

# Migratory bird struggles for shelter as chimneys torn down

GILLIAN FLACCUS  
Associated Press

PORTLAND — A crowd of several hundred people gathered in the growing darkness outside Chapman Elementary School in Portland before the first Vaux's Swift darted into view high above.

Minutes later, thousands of the tiny birds were swooping and swirling like a cloud of pulsating black ink as they circled a tall brick chimney silhouetted by the fading light.

The humans below, watching from a patchwork of blankets and empty picnic baskets, cheered as the flock poured into the chimney all at once, like water spiraling down a drain.

The swifts' noisy migratory stopover each fall has made this chimney famous with bird lovers as far away as Europe and is a quirky Portland tradition so embraced by locals that the school keeps the diminutive Vaux's Swift as its mascot.

But in recent years, fewer of the beloved birds have shown up. The birds were already struggling because of the destruction of old-growth forests and now some scientists believe they are being further impacted by the destruction of old brick chimneys along their migratory path.

At least the last two years, the migrating birds have stopped and roosted in Pendleton.

The birds can fly for about 100 miles at a time between stops as they travel from Canada to Mexico and back each year and roost in large numbers in tight, enclosed spaces because their body temperature drops at night.

But the decades-old smoke stacks they've adopted are getting torn down and capped off along the West Coast because of redevelopment, seismic concerns and an urban annoyance with swift poop and noisy flocks. When a chimney that's been a major roosting site disappears, no one is sure exactly where they go.

After adapting to live alongside humans in an urban landscape, the graceful birds are being evicted once again. Now, a movement has taken flight to build concrete



AP Photo/Don Ryan

In this Sept. 13 photo, migratory Vaux's Swifts are a blur as they race to roost for the night inside a large, brick chimney at Chapman Elementary School in Portland. Numbers of Vaux's Swifts are in decline, in part scientists say because of the destruction of the brick chimneys that they use to roost during their annual fall migration.

towers to replace the chimneys that are lost.

"It's obvious, it's going (to) be real easy for a time to come when the swifts cannot find a nice, brick roost site," said Larry Schwitters, an expert on the West Coast swift species who lives outside Seattle. "The problem at this point is us. We're the ones causing their decline."

The birds are 4 inches long and grayish-brown with a jaunty black eyepatch that makes them look like tiny, winged Zorros. Their wings make elegant crescents in the air.

The West Coast cousins to the more well-known East Coast chimney swifts can only perch vertically and must cling to hollowed out trees or, in urban settings, the insides of old chimneys. Only brick smoke stacks erected before 1940 will work because newer chimneys have a liner that makes it impossible for them to gain a foothold.

The official estimate of the Vaux's Swift population in the



AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus

In this Sept. 15 photo, Audubon Society volunteer Joel Geier walks toward a tower in Albany that was built to replace a brick chimney that Vaux's Swifts lost as a migratory roosting place when the city tore down the old fire station this summer.

U.S. and Canada is about 390,000, but Schwitters believes there may be far fewer based on his work to

document all the roosting spots on the West Coast and tally all-time high roosting numbers at each one.

The birds aren't listed as a threatened or endangered species, but their population has been falling 2 to 4 percent a year and has declined about 50 percent since 1970, said John Alexander, co-author of a regional conservation plan for Partners in Flight, a national alliance of bird-focused nonprofits and wildlife agencies.

"We haven't found a new roosting site on the West Coast in five years," Schwitters said. "They're tearing them down all the time."

A brick chimney in downtown Los Angeles that attracted as many as 23,000 Vaux's Swifts — one of the largest roosting spots in North America — was capped several years ago to make way for trendy lofts. Another chimney in San Diego has been all but abandoned after a skyscraper went up next to it. And a 66-year-old fire station in Albany, Oregon, that hosted up to 10,000 swifts was torn down this summer because of seismic dangers.

Now, the city is working with the Audubon Society in nearby Corvallis to attract the displaced swifts to a 30-foot-tall replacement tower made of concrete culvert tubes. The tower is on city land next to a park and within feet of a busy railroad track.

Conservationists have been broadcasting swift calls at 1,100 watts and have smeared swift guano inside the tower, but it hasn't worked yet.

"It might be you have to just get the first one to try it and say, 'Hey guys! It's good in here,'" said Joel Geier, an Audubon Society volunteer bird counter.

If the birds do return, bird lovers hope to set up towers along the West Coast for Vaux's Swifts that have lost their chimney roosts.

"We could put these up with donated services for \$10,000 apiece, which would be definitely doable when you're looking at the continued decline of the species throughout Western North America," said Jim Fairchild, conservation chair for the Audubon Society of Corvallis. "If it's used in the first couple of years, we'll try another one in another location."

## Plans underway for Rail Fire salvage

East Oregonian

The Rail Fire, which started July 31 and torched 41,708 acres in the Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests, has put the brakes on a management project in the Whitman Ranger District to thin forest fire fuels and improve forest health.

Instead, district officials are now focused on salvaging dead and dangerous trees from within the fire area.

Specifically, the Whitman District is proposing to remove trees from along open forest roads and ATV trails for

public safety, and salvaging 250 acres of burned timber. A project file will be prepared to document environmental effects, and written public comments deadline is Nov. 3.

Comments can be sent to Whitman District Ranger Jeff Tomac at 1550 Dewey Ave., Suite A, Baker City, or via email at comments-pacific-northwest-wallowa-whitman-whitmanunit@fs.fed.us. For more information, contact Roy Cuzick at 541-523-1327.

The Rail Fire is now 95 percent contained, and the cause remains under investigation.

### BRIEFLY

#### Crater Lake sees record attendance

SALEM (AP) — Crater Lake National Park has already set an attendance record in 2016 with the most visitors coming through the park since tracking began in 1904.

The *Statesman Journal* reports that Crater Lake had 702,050 visits from January to September, surpassing last year's record-setting total with three months left in the year. More than 614,000 visitors came to Crater Lake in 2015, setting the previous record.

Park spokeswoman Marsha McCabe says increased visitation can be attributed to the National Park Service's centennial celebrations as well as other factors. Weather didn't close the park this year and neither did wildfires.

#### South Dakota hunting groups cry foul on waterfowl permits

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Two South Dakota hunting groups want to keep out-of-state waterfowl hunters out of the north central part of

the state.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation and the South Dakota Waterfowl Association are asking the Game, Fish and Parks Commission to revoke nonresident waterfowl licenses available for use outside of a five-county Missouri River unit.

The petition came this year after the Legislature added five north central counties to the list of those in which 1,500 three-day licenses can be used by out-of-state hunters.

The two hunting groups contend the nonresident licenses might have been issued illegally. The groups also say the expansion violates their rights.

"There are a whole lot of South Dakotans who feel like they've lost pheasant hunting to out-of-staters" said George Vandel of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation. "Waterfowl is what we have left."

Supporters of the expansion such as Rep. Dick Werner believe it could potentially give an economic boost.

"These five counties have had to work hard to find out how to make their communities thrive," Werner said.

## Tuna fishing trip worth the rock-and-roll

By RICH LANDERS

The (Spokane) Statesman-Review

WESTPORT, Wash. — There's nothing canned about the tuna fishing experience on a charter boat out of Westport, Washington.

With a state-average catch rate of eight fish per person, charter boat anglers are almost sure to return with the makings of a saltwater feast. But the ocean serves up a different adventure on every trip.

Anglers lining up at boat docks before sunrise are aware that venturing 25-60 miles offshore leaves no place to hide if the wind fouls the mood of the sea.

If you're game, September is prime time for albacore averaging roughly 20 pounds or more, and October is known as big-fish month. The local derby-leading tuna last week was 43 pounds.

Westport charter boats are up to the challenge, landing 88 percent of Washington's sport albacore catch, the Fish and Wildlife Department says.

Even though schools of these tuna are measured by the acre, they are a speck in the open ocean. Skippers find them in 3,000 feet of water by trolling while scouting the horizon for jumpers and seabirds flocking to feed on bait boiling to the surface as tuna slash and feed below.

Pursuing the albacore and some yellowtail that cruise within striking distance off the coast from mid-June into November is a deliciously blue-collar experience. A certain toughness is required. A cast-iron stomach helps.

Tuna anglers tend to be on whack-and-stackers. There's no catch limit. Skippers warn that customers should be capable of boarding a carnival ride and lifting 50-pound bags repeatedly.

Some anglers bring beer aboard for refreshment. Chardonnay? Probably never.

Choosing a smaller six-angler vessel is the newer, faster alternative for getting lines in the water, fish in the hold and back to the marina before the traditional larger boats and overnight charters.

At the helm of a 29-footer powered by twin 250-hp outboards, Capt. Mark Coleman of All Rivers & Saltwater Charters warns anglers on his website that these are "hardcore 8- to 12-hour fishing trips!"

Anglers must have full rain gear that includes rubber boots, bibs and coat with hood. "And no cheap crap, either," he says.

Rain and saltwater spray can be expected and everyone is hosed down in the bloodbath after a bite. Skippers worth their paycheck immediately bleed and ice every tuna that comes into the boat.

"These are physically demanding, fast-paced trips that require coordinated



Rich Landers/The Spokesman-Review via AP

In this Sept. 19 photo Puget Sound fishing guide Keith Robbins poses for a photo in a boat off Westport, Wash. Robbins switched positions to be a client on an All Rivers and Saltwater Charters tuna trip out of Westport. "Albacore are delicious," he explained.

movements on a busy, moving deck among other anglers while battling a powerful fish," the website says.

"These trips are not appropriate for people with balance, spine, neck, limb, or severe health issues, recent surgery, require canes, crutches or disabled in any manner that would inhibit keeping up during the trip.

"Depending on the ocean conditions, the ride to and from the tuna grounds can be bumpy with occasional harder bumps as you'd expect."

My friend Jim Kujala and I signed up without hesitation.

Costs are a bit more than tuna in a can: \$400 per person, plus tips and extra for fish cleaning if desired. But we were smitten by the promise of hooking fish that accelerate like sports cars and feed friends like a gourmet chuckwagon.

While Westport also is known for introducing masses of anglers to Washington's iconic salmon runs, tuna are another animal — one of the bright spots on an otherwise concerning Northwest saltwater scene.

Albacore, which venture into cooler water than most of the 15 tuna species recognized worldwide, are large, sleek predatory fish that spend their lives in the open oceans. That's in contrast to salmon, which hatch in rivers and migrate to live most of their adult lives at sea before returning to natal streams to spawn.

Salmon have orange or pink meat while albacore are pale-fleshed — the advertised "chicken of the sea."

Unlike salmon, which are cold-blooded slaves to their environment, albacore are basically warm-blooded. They can regulate their body temperature. These speedsters come into a boat

about 15 degrees warmer internally than the water. This gives them an advantage over their blue-water prey, researchers say.

Albacore don't have swim bladders, so they must be constantly on the move. To fuel this activity they eat around 25 percent of their weight every day, according to some reports.

All of this works to the advantage of the angler. Tuna are a scream to catch.

We were nearly 30 miles offshore when Coleman found the first school of the day. He eased the boat in and shut it down while deck hand Travis Richey grabbed a plastic whiffle ball bat with the end cut off. He stuffed the bat with live anchovies and swung it to spray bait out from the boat as though he were a priest flinging holy water over churchgoers.

The congregation responded. Hooks baited with live anchovies were flung over the boat side facing the wind and allowed to swim and free-line into the school.

"Virtually no thumbing," Coleman yelled. "Keep the line coming off the reel. To do it right, you're always on the very edge of a major backlash."

Soon, line started peeling off quickly. Count to two, Coleman said, and then shift the lever smoothly from free-spool to let the drag take charge of a tuna that's about to go ape.

"Don't jerk the rod up to set the hook," Coleman had said in his pre-launch briefing. "We have strong gear, but tuna can be stronger."

The anglers had to dance around the boat, lifting rods over one angler's head, under the rod of another and back again as their quarry darted around like aerial fireworks gone haywire.