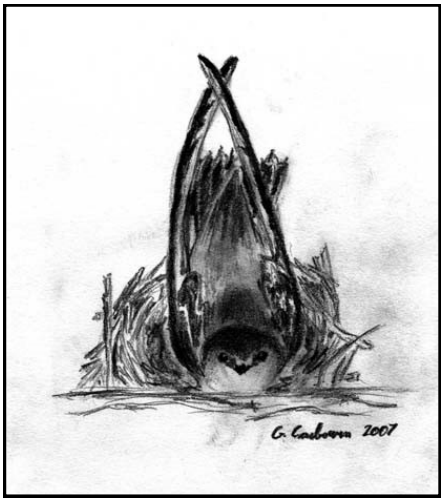
HOW TO HELP CHIMNEY SWIFTS IN LONDON, ONTARIO: WHAT YOU CAN DO



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Introduction

Ontario's Chimney Swifts are in BIG TROUBLE. Populations plummeted by 94% in the 45 years from 1970 to 2015, and 47% in the decade from 2005 to 2015. In 2007, in the face of alarming population declines, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSWEIC) assessed the species as Threatened. Two years later, in 2009, the Chimney Swift was officially designated as Threatened, both provincially and nationally. In the decade since then, despite legislative requirements, no Recovery Strategy has been developed. A further assessment in 2018 reaffirmed the Threatened status. Meanwhile, according to Breeding Bird Survey data, Ontario and Canadian Chimney Swifts are continuing to decline at the rate of approximately 6% annually.

The lack of a Recovery Strategy is a significant disappointment, as it would identify key issues, establish direction, set priorities and make funding available to address the problems faced by swifts. On the other hand, the needs of swifts are urgent and ongoing. Rather than sit by and bemoan the absence of a Recovery Strategy, it behooves private citizens and others to step forward and take action now.

The big question, of course, is, what are the best and most useful actions that ordinary people can take to benefit swifts? Without the guidance of a Recovery Strategy, the answers to this question are not entirely clear. I have attempted, however, to offer some suggestions that might in small ways help the swift cause while we wait.

Increasingly, evidence is accumulating to indicate that one of the biggest threats to swifts is the quantity and quality of the food supply – insects caught in flight. Insects available to swifts are now much smaller and present in the air column in much lower densities than at the end of World War II, when humanity began in earnest to wage chemical warfare on insects. More recently, the addition of neonicotinoids to the arsenal of pesticides has raised the campaign against insects to a whole new level. Many other factors have also been compounding the swifts' food-supply problems. Loss of natural habitat is a big one – largely achieved through intensification of agriculture and the relentless expansion of urban centres. Both gobble up or degrade habitat that could otherwise support insects that might waft upward to become food for swifts.

Worldwide, a very significant decline in insects is underway. Since insects are the basis of countless food chains, their difficulties spell trouble for all wild creatures. In their younger stages, many native insects – as nymphs or larvae (caterpillars) – munch, suck or nibble on native plants. They are generally unable to survive on non-native vegetation, though as adults some do drink nectar or collect pollen from non-native plants.

A full 95% of the landscape in southwestern Ontario is privately owned. Landowners, therefore, have a big role to play in ensuring the continued existence of healthy natural habitats. These support not only insects but all other species (including birds) that together form the complex web of life.

Even if you are not a big landowner, you can do your part to help produce insects to feed swifts. One way is to support conservation organizations such as land trusts, which acquire and preserve significant tracts of natural habitat. But, you can also do your bit right at home. Every native flower, shrub and tree you nurture contributes to the bigger picture of providing habitat and food for myriad species of wildlife, insects included. Each individual plant counts – even native plants growing on balconies support native insects that may have a future as swift food. Insects that don't end up as swift food contribute to a healthier, more resilient ecosystem.

There are many other ways, both direct and less so, that ordinary citizens can help swifts (and also help other species of birds and wildlife along the way). Read on for more details and ideas. Many actions, whether large or small, can collectively help to make the future a little brighter for London's Chimney Swifts.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP CHIMNEY SWIFTS IN LONDON:

1. Advocate for Swifts

Consider contacting the Federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change and your Member of Parliament, urging that a Recovery Strategy for Chimney Swifts be developed and implemented as soon as possible.

2. Encourage Native Insects by Growing Native Plants in Your Garden or on Your Property

2.1. For Urban Dwellers: Convert Your Yard (or Part of It) into a Nursery for Native Insects

- ♦ Keep in mind that most of our insects are native species whose juvenile stages are unable to survive on non-native plants (e.g., up to 500 insect species live on oak trees but just two live on gingko trees).
- ♦ Insects lay their eggs only on the species of host plants to which their larvae are adapted. Often, larvae eat the foliage of only one or a few species of native plants. Diversity of species of native plants grown means a greater diversity of native insect species.
- ♦ Create a backyard oasis (aka biodiversity garden) to help produce native insects, some of which may eventually fly or waft skyward and become food for swifts.
- ♦ Reduce areas covered by asphalt, concrete, brick or stone.
- ♦ Reduce monocultures such as manicured lawns, perhaps substituting meandering pathways instead.
- ♦ Start small: replace an ailing non-native shrub with a native one, or convert a small corner of lawn into a native wildflower bed.
- ♦ Plant a diversity of native grasses, flowers, trees, shrubs and vines to ensure an abundance of lush foliage of different heights that come into prominence at different seasons.
- ♦ Select species of native plants that offer a succession of blooming times from early spring until fall frost. This ensures adult insects (often pollinators) that feed on nectar have a supply throughout the season.
- ♦ In choosing native plants, be aware of the preferences of particular species for moisture, shade and soil type, and ensure conditions in your yard are a good match.
- ♦ Retain leaf litter after fall leaf drop; it serves many purposes, from holding moisture and adding nutrients to the soil, to serving as mulch and providing shelter for overwintering insects.
- ♦ Don't be too tidy; reduce mowing, pruning and raking. Create a brush pile for woody materials and allow herbaceous yard waste to compost.
- ♦ Let some of your yard go wild, removing non-native species as they appear and supplementing with native plantings as appropriate.
- ♦ Create a small pond or water feature (managing it carefully to avoid encouraging insect species that bite humans). Surround it with native plants that thrive under moist conditions.
- ♦ Avoid using chemical pesticides. Develop a mellow attitude to insect damage on your plants. After all, the purpose of this backyard oasis is to nurture insects, and insects have to eat. Caterpillars and nymphs mature into adult insects that may head skyward and become food for urban swifts.
- ♦ Gradually replace non-native species of grasses, flowers, shrubs, trees and vines with native ones. While contributing little or nothing to the nurturing of native insects, each non-native plant or tree takes up space that could be more productively occupied by native plants.
- ♦ If you live in an apartment, fill your balcony with planters of native wildflowers. If space is limited, even one plant or pot makes a contribution.

2.2. Additional Ideas for Rural Residents

- ♦ If you live on a rural property, in general, begin by following advice for urban dwellers (earlier section).
- ♦ Consider retiring your ride-on lawn mower or at least greatly curtailing its sphere of operations.
- ♦ Convert formerly mowed areas (mega-lawns, ditches, roadside verges) into more natural habitat.
- ♦ Consider creating a meadow of native wildflowers or planting a diversity of native trees and shrubs.
- ♦ If naturalizing an abandoned field or other waste area, take an active hand in restoration. Only a few native plants plus some non-native ones are likely to colonize the area on their own.

Native asters and goldenrods provide food for juvenile as well as adult insect stages.

- ♦ Reduce the size of fields; at intervals establish fencerows, hedgerows or shelterbelts of native trees, shrubs, grasses and wildflowers.

2.3. Recommended Native Plant Species to Grow in the London Region

- ♦ Check the websites for Carolinian Canada (InTheZoneGardens.ca) and the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (www.thamesriver.on.ca/watershed health) for lists of native plants and trees appropriate to London and region.
- ♦ Purchase native plants only from reputable sources and ensure they have not been dug up from wild habitats.
- ♦ Be mindful that it is not uncommon for garden centres to label cultivars and related, non-native species as native species. Such plants are unlikely to support the biodiversity of native insects that true native plant species will.
- ♦ Note that some native plants are advertised and sold as being insect and/or pest resistant. This usually means they have been impregnated with chemical pesticides. Given that one of the purposes of a native biodiversity garden is to promote the production of native insects, the purchase of such plants should be avoided.

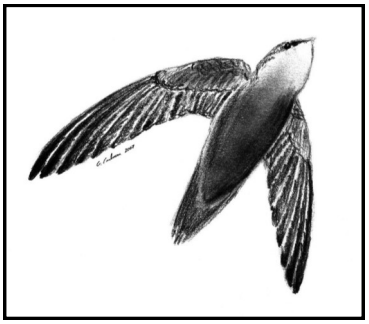
3. Preserve Chimneys Used by Swifts

In Ontario, the old brick chimneys in which swifts nest and roost are steadily disappearing and suitable new ones are no longer being built. When a pair of swifts is using a particular chimney for nesting, it is very important to keep it available and safe for the resident swifts, especially if nesting is underway. Swifts are known to return to the same chimney each year to nest.

Chimney Swifts are unable to enter or use chimneys that are topped by metal topknots or wire screening.

- ♦ Help identify chimneys used by swifts for nesting and roosting.
- ♦ Advocate for the preservation of older chimneys used by swifts.
- ♦ If your home, business or workplace has a large-diameter, 1960s or earlier, brick chimney suitable for swifts, try to ensure that the top remains open; avoid capping the chimney or lining it with metal.
- ♦ If you are converting a furnace or hot water heater to gas, rather than installing a metal chimney lining, investigate the option of an alternative venting system, leaving the chimney unused, unlined, uncapped and available for swifts.
- ♦ If your building has two chimneys and you have decided to line and cap, consider leaving one unmodified for use by swifts.
- ♦ If raccoons or squirrels are a concern, to prevent access, wrap a 60-centimetre (2-foot) sheath of metal flashing around the outside of the chimney just below the top and secure it in place. Trimming back overhanging branches also reduces access by nuisance wildlife to your roof and chimney.
- ♦ If your fireplace flue is suitable for swifts, keep the damper closed and the top open; avoid using the fireplace from May through September.
- ♦ If you detect swifts nesting in your fireplace chimney and are bothered by the noise of food-begging calls, close the damper tightly and temporarily pack insulation (but not fibreglass) beneath it to mute the sound until the young have learned to fly and feed on their own (usually within about two weeks).
- ♦ Have your chimney (especially if wood or coal is burned) cleaned annually, avoiding the swift season (late April to early October). Regular cleaning reduces the risk of creosote accumulation and fire, and lessens the likelihood that swift nests will fall down before young have left them.
- ♦ If rain entering your chimney is a concern, place a small roof (on tall legs) high enough above the top of the chimney (about 30 centimetres [1 foot]) to allow swifts to enter.
- ♦ If your chimney is lined with metal, keep it capped to prevent swifts and other wildlife from entering and becoming trapped inside.
- ♦ If your chimney is deemed unsafe, instead of demolition, explore the possibility of repairs, height reduction, or other modifications that will permit swifts to continue to use it.
- ♦ Do not leave food garbage in unsecured containers; this may encourage raccoons, which could prey on swifts inside chimneys or commandeer chimneys for their own use.

4. Help Protect Habitat that Produces Food for Swifts



- ♦ Promote protection of healthy natural habitats such as wetlands and woodlands, which help produce the insects on which swifts depend for food.
- ♦ Support and donate to conservation organizations that preserve and restore healthy natural landscapes where native plants, animals, birds and insects can thrive.
- ♦ Speak up for the cessation of ditch and roadside mowing by rural municipalities, as such practices reduce the supply of insects that could become swift food.
- ♦ Ask municipalities to cease spraying herbicides along rural roadsides, as this activity poisons and destroys plants that are essential sources of food for native insects.
- ♦ Encourage rural landowners to preserve meadowlands and establish hedgerows as habitat for insects that feed birds, including aerial insectivores.
- ♦ Encourage policy changes that would reduce drainage of low-lying areas and the lowering of the water table on nearby lands (swamp forests and other wetlands are excellent habitat for producing insects).
- ♦ Organize community plantings of native vegetation (e.g., schoolyards).
- ♦ Become involved in campaigns to help reduce pesticide use across all sectors.
- ♦ Advocate for compact cities and the curbing of urban sprawl.

5. Educate Yourself and Others: Spread the Word about Swifts and their Plight

- ♦ Educate yourself, your family, friends and neighbours about Chimney Swifts, their fascinating way of life and the problems they face. Tell associates about the alarming decline of swifts and the importance of preserving chimneys currently used by swifts as nest and roost sites. Help others learn more by checking out the swift page at http://www.naturelondon.com/chimney-swifts-resources/
- ♦ Learn to recognize Chimney Swifts and their vocalizations, and develop the habit of looking up to enjoy the birds' aerial acrobatics. Point out swifts to friends and colleagues. Invite others to join you in watching the amazing spectacle of swifts descending into a chimney to roost.
- ♦ Celebrate Chimney Swifts, which are cute, talkative, gregarious and endearing, as well as accomplished stunt flyers.
- ♦ If you find an injured or orphaned Chimney Swift, contact Swift Care Ontario (519-434-0763 or swiftcareontario@gmail.com).

6. Reduce Your Personal Ecological Footprint

- ♦ Avoid using chemical pesticides and fertilizers. These may travel from your property via the storm sewer system and negatively impact local wetlands and waterways. Such areas are important incubators for many species of insects on which swifts dine.
- ♦ Drastically reduce your own ecological footprint. Eat organic foods. Walk, bicycle or take the bus whenever possible. Lowering your demand for consumer goods and expanded transportation networks reduces both air and water pollution, and slows the rate of habitat loss and other environmentally damaging effects of a consumptive lifestyle.

7. Help Nature London Learn More about Local Swifts and the Chimneys They Use

- ♦ Learn to identify swifts and how to detect nest/roost chimneys.
- ♦ In London, report date, location and numbers of swifts seen entering or exiting chimneys to chimneyswift@naturelondon.com.
- ♦ Sign up to help with regular monitoring of chimneys used by swifts (chimneyswift@naturelondon.com).
- ♦ To report swifts entering chimneys outside of London, contact ontarioswiftwatch@birdscanada.org.

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