

Chimney Swift: Manitoba's Flying Cigar

Did you know that chimneys in your neighbourhood may be providing essential habitat for a threatened bird, the Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)?

This small, soot-coloured bird with long, narrow wings and a short, stubby tail is often described as "a cigar with wings." Chimney Swifts are most often observed flying overhead with rapid wingbeat, an erratic flight pattern and wings bowed back in the shape of a boomerang, making high-pitched chittering calls.

One of the most aerial birds, they feed, drink, bathe and collect nest material while flying, leaving the skies only to tend their nests and roost (rest) for the night. They can be extremely beneficial to have around, eating over 1000 mosquitoes and airborne insects per day.

Historically, Chimney Swifts nested and roosted inside large, hollow trees. As old-growth forests were cleared, much of the swifts' natural habitat was destroyed. Fortunately, Chimney Swifts were able to adapt and began to nest and roost inside masonry chimneys that were built as towns and cities were established. Today, Manitoba's swifts are most often found in chimneys located in urban areas.



Swifts' long claws are used to cling to and climb rough vertical surfaces, like the inside walls of old brick chimneys and occasionally, tree cavities.

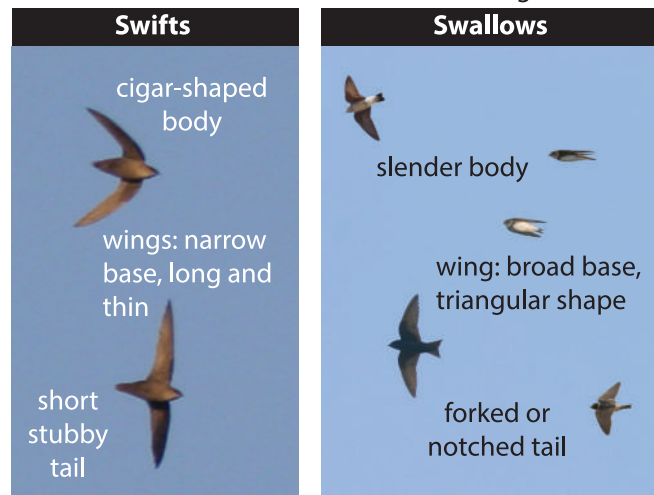
Photo by Bruce Di Labio

The Chimney Swift is at the north-western edge of its nesting range in Manitoba. Here, swifts deal with the challenges of a shorter nesting season, lower temperatures, less precipitation and large areas of unsuitable habitat.

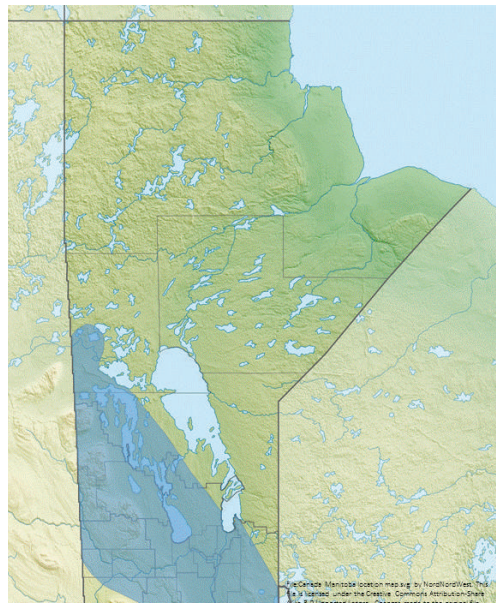
Swifts or Swallows:

The swift swerves with stiff, jerky, rapid wing beats.

The swallow flies with smooth flexible wing beats.



Photos by Christian Artuso



In Manitoba, Chimney Swifts range from Pine Falls and Lac Du Bonnet (northeast) to Wasagaming and Dauphin (northwest) and from Brandon, Souris and possibly Melita (southwest) to Carman, Portage la Prairie, Winnipeg, St. Adolphe, Otterburne, La Broquerie, and Steinbach (southeast).

Life Cycle



Photo by Rob Stewart

One nesting pair of adults per chimney occasionally assisted by one or two helpers. Swifts build a miniature half cup-shaped nest from twigs that are glued together and fastened with their own saliva several meters down the chimney interior.



Photo by Bruce Di Labio

Typically 4-6 (range 2-7) white eggs are laid that hatch in 18-21 days.



Photo by Bruce Di Labio

Born naked and helpless.



Photo by Bruce Di Labio

10 days: Flight feathers begin to unfurl.



Photo by Bruce Di Labio

21 days: Leave the nest and move to the wall full-time. Juveniles cling tightly to the wall between practice flights in the chimney.



Photo by Christian Artuso

28 to 30 days: Fledglings take their first flight up and out of the chimney!



Due to changes in heating methods since the 1960's, many chimneys have been demolished, closed off completely, or lined with metal which makes the interior too slippery for swifts to cling to or attach their nests.

Photo by Tim Poole

Conservation Status - Threatened

The Canadian Chimney Swift population has decreased by about 95% in the last 40 years. Although their broad range encompasses much of southern Manitoba, in recent years Chimney Swifts have been recorded at very few locations within that range. The species is now designated as Threatened nationally and provincially in Manitoba. While there are many possible reasons for the decline of Chimney Swifts, including insect availability and extreme weather events, one of the main factors is a dramatic reduction in the number of "swift-friendly" chimneys.

What You Can Do To Help Chimney Swifts?

- Look and listen for them in your neighbourhood
- Report your sightings to the Manitoba Chimney Swift Initiative (MCSI) (see below)
- Volunteer with the MCSI and learn how to monitor local nesting and roosting chimneys
- If you have swifts in your chimney, learn how to become a "Swift Champion"!

Contact Info:

Manitoba Chimney Swift Initiative

mbchimneyswift.ca mbchimneyswift@gmail.com

c/o Nature Manitoba

401-63 Albert Street, Winnipeg, MB R3B 1G4

204-943-9029



Canada

This project was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada.
Ce projet a été réalisé avec l'appui financier du gouvernement du Canada.