

Chimney Swift: Manitoba's Flying Cigar

Are Chimney Swifts Using My Chimney?

The Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) is a small, soot-coloured bird with long, narrow wings and a short, stubby tail. Often described as "a cigar with wings", swifts are present in Manitoba from mid-May until the end of August.

Historically, Chimney Swifts nested and roosted inside large, hollow trees. As old-growth forests were cleared, much of the swifts' natural habitat was destroyed. Chimney Swifts adapted to use masonry chimneys that were built as towns and cities were established. The decline of Chimney Swifts, which were recently listed as Threatened species in Canada and Manitoba, is partly due to a dramatic reduction in the number of "swift-friendly" chimneys for the birds to nest and roost in.



Illustration by Richard Cain

Do I Have a Swift Friendly Chimney?

You'll need to do some swift detective work to answer that question!

1. Assess your chimney.

Swifts typically choose chimneys that are:

- Uncapped (not covered with any material that would prevent access)
- Not lined inside with metal sheeting
- Made of brick, concrete, stucco, stone or other rough material
- Are at least 2.5 bricks by 2.5 bricks wide
- Only used in the winter for heating (not venting smoke all year long) or not used at all
- Within a couple of kilometres of a water body and other open areas that attract flying insects
- Ideally near other buildings with suitable chimneys

Photo courtesy of: Ken Wainwright, B.Sc.

Because swifts fly in and out of their homes, a chimney must be at least 2.5 bricks by 2.5 bricks wide - slightly greater than the wingspan of a swift.



2. Inspect your chimney cleanout trap for nesting evidence.

This is best done when the birds would not be present (between September and early May). You'll know Chimney Swifts have used your chimney if you see:

- a nest made of fine twigs held together by the swift's dried, yellow glue-like saliva (no mud or grass will be present)
- twigs that may have fallen during nest construction
- small, broken pieces of white eggshells
- long, tapered, soot-coloured feathers moulted by adults

Nests or twigs may be found in the cleanout trap.

Photo courtesy of: Bruce Di Labio



3. Look down your chimney.

Outside of the nesting season, and only if you can't get to your cleanout trap.

Using a flashlight, check for a small, half cup-shaped twig nest that is attached to the chimney wall several meters below the rim.

One nest in St. Adolphe, MB was approximately 10' down from the top of the chimney!

Photo courtesy of: Bruce Di Labio



4. Watch for pairs arriving in Manitoba in mid- to late May.

Chimney Swifts can be seen entering and leaving chimneys in the daytime or early evening during the nesting season. There will only be one breeding pair of adults per chimney. Additional helpers may assist.

Swifts in a chimney can sometimes be heard inside the building during the two-week period before fledging. Youngsters may make noisy calls each time their parents enter the chimney with food.

Photo courtesy of: Bruce Di Labio



5. Watch for flights of juvenile Chimney Swifts outside the nest chimney.

Juveniles typically fledge from the last week of July through the first week of August.

6. Look out for larger groups of Chimney Swifts in May at the end of their spring migration and mid-August before their fall migration.

They can be seen entering chimneys 1/2 hour before to 1/2 hour after sunset. By the end of August, Manitoba's swifts will have departed on their southward migration.

You have nesting swifts? Congratulations!

Your chimney provides habitat for this species-at-risk. Please do everything you can to maintain your chimney as it is. Be assured swifts pose no fire hazard. A Chimney Swift nest would fit easily in the palm of your hand, so air will still be able to properly circulate in the chimney during the heating season.

Here are a few simple ways to maintain your swift-friendly chimney:

- Between mid-May through August, please refrain from cleaning or using your fireplace/heating system chimney to avoid disturbing nesting or roosting swifts. The fumes could be fatal.
- Close the chimney inside the house to prevent swifts from entering the rest of the home.
- Avoid disturbing the birds by opening clean-out traps, looking down the chimney or by renovating the roof from mid-May through August.

We can only protect and enhance Chimney Swift habitats if we know where they roost and nest. Please report your Chimney Swift sightings and information on active nesting and/or roosting sites in your community to the Manitoba Chimney Swift Initiative.



To learn more about monitoring or to become a "Swift Champion", contact us at:

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.