s, religious zealots in southern Illinois thought the end of the world was imminent when a spring passed without the dark clouds of Passenger Pigeons passing overhead. (And, from the pigeons' point of view, they were right.) If some spring the swifts don't return, what will it mean to us? Will we notice?

The demise of Chimney Swifts, a bird so closely linked to human habitats and so seemingly adaptable, would, like the miner's canary, signal that our world is going up in smoke — the smoke of toxic fumes and burning forests. And we, like swifts down a chimney, would be left to flounder among the ashes.

For me personally, it would mean the loss of an avian counterpart. Like swifts, I have limitations in design and development. I am not colorful, I can't sing, and I am clumsy on my feet. I chatter and prefer to winter in the tropics. Like a swift skimming over a pond, I snatch food and drink on the move, and I've used childcare to buy time. The loss of Chimney Swifts would mean the loss of an animated reminder that Jonathon Swift was right: We must know our strengths. Use our abilities — as limited as they may be — to the fullest. Overcome limitations by winging above them. Cling to the chimneys that we call home.

Without my avian equivalents twittering overhead, without darting and dashing cigars bringing the sky to life, summer afternoons would never be the same. But for now we are blessed with swifts. Just as chimneys provide Santa with the magical conduit for delivering our Christmas gifts, these same chimneys "magically" provide us with the gift of swifts. ♣

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A juvenile Chimney Swift flies out of a chimney. Shafts protruding from the bird's tail feathers enable it to use them as a prop when roosting.

