

# Move over Santa

the chimney swifts are coming



by Carla Burgess, *Special to the Museum*

It's rare that you can witness an astonishing wildlife scene from the vantage of a city street. But if you want to see a hoard of chimney swifts, it could be the perfect spot. In mid-September 2007, Museum naturalist John Connors led a group of birdwatchers to a street corner in downtown Raleigh to observe a huge group of chimney swifts turn in for the night. Their roost was inside the chimney of an old, eight-story office building. At dusk, a dark, swirling mass of more than 3,000 birds appeared to be sucked into the chimney, like smoke in reverse.

The show began about an hour before sunset. Birds returning from their foraging territory gathered near the site, flying high in the sky, swooping and diving in unorganized fashion as they chattered nonstop. After a long period of meeting and greeting, the group of acrobats fell into formation, swirling like the outer bands of a hurricane before the first intrepid swift decided to take the plunge. Others soon followed, and the birds continued to drop

into the chimney with increasing intensity. Twenty minutes later, not a wisp of smoke remained.

Connors and his fellow birdwatchers were observing "staging" behavior — a prelude to the swifts' fall migration to the upper Amazon basin, where they spend the winter. After the birds have nested, raised their young and fattened up on summer insects, they begin to assemble during late summer and early autumn in large communal roosts.

Though from a distance swifts appear to dive into their roost, they actually slow down abruptly at the chimney's lip and flutter down into the chimney tail-first. Once inside, the birds cling to the brick walls, propped up by their stubby tails, and roost shoulder-to-shoulder until dawn. Chimney swifts have small feet but strong claws designed for clinging to rough, vertical surfaces. The birds are unable to perch or stand up straight, so unless they are building a nest or feeding their young, they fly all day. They propel their 5-inch-long, cigar-shaped bodies through the sky on long, slender wings — at dazzling speeds.

"Here's a bird that gets up shortly after dawn, say 7 o'clock, flies 30 to 50 miles an hour, all day long for 12 hours," says Connors. "That's up to 600 miles in one day. It's pretty extraordinary." Chimney swifts feed on the wing, catching insects in the air or skimming them from the surface of bodies of water. They buzz through treetops, breaking off twigs for





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their nests without stopping, using their feet or beaks. The birds are even capable of mating in the air, though they primarily copulate within their nest site.

### A swift by any other name

Chimney swifts were not always chimney swifts. They were once called American swifts, and they lived in old, hollow trees. When Europeans began colonizing North America, they felled forests and removed old trees — and thus removed habitat for American swifts. Yet it didn't spell doom for the birds. "Fortunately, people had a use for their lumber that would ultimately help the swift," says Connors. "The same people that were cutting down the trees were also building homes, heating with wood and building fireplaces." They vented the smoke with tall, vertical shafts made of brick — which to swifts investigating new territories must have

looked a lot like, well, home. The American swift soon became the chimney swift. The earliest record of a swift nesting in a chimney was from 1672 in Maine. "By all reckoning, this species easily could have gone into extinction," says Connors. "It didn't though because it made a remarkable behavioral shift."

Chimneys like the one on the old Raleigh office building are increasingly precious real estate for swifts, as more and more large, old buildings meet the bulldozer and as property owners seal off unused chimneys. Breeding swifts, which nest only one pair per chimney, face similar obstacles in residential areas, where people are more frequently lining or capping chimneys. Because most natural roost sites have vanished, the fate of chimney swifts remains in human hands. "Chimney swifts are now virtually totally dependent on us," says Connors.

Today, some of the birds are making another housing transition — into man-made structures built solely for them. Conservationists are designing and building towers made of wood or concrete block to give the swifts alternative habitat. They can also be built and used in back yards. Additionally, homeowners are encouraged to leave their chimneys open to swifts. Chimney swifts return to North Carolina to begin nesting in early April, and they depart by October. 🐦

*For information about sharing your home peaceably with chimney swifts, visit [www.chimneyswifts.org](http://www.chimneyswifts.org), or you can e-mail [john.connors@ncmail.net](mailto:john.connors@ncmail.net) or the Museum curator of birds at [john.gerwin@ncmail.net](mailto:john.gerwin@ncmail.net).*



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Chimney swifts cement twigs together with glutinous saliva to form nests on the vertical insides of chimneys, or in this case a man-made tower. Bird's nest soup, a delicacy in Chinese cuisine, is made from the all-saliva nest of an East Indies species of swift.