

Tales from a Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Watching out for swifts

You have to be swift with your binoculars or camera to catch sight of a swift zooming by, swiftly in pursuit of a moth, mosquito, beetle, gnat or other small flying insect. And, if it happens to be Vaux's swift, aka Vox, or Voh's swift, or any of the other swift swifts we have zipping about Central Oregon, you gotta be even swifter.

If you go on a birding excursion to Fort Rock between May and July you'll see hundreds of white-throated swifts swooping around the steep walls of the old mud volcano pursuing flying insects, many of which are mosquitoes. Strangely enough, they were not there in the 1950s, but arrived some time after 1965.

If you're keeping a Life List of Birds, a visit to the Oregon Coast may provide you with a sighting of the black swift, a rare visitor to Oregon. Like all the swifts, they, too, look like a flying cigar with crescent-shaped wings. While most swifts, such as the black and white-throated, have a well-defined tail, but Vaux's swift's body looks exactly like a cigar.

Swifts spend their entire day zig-zagging through the air, mouths wide open, scooping in insects to keep their high metabolism going full-bore as they make their way south all the way to Panama

and points south, where they'll spend winter.

Chimneys are the substitute today for their ancient shelters and nesting places: huge, hollow trees of the old-growth forests. Luckily, as ancient forests vanished into sawmills to become lumber, Vaux's swifts discovered old, unused brick chimneys for nesting and resting. Without these substitutes, they would be as extinct as the passenger pigeon.

This week's best story about swifts comes from the Oregon birder's website, OBOL, where, over in Rainier, Darrell Whipple, had this tale to tell...

After excluding birds for 27 years, the old brick chimney at Riverside Community Church in Rainier is now open to Vaux's swifts. It is the largest chimney in Rainier and one of the largest on the swift's migration flyway, able to accommodate 20,000 roosting birds at one time, according to Larry Schwitters of Issaquah, founder and coordinator of "Vaux's Happening."

Larry drove down to Rainier on the last day of April, expecting to watch the grate removal operation as a spectator. But he ended up fishing the grate out himself, 30 feet up in the manlift piloted by Pastor Paul Rice of Riverside Community Church.

Everyone watched with some trepidation as Paul and Larry first figured out how to operate the manlift. Would this machine reach the top of the chimney? Paul and David went up in the bucket to scope it out. And horrors! The darn thing was two feet too short reaching the grate. What to do now? Brainstorming time.

They decided to snug the lift up as close as the curb and fence would allow, and to rise up at a more advantageous angle. Larry went up

with Paul this time and, channeling his inner rock-climber, got his head and arms over the lip of the chimney to see what the grate looked like and what tools it would take to lift it out of there — and while doing so, he somehow still had two feet on the bucket.

The team fashioned a couple of rods with hooks deftly attached, such that the grate could be snagged and levered up and out.

Makeshift tools and ropes in hand, and Larry fitted out in a harness Paul had dug up, they launched again for the (hopefully) final effort in the manlift. Wonder of wonders, the plan worked like a charm! Larry in harness got the grate out by hook or by crook, David snapped a couple pictures, and Paul landed the manlift with expert precision.

Years ago, the residents of Bend didn't have to travel anywhere to see Vaux's swifts; throughout most of September they put on an air show everyone can enjoy right in town.

Just before dark (about 7 p.m.), what looked like a wisp of smoke appeared in the darkening sky heading for the little craft shop, Christmas Presence, on 644 Harriman,

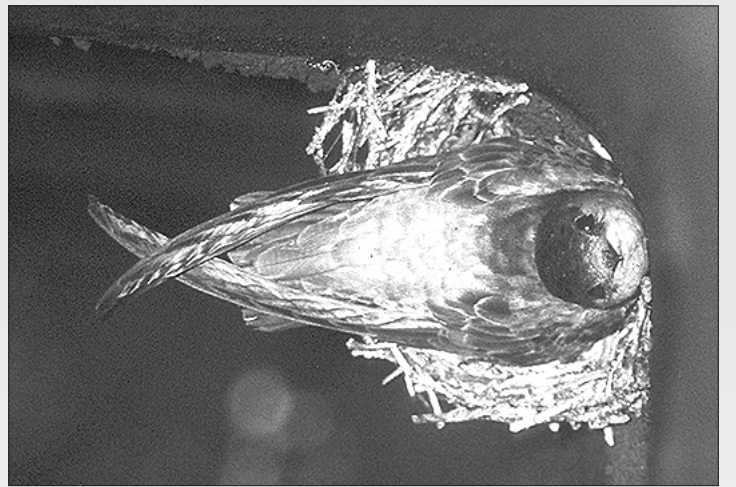


PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

A female Vaux's swift on her nest in the chimney of a house in Madras.

between Hill and Franklin. As the "smoke" got closer individual dots could be made out, zooming about each other, and in a few seconds spectators were able to make them out: 30 to 100 Vaux's swifts. Then, with astonishing accuracy, they all went spiraling down into the tall, brick chimney on the roof of the craft shop.

How they organized themselves inside the old brick chimney without stepping on one another was one of those mysteries of nature, but they all found a way to crowd together, clinging to the bricks and settled down for a comfortable night's sleep.

There is a nationwide effort to keep tabs on swift populations, and Kim Boddie, of East Cascades Audubon Society, is the person who once counted the Christmas Presence migrating population. In times past, Kim has seen (with other ECAS birders) as few as 27 and as many as 260 swifts.

With that in mind, why don't you take a few moments at the end of your busy day, park your camp chair next to the old brick chimney in your neighborhood about 7 p.m.; watch for swifts swiftly descending, and call ECAS member Miriam Lipsitz at 541-330-0933 if you see any.

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