



# INTRODUCTION TO CHIMNEY SWIFTS IN LONDON, ONTARIO



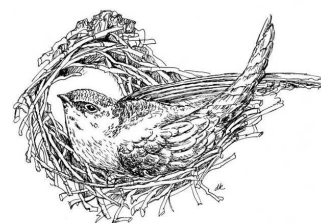
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## What is a Chimney Swift?

- A Chimney Swift is a small, sooty-coloured bird with long pointed wings and a stubby tail.
- Swifts fly from dawn to dusk, catching approximately 1000 insects a day (many more if feeding young).
- Swifts feed on insects that have wafted upward after completing immature stages on plants or in waterways.
- The design of their feet prevents swifts from landing on the ground or perching in trees or other structures.
- Swifts traditionally nested and roosted inside large-diameter hollow trees or dark corners of barns.
- Swifts land inside chimneys (or hollow trees) to tend nests or roost at night by clinging vertically to bricks.
- There is only one nesting pair per chimney, but some non-breeders sometimes roost in the same chimney.
- Chimney Swifts breed in southern Canada and eastern United States and winter in South America.
- Because swifts fly high and never land where they can be seen, few people even know they exist!
- Swifts are present in London from late April until early October.

## A Threatened Species

- Chimney Swifts were once one of our commonest summer birds.
  - From 1970 to 2015 (45 years), Breeding Bird Survey Data show
    - decline in Canada 90%
    - decline in Ontario 94%
  - From 2005 to 2015 (10 years)
    - decline in Canada 43%
    - decline in Ontario 47%
    - annual decline rate (Can & Ont) 6%
- Since 2009 the Chimney Swift has been designated as THREATENED in Ontario and in Canada.
- Chimneys Swifts and their habitat are protected under federal and provincial species-at-risk legislation:
  - provincial legislation has been supplemented by policies that significantly reduce protection.
  - federal legislation applies only on federal lands.
- Chimney Swift Recovery Strategies are required under federal and provincial legislation (but none to date).
- Swifts and their nesting habitat are protected by the federal Migratory Birds Convention Act i.e., birds and nests of migratory species cannot be harmed.



## Why Chimney Swifts Are in Trouble

- Problems with their food supply (insects caught in flight):
  - ◆ Widespread use of pesticides, including neonicotinoids, on farmlands.
  - ◆ Loss and/or degradation of insect-producing habitat, e.g.,
    - wetland drainage, woodland clearance, removal of hedgerows;
    - mowing of ditches and roadsides, expansion of mega lawns;
    - industrial agriculture: increase in vast monocultures of farmed crops;
    - expanding cities and roadways;
    - proliferation of non-native trees, which produce very few insects edible to native birds.
  - ◆ Changes in timing of peak insect abundance – possibly out of synch with peak needs of nestlings.
  - ◆ Insect species available to swifts are smaller, less abundant and less nutritious than formerly.
- Shortage of nesting and roosting sites:
  - ◆ Few large-diameter hollow trees and old wooden barns (and these may be occupied by raccoons).
  - ◆ Ongoing loss of large, uncapped, unlined brick chimneys of the type favoured by swifts.
  - ◆ Unlined brick chimneys that are suitable for swifts have not been built since the 1960s.
  - ◆ Slow progress in developing designs for artificial chimneys that Ontario swifts find acceptable.
- Extreme weather events (increasing in frequency and severity in recent years):
  - ◆ Hurricanes, heavy-rain events and temperature swings during shoulder and nesting seasons may affect migration, disrupt food supply and wash away nests.
- Problems along migration routes and on the wintering grounds (e.g., logging, fire, land clearance, pesticides)



## Where to Find Swifts in the London Region

- Since 2003, approximately 180 chimneys used by swifts in London have been identified; one-third have since been demolished or capped.
- There are undoubtedly other chimneys used by swifts in London that have not yet been “discovered”.
- Also look for unlined, open-topped brick chimneys in the many small towns and villages throughout southwestern Ontario, as such chimneys may harbour swifts.
- Pre-1960s buildings such as churches, schools, businesses, factories and older homes with large chimneys hold potential for housing swifts.
- From May to September, listen for chattering swifts high overhead; then look for swifts entering chimneys.
- For tips on watching swifts and suggestions for the best sites for seeing swifts in London, go to <http://www.naturelondon.com/chimney-swifts-resources/> “Where to See Chimney Swifts in London, Ont”.

## How You Can Help Chimney Swifts

- 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](mailto:chimneyswift@naturelondon.com).
  - ◆ Sign up to help with regular monitoring of London chimneys used by swifts ([chimneyswift@naturelondon.com](mailto:chimneyswift@naturelondon.com)).
- To report swifts entering chimneys outside of London, contact [ontarioswiftwatch@birdscanada.org](mailto:ontarioswiftwatch@birdscanada.org).
- Help protect the habitat needed by swifts for nesting and roosting and for production of the insects they eat:
  - ◆ Advocate for protection of older chimneys used by swifts.
  - ◆ Promote protection of woodlands, wetlands, waterways, roadside verges and other places where insects eaten by swifts and other birds are produced.
  - ◆ Support (and donate to) conservation organizations that preserve healthy natural landscapes where native plants, animals, birds, insects, etc. can thrive.
- Take personal action at home:
  - ◆ If you have a chimney used by swifts:
    - Keep the top open and damper closed; don't use your fireplace during swift season.
    - Clean your chimney and do other maintenance between October and April.
    - If converting to a gas furnace, keep chimney available to swifts by venting elsewhere.
  - ◆ Turn your property into an oasis of native vegetation that supports the insects that feed native birds:
    - Plant only native trees, shrubs and flowers (avoid non-natives or cultivars).
    - Gradually remove non-native plants and trees, as few insects live on them and they take up space that could be more productively occupied by native trees, shrubs and flowers.
    - Start by planting just one native plant, shrub or tree; then add more over time.
  - ◆ Reduce your ecological footprint to help slow climate change and loss of healthy native habitats.
- Take action in the community:
  - ◆ Promote community plantings of native vegetation (schoolyards, public parks, etc.).
  - ◆ Educate neighbours and friends; celebrate swifts!
  - ◆ Advocate for reduction in use of pesticides, especially neonicotinoids.

## Learn More about Chimney Swifts

- Visit the Nature London website:  
<http://www.naturelondon.com/chimney-swifts-resources/>
- Schedule a free PowerPoint presentation; contact [chimneyswift@naturelondon.com](mailto:chimneyswift@naturelondon.com).

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