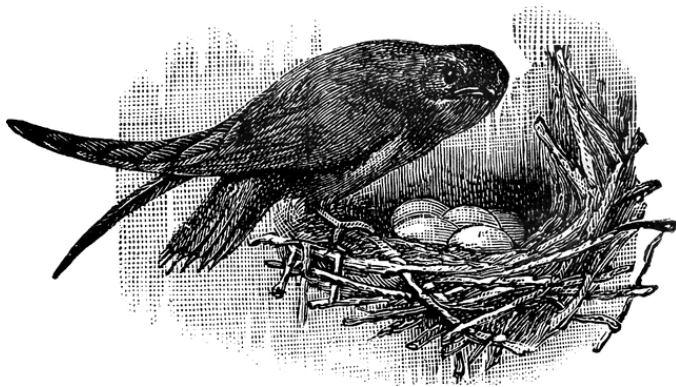


Creature Feature: Winter 2015

By W. Scott Douglas

Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)



In the summer months, when I come out of my office in Ewing, NJ to come home in the evening, I am often treated with the site of a dozen or so chimney swifts circling high overhead. These acrobatic “flying cigars” are easily distinguished from swallows by their silhouettes. Like swallows, swifts

fly with long glides and short quick bursts of flapping, but they have disproportionately long wings (11-12 inches) with a short blunt body and tail (5-6 inches). In silhouette it’s hard to tell, but the bird is sooty olive above and grayish brown below, with a pale throat.

On closer inspection, which is rare, you might see the exposed pin feathers on the tail that allow the swift to lock in to the sheer faces that it uses for nest locations. Swifts cannot perch like most birds, they cling instead, an adaptation which allows them to exploit crevices, caves and hollows that befuddle predators. They, like the eastern peewee and barn swallow were threatened by man’s removal of old growth forests and the hollow trees that were once common, but readily accepted man-made structures as replacements. The peewee likes our bridges, and the barn swallow likes farm buildings, but swifts actually prefer industrial structures, especially large, high chimneys, air vents, and wells. They will roost in residential chimneys as well; the brick and mortar ones, not the metal ones, and only if they have unrestricted openings at the top. They especially like structures near moving water, where they mix readily with swallows and purple martins, but usually higher in altitude. The chimney swift, *Chaetura pelagica*, breeds throughout the eastern US and southeast Canada. While they typically hunt and migrate in small groups of

less than 20, hundreds and even thousands of individuals can occupy communal roosts. Nesting is restricted to a single monogamous couple, however, making abundant suitable nesting locations very important to population health. Nests are a small semicircle of short sticks with a bowl at the bottom that are attached with saliva to secluded and protected vertical surfaces. Since the birds cannot land on branches or on the ground, every stick is collected while on the wing. Swifts are voracious insectivores; a single pair with young in the nest can consume 5,000-6,000 insects every day. The breeding season is short - it only takes about 30 days for a couple to bring its young to fledge. After fledging, the adults leave the nest site for communal roosts.

Chimney swifts, and the related Vaux's swift, were once abundant throughout the eastern US. Their adaptability made them able to withstand the widespread habitat loss that came with European settlement; in fact they thrived to the point that many people considered them a nuisance. With the decline of manufacturing in recent decades, many community planners have pushed to dismantle the chimneys and industrial structures that swifts used for roosting and nesting. Many people, including myself, close off their chimneys to deter nesting rodents and raccoons and to keep water out. While a nest of swifts would be welcome to most, they are incredibly loud housemates. The calls of the 3-5 young echo off the enclosed space every time a haggard parent returns with food. While most readers of this newsletter would be thrilled to have swifts in residence, it is good to remind less sensitive acquaintances that it is illegal to disturb any nesting songbird. There are plans on the internet for artificial chimneys, but these large structures are projects for the diehard swift fan or a nature preserve (perhaps Mariton would consider one?). I have not documented swifts in the Watershed, but I am sure they are here, in limited numbers. If you do happen to know of a nest or roost, do let me know.

