



DO YOU KNOW.....?

ABOUT CHIMNEY SWIFTS?

A Species Profile

Chimney Swifts, though common, are most unusual birds. They cannot perch like normal birds. They cling to vertical surfaces like walls, especially inside chimneys, hence the name. They are so aerial that all feeding, drinking, bathing, courting, gathering of nest materials and, possibly, even mating are accomplished in flight. A nine year old Swift was estimated to have flown 1,350,000 miles during its life, including its yearly migrations between the U.S. and South America. Wouldn't you like to have those frequent flier miles!

Swifts are small birds, black above and sooty gray below. At hatching, they are totally naked. Their beaks appear very small but conceal an enormous mouth relative to their size. They have tiny feet and legs and sharp, stiff spines at the tip of the tail feathers which help them maintain their vertical position, similar to the stiff tail feathers of woodpeckers.

When constructing a nest, Swifts find a tree with many dead twigs of the appropriate size. They dive in and grab a twig, breaking it off with their feet as they fly. The twig is transferred from

feet to beak as they return to the nest site. It may take as long as thirty days to build the nest, even with Mom and Dad both working on it. The twigs are glued to a vertical surface (chimney) with a specialized saliva. Certain Swifts build their nest entirely of saliva. If you've ever ordered authentic Bird's Nest Soup at an Oriental restaurant, that's the nest that's used. Yes, you're dining on bird spit and paying dearly for the privilege.

These beautiful creatures are one of Nature's most efficient means of pest control. They eat only insects, consuming hundreds of gnats, flies, mosquitoes, etc. each day. A certain European species has been found to carry as many as 600 insects in a ball in its throat while feeding young. With a few Chimney Swifts, you might enjoy a mosquito-free cook-out on the patio. No need to purchase a fancy (and expensive) Swift house; all they need is an uncapped chimney. Of course, uncapped chimneys also invite raccoons and squirrels which may not be quite as welcome. Predator guards fashioned from 2' to 3' wide strips of galvanized metal flashing wrapped around the top of a chimney will usually deter unwanted mammals.

Baby Swifts typically arrive in our area late in the season, late July to August. They have only one clutch per year and Second Chance usually receives between 35 and 40 babies each season. The usual reason for admission is that the nest has fallen into the fireplace. The nests are located anywhere from 2' to 22' from the top of the chimney. If you have your chimney cleaned regularly, the nest is less likely to fall. If it does fall and the babies are completely feathered and have their eyes wide open, you may be able to "stick" them on the inside of the chimney above the flue and allow Mom and Dad to continue their duties. Testing their ability to cling on the outside of the chimney will help determine if they have suffered any injury. If that's not possible, or the bird is unable to cling well, Second Chance is happy to accept these remarkable birds. In fact Chimney Swifts are a favorite. They require a special feeding technique and special housing but are well worth the extra effort.

References:

- * Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds
- * Stokes Nature Guide, Vol. 1
- * The Birder's Handbook
- * Paul & Georgan Kyle, Driftwood Wildlife Asso., Austin, TX personal communication
- * Personal Observations

NOW YOU KNOW!!!!!!

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