

# HISTORIC ST. ADOLPHE:

## Chimney Swift Nesting Capital of Manitoba

by Barb Stewart

From mid-May to the end of August, St. Adolphe residents turn their eyes to the sky to view the wonder of the Chimney Swifts. Whether someone casts an upward glance to a chimney rim as they walk by, or families gather for an evening to view the spectacle of the roosting hour, towns' folk savour their connection to the Chimney Swifts.

Although the nesting and roosting birds inside the chimneys are hidden from curious eyes, their aerial displays are impressive to watch. Entries to a chimney range from fast, kamikaze style head first dives to slow, fluttering foot first drops. Exits can be seen as skyward bursts or low, stealthy manoeuvres. The gregarious Chimney Swifts communicate with a variety of distinctive vocalizations as they fly with impressive agility to nab insects from the air.

Celebrating the spring arrival of Chimney Swifts to St. Adolphe has become a recent community tradition. Unknown to most residents prior to Manitoba Chimney Swift Initiative (MCSI) monitoring, which began in 2007, Chimney Swifts are now embraced as "THE" most anticipated migrant. Chimney-side watches begin as breeding pairs of Chimney Swifts take up residence in 5 old, brick chimneys situated in 4 historic buildings along Main Street. The local population of Chimney Swifts in St. Adolphe represents the highest known concentration of breeding adults in Manitoba.

In 2007, the inaugural year of MCSI monitoring, 3 pairs of Chimney Swifts used nest sites in Le Club Amical, the Paroisse St. Adolphe Catholic Church, and a private Main Street residence. The fledging of 3 juveniles from the north-east chimney at Le Club Amical in late July 2007 was the first documented breeding record for the community and the first in the province since 1942.

By 2010, a colonizing trend was established and 11 adults – 5 breeding pairs and one roving helper bird – distributed themselves among 5 chimneys which included the southeast Club Amical and Brodeur Bros. (a former local business) sites. The successful fledging of 2 juveniles from the Brodeur Bros. chimney on August 18 set the record for the latest known fledging date in St. Adolphe.



Lewis Cocks

An active Chimney Swift nesting chimney (circled) at Paroisse St. Adolphe Catholic Church.

### ***A Special Avian Congregation***

A tall white spire prominently rises from the front of the Paroisse St. Adolphe Catholic Church. At the back of the building, a discrete stack of bricks extends unobtrusively above the roof line. This chimney has not served as part of the heating system for decades, but it is still an invaluable structure – the preferred nest site and migratory roosting location for Chimney Swifts.

Monitoring of the Church started in June, 2007 after a MCSI observer tracked a flying Chimney Swift and watched it drop into the chimney at dusk one evening. The excitement of

identifying a new nest site was surpassed by the discovery of 2 Chimney Swifts flying in the vaulted ceiling of the Church about 4 weeks later! The birds had left the chimney through a gap in the basement, flown up the stairwell into the first floor meeting room, and then headed into the main body of the Church. After several days, the exhausted birds were found clinging to chair backs by Fr. Gerald Michaud and parishioners Joe Brodeur and Marcel Lagasse. Once released by these gentlemen, the Chimney Swifts continued to use the chimney until fall migration.

The precarious start to monitoring Chimney Swifts in the Church was not the only challenge to overcome. By early 2009, the mortar in the 1913-built chimney was eroding noticeably. It was recommended that the chimney be repaired or demolished. In each breeding season since 2007, Chimney Swifts had successfully fledged from this nest site and the Church chimney was the only location of migratory groupings in August. The chimney had to be protected.

The MCSI started negotiations with the Parish Board of Directors. With financial assistance from the Province of Manitoba's Sustainable Development Innovations Fund and Environment Canada's EcoAction Community Funding Program, mason Bill Anderson was on site in September, 2009 to re-point the failing mortar. Also, the rim was

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reconfigured to a solid, continuous edge, repairing the unstable turret-like damaged areas.

As usual, the first spring migrants in 2010 entered the Church chimney. There was no indication that the Chimney Swift's activity was negatively impacted by the refurbishment.

Indeed, a helper bird was assisting the breeding adult pair with nest building and feeding duties that culminated in fledging day on July 28. As in years past, local birds assembled at the Church by mid-August and migrants then joined the roosting group before they left for their wintering grounds in the Amazon.

### **"I hear them – THEY'RE BACK!"**

One day near mid-May, Suzanne Leclerc steps out of her home in St. Adolphe to hear a distinctive chittering noise overhead. Looking up, she catches sight of an agile bird darting about the tree tops. Recognizing the characteristic taper of the long wings, which extend well past the stubby tail, Suzanne welcomes the Chimney Swift to town.



Lewis Cocks

The Leclerc residence, a.k.a.  
"Main Street Chimney".

Four successive generations of the Leclerc family have lived in their 2-storey home since it was built in 1918. Chimney Swifts also share this residence and have been observed using the old, brick chimney each year since 2007. It is difficult to estimate how many generations of Chimney swifts have nested in the Leclerc chimney, but now we are certain that the chimney will be suitable habitat for many future breeding attempts.

Refurbishment of the Leclerc chimney was done by mason Bill Anderson in early May 2010 as part of the MCSI habitat restoration program. Before these repairs, crumbling mortar was raining down the chimney, creating an unstable environment for the twig

nests which are glued to interior surfaces with the adult's sticky saliva. The stack of bricks near the rim had been banded to keep the chimney from toppling. The Leclerc chimney was rebuilt above the roofline to its original configuration. On May 21, a pair of newly arrived Chimney Swifts entered the Leclerc's chimney. Subsequent behavioural observations determined that the birds accepted the refurbishment and another nesting season was underway.

### **WANTED: Old, Brick Chimneys**

The significant decline of Chimney Swift populations is linked to habitat loss. While the St. Adolphe population is now protected due to these habitat restoration initiatives, Chimney Swifts elsewhere in the province would benefit from similar action. As ageing buildings are repaired and converted to modern heating systems, chimneys are becoming unavailable to the birds at a rapid rate. MCSI would like to locate other candidate chimneys for refurbishment. If you are aware of any Chimney Swift-friendly nest or roost sites which require repair or reopening, contact Frank Machovec, MCSI Coordinator at: [MBchimneyswift@gmail.com](mailto:MBchimneyswift@gmail.com) or through the Nature Manitoba office. Visit the MCSI website for more information: <http://www.naturemanitoba.ca/CHSW.html>.

*Barb Stewart is a member of the Manitoba Chimney Swift Steering Committee.*

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These maps also represent the amount of work that went into the atlas this spring and summer – over 4500 hours of atlassing was completed by 467 volunteers in 1091 squares. But the blank space on this map represents the almost 6000 squares that have not yet been covered – a lot of work remains to be done in the next four years! The challenges of atlassing in central and northern Manitoba are obvious, with initial efforts largely restricted to squares along highways and in the Churchill area. In 2011, the Atlas will make a concerted effort to

get good coverage of parts of central and northern Manitoba without road access.

### **Wilderness Atlassing Anyone?**

The Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas project is currently seeking in-kind assistance from lodges and outfitters and various other organizations to help us plan a series of atlassing expeditions, some fly-in, some boat-access, in the summer of 2011. If you have birding experience as well as wilderness or canoe-camping experience and might enjoy a remote at-

lassing expedition, please contact Bonnie Chartier at 945-7758 or toll-free at 1-800-214-6497 (ask to be put through to the Breeding Bird Atlas). If you have contacts in the north, or a canoe you could lend us, or if you think you might be able to help us access remote parts of Manitoba, please get in touch! We now have several "Song Meters" with powerful recording equipment so we can even send these with less experienced birders who travel into wilderness areas to make recordings (we transcribe the data later). In 2011, the big challenge begins!