



Keep Chimney Swifts Common in Wisconsin!



Swifts in Your Chimney?

If you have Chimney Swifts in your chimney, congratulations! You are a “swift landlord.” Swifts will help keep insect numbers in check and eat up to half their weight in flying insects each day!

What is a Chimney Swift? Chimney Swifts are dark gray-brown, swallow-like birds with long, slightly curved wings and stubby tails. They fly with stiff, rapid wing beats. Their call while in flight is a series of quick, chattering noises. This small bird spends almost its entire life in flight, feeding and drinking on the wing. Chimney Swifts nest and roost in chimneys and on vertical surfaces in dim, enclosed spaces.

Unfortunately, Chimney Swift populations are declining in numbers throughout North America. One reason for this decline may be that fewer chimneys remain uncapped and available as habitat. Swifts return to the same chimney each year and they depend on us to provide their only option for nesting.



Joni Denker



WI Humane Society

Fallen Nest or Injured Bird?

If you keep the chimney clean and the fireplace damper closed, you likely will not have a problem with swifts entering the house from the fireplace. Occasionally, hard summer rains may loosen the nest from the masonry chimney, especially if there is a creosote buildup. If the nest falls onto the damper, or if the damper is open, you may find a nest or young chicks in the fireplace.

If this happens, contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator to decide on the most appropriate action. In Wisconsin, refer to dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/directory.html to find a local rehabilitator or facility that can help. You can also contact the **Wisconsin Chimney Swift Working Group at (608) 658-4139.**

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Being a Swift Landlord

It’s easy to be a swift landlord. The only requirement is to keep your chimney clean. Why? Because soot can build up and may prevent the swifts’ nest from adhering securely to the chimney wall. This may cause the nest to fall, leading to the death of the nestling swifts. The best time for chimneys to be cleaned in Wisconsin is in March or early April, after the winter and before the swifts return from South America. Tell your chimney sweep that you are aware of Chimney Swifts using the chimney.

If you have a masonry chimney, please consider keeping it uncapped from mid-April to mid-October, to encourage use by swifts. After the swifts have left on their migration south, the chimney can be used for a working fireplace in fall and winter.



Jim Edlhuber



(608) 658-4139
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Chimney Swift Structure Use

There are two types of roosts that Chimney Swifts use: nesting roosts and resting roosts.



Jack Bartholmai

Nesting Roosts are used during the breeding season. Only one Chimney Swift pair nests per chimney. When nest building they gather twigs in flight, snapping them off with their feet as they pass. An average nest consists of 265 twigs held together with saliva.



Dick Nikolai

Resting Roosts are used during migration and also by unmated swifts in summer. Swifts gather in groups (sometimes very, very large groups) in communal roosts in large commercial chimneys, often whirling in a huge circle as they funnel down for the night.



Jack Bartholmai

Chimney Swifts historically nested and roosted in hollow trees. As American pioneers moved westward across the continent, they cleared forests and removed the swifts' natural habitat. The birds that Audubon called American Swifts became known as Chimney Swifts as they readily adapted to the masonry chimneys erected by those same pioneers. Over the decades, the range of the swifts expanded with the ever increasing availability of this new, man-made habitat. However, environmental changes, including fewer chimneys, are now challenging this species.

What's That Sound in My Chimney?

Chimney Swifts create a variety of sounds when nesting. There is the "whooshing" sound of their wings as they come and go from the chimney. They utter a gentle "chipping" as they socialize with one another during nest-building and at night. The most audible sounds are those of the young which includes a very loud, high-pitched "yippering" as they beg for food from the parents, and a mechanical, hissing alarm call made when disturbed or frightened.

Once the sound of the young becomes noticeable, they are usually only 10 days or so from leaving the nest. The homeowners' tolerance during this critical period of the swifts' development is very important. Keeping the damper closed and packing the fireplace with insulation can dampen the sound to tolerable levels.

For nesting, Chimney Swifts do not require acres of unspoiled wilderness, expansive wetlands or complicated wildlife management plans. All that is needed is one square foot of unused column such as our chimneys during the summer when not being used...and a little tolerance.

This is an edited excerpt from Rehabilitation and Conservation of Chimney Swifts, Fourth Edition by Paul and Georgan Kyle. Copyright, 2004

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