

Chimney Swift Stewardship

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The Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) is a species in significant decline throughout all of its range in North America. Although it is often mistaken for Purple Martins and other swallows, the Chimney Swift is readily distinguished by its cigar-shaped body, long slender pointed wings, short tail, characteristic call and by their flickering wingbeats and more abrupt manoeuvres.

HABITAT

Chimney Swifts are aerial foragers, often concentrating near water where high-flying insects are abundant. Before the arrival of Europeans in North America, the Chimney Swift mainly used hollow trees for nesting sites. When hollow trees became rare as a result of logging, they quickly adopted chimneys in large urban areas and small towns. In their northern breeding range, Chimney Swifts look for sites with a relatively constant ambient temperature.

DISTRIBUTION

The breeding range of the Chimney Swift is limited to eastern North America. In Canada, the Chimney Swift breeds in east-central Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba, and southern Ontario, southern Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, probably Prince Edward Island and possibly south-western Newfoundland. Approximately one quarter of the species' breeding range is located in Canada. It winters in the upper Amazon River drainage basin in South America, mainly in Peru. Chimney Swifts evidently occupied Manitoba towns soon after they were founded. By 1890 they were abundant in Winnipeg and common in Portage la Prairie with small numbers elsewhere. We have one observation this summer of a Swift as far North as The Pas.

SOME INTERESTING FACTS

- The birds that Audubon called American Swifts became known as Chimney Swifts as they readily adapted to the masonry chimneys erected by pioneers. They were first

*Swifts by Rudolf Koes
from Birds of Manitoba.
Scanned by Nella Schmidt*



- spotted in such structures in Maine in 1672.
- The Chimney Swift is the only swift found in Manitoba and in eastern North America.
- Individual Chimney Swifts are capable of eating more than 1,000 insects per day. This is equivalent to 1/3 of their 21 gram body weight.
- The most significant limiting factor to Chimney Swift populations is the dwindling number of breeding and roosting sites resulting from logging, the disappearance of old abandoned buildings, and most importantly the dramatic reduction in the number of suitable and accessible traditional chimneys, the species' main breeding habitat. The rate at which chimneys are being converted is rising and hardly any suitable sites will remain in 30 years or so. Canadian Wildlife Service biologists in Quebec recently reported that the number of suitable nesting sites in Quebec is now limited, and they estimate that only 60% of breeding adults actually reproduce.
- The significant negative trends shown by the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data in the Canadian provinces and in almost half of the US states where Chimney Swifts are found are sufficient to conclude that the species is in a precarious situation. The decline is accelerating and is more rapid in Canada due to the disappearance of suitable chimneys.

- In the southern states, primarily Texas, considerable success is being achieved through the construction and placement of Chimney Swift towers for nesting and roosting. A typical tower is a modest 2 to 3 metres in height. For more details, see www.gwf.org/chimneytower.htm

STEWARDSHIP AND RECOVERY

MNS members are currently advancing a proposal that seeks funding from Manitoba Conservation's Special Conservation Fund and from Environment Canada's Eco-Action Funding Program. The funds will be used to help cover the cost of design and construction materials needed to build several made-for-Manitoba towers in and around Winnipeg, to hire someone part time dedicated to this recovery effort, and to coordinate a public education and awareness program.

In closing, Chimney Swifts, like many of our precious neotropical migrants, are declining in numbers throughout North America. Unlike many other bird species, they do not require acres of unspoiled wilderness, expansive wetlands or complicated wildlife management plans; they only require one square foot of an unused column mimicking a pre-1960s chimney.

If you or someone you know would like to become a Chimney Swift project participant, please contact the MNS Office at 943-9029.