

Annual Report, 2019/20, of Nature London Chimney Swift Initiative

This account covers the 12 months from Nov 1/19 to Oct 31/20, a period that enables reporting on a single (April-to-October) season of Chimney Swift presence in London.

Introduction

During much of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a dampening effect on Nature London's ability to deliver its multi-pronged program of Chimney Swift initiatives. Specifically, from March 2020 onward, outreach and advocacy activities were reduced, and the planned spring and early summer monitoring program was suspended. Following consultations with the Nature London Board and the Middlesex-London Health Unit, formal monitoring began in mid-July, at which time a strict COVID-19 protocol was implemented to keep volunteers safe. Despite the limitations, 2020 was a highly productive and successful year for swift initiatives in London.

Once again, the flagship program, capably organized by Sandy Symmes, was weekly evening monitoring at 13 targeted chimneys. Additional monitoring took place at some of these chimneys throughout the season, and also at other chimneys. About 55 volunteers helped with monitoring.

As in 2019, the London monitoring program operated independently, using its own guidelines, online data portal, and field forms. All data collected were later submitted via spreadsheets to the provincial database maintained by Ontario SwiftWatch (Birds Canada).

A summary of swift-related initiatives during the past year follows, presented in three categories: Education/Outreach, Conservation/Advocacy and Monitoring/Data Collection.

Education/Outreach

- Prepared 84-page report on the 2019 daytime monitoring pilot project for participants and others; provided customized reports to landlords of 12 swift chimneys in the pilot.
- Published overview of 2019 Nature London swift activities in Winter 2020 *Cardinal*.
- On Nature London website, maintained page of educational materials about swifts.
- Delivered PowerPoint presentations on swifts to
 - Dundas Street Centre United Church – Nov 17/19 (attendance 40),
 - Lambton Wildlife in Sarnia – Feb 24/20 (attendance 60+).
- In 2020, provided updates on swift usage of their chimneys to landlords of 10 active chimneys.
- Posted recent videos of swifts entering London chimneys on NL's YouTube Channel.
- Via e-newsletters and Facebook provided NL members with updates on sites of big fall roosts.
- During monitoring, educated passersby through conversation and swift info "postcards".
- Exchanged information and ideas with other swift stakeholders in MB, PQ, ON and US.

Conservation/Advocacy

- In response to requests, compiled info re
 - Strategies to encourage preservation of swift chimneys,
 - Evidence that swifts and nests in chimneys pose no health or safety hazards,
 - Designs and locations of artificial swift towers that work in Canada.
- Submitted report to Transport Canada and Canadian Wildlife Service of Jul 4/20 incident of a recreational drone buzzing a swift-occupied chimney, which was abandoned soon after.
- Contacted Development Services, City of London, urging action re three deteriorating chimneys of heritage interest in McCormick Area Secondary Plan district; all were used by swifts in 2020.
- Participated in process of re-evaluating the status of the Chimney Swift by COSSARO (Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario):
 - Submitted 13 pages of input based on London swift data and observations since 2003,
 - As observers, attended virtual meeting on Sep 24/20 (W Wake and S Symmes).
- As per five-year plan:
 - Updated photo inventory of known London swift chimneys,

- Updated status of 180 known swift chimneys: 120 available, 60 demolished or capped,
- Checked approximately half the 120 chimneys for current swift usage.
- Identified suitable site (Smith Fruit) for release of three orphaned swifts from Destined to Fly Wildlife Rehab Centre in Harrowsmith (Sep 8).

Monitoring / Data Collection

- Tried to create meaningful and enjoyable experiences for volunteer monitors.
- Generally followed monitoring protocol used in 2019, with updated guidelines and materials for 2020, including COVID-19 protocol.
- Engaged approximately 55 volunteer monitors, new ones being mentored by experienced ones.
- Made 139 Tuesday evening monitoring visits (11 weeks) to 13 chimneys, Jul 14 to Sep 22, rotating volunteers among sites.
- Made 85 additional early, mid- and late-season monitoring visits to 13 chimneys, May 6 to Oct 1.
- Made 55 monitoring visits to 48 other swift chimneys (breeding season plus some fall migration).
- Made single monitoring visits to 8 chimneys on spec (2 held swifts).
- Collected data on sightings of Common Nighthawks.
- Sent out weekly e-communication to volunteers: schedule of monitoring assignments; cumulative results for each chimney; table plus analysis of current-week results; trends, counting tips; etc.
- Shared 279 data entries via spreadsheet with Ontario SwiftWatch (Birds Canada).
- Hosted monitors' end-of-season gathering via Zoom (Oct 20); presenter W Wake (attendance 22).
 - Video of session available via dropbox until Nov 30.
- Prepared and distributed end-of season monitoring report for 2020 (30 pages).

Highlights of Monitoring Results in 2020

- Seven chimneys held roosts of at least 20 swifts for at least a few weeks of the season.
- First swifts of season in London seen Apr 29, last on Sep 27.
- Combined peak fall counts at 13 chimneys greater than in 2019 but less than in 2018; peak came later than in 2019 but about the same time as in 2018.

Thanks to

- The dedicated volunteer monitors, the backbone of Nature London's swift monitoring program,
- Sandy Symmes, organizer, communicator and trouble-shooter par excellence,
- Ric Symmes, creator of online data portal,
- Dave Wake, creator of tables, graphs, spreadsheets, etc. (computer guru),
- Wufoo, operator of data entry system, allowed Nature London a reduced rate,
- Nature London, sponsor and funder, and facilitator of Zoom meeting.

Winifred Wake
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