



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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BIRD THAT NEVER TOUCHES GROUND,
LIVES IN AIR, HEADING SOUTHWARD

During August, September, and October a million or more small birds that live in the air and probably never touch ground are migrating in flocks of thousands to their winter homes, which are probably in the great rain-forest area of the Amazon Valley of Brazil, according to officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior. The chimney swifts are heading south.

Known to many as chimney swallow, the chimney swift has long attracted the attention of outdoor enthusiasts because of its unusual habits. A species that literally lives in the air, the chimney swift is scattered over a large part of the North American Continent in summer but never, except by accident, sets foot on land. The bird even eats and mates on the wing.

Like a six-day bike rider who speeds around the wooden saucer, the swift is noted for its speed and tireless energy. During daylight hours throughout the summer, it has the habit of continual flight, sailing, circling on set wings, and then with a rapid beat of wings spurting off in a burst of speed, racing along like a bike rider during a sprint or jam.

Probably the most unusual sight afforded by a flock of swifts is seen at night, when literally thousands gather and wheel in funnel-shaped clouds over a large chimney into which they descend to roost. Its roosting and nesting habits have given the bird its popular name, chimney swift. Ornithologists know the bird by its scientific name, Chaetura pelagica.

The chimney swift cannot walk, but its feet and legs are strong enough to hold the bird to the wall of a chimney as it roosts at night, braced by its spine-like tail feathers. The bird, incidentally, has been benefited by civilization. Before white men settled in the New World, the bird roosted and nested in hollow trees. Now it lives in chimneys, crowding from the top to about 22 feet below it.

Though it roosts in flocks, the swift does not colonize during the nesting season. Usually only one nest is found in a chimney or hollow tree. The nest is described as a little half-saucer made of dead twigs and glued to the wall by a salivary secretion. From four to six eggs are laid. The young emerge from the nests when partly grown and attach themselves to the side of the wall.

Man's first large-scale contact with the chimney swift came probably in 1926 when Herbert L. Stoddard attached numbered bands to some 200 chimney swifts taken in a special trap. Since then over 324,400 chimney swifts have been banded by Fish and Wildlife Service personnel and cooperators.

Approximately 9,800 of these birds have been retrapped and their band numbers recorded. By this means the Fish and Wildlife Service has been able to study the flight habits of the bird.

The largest number of chimney swifts banded in one trap was 6,025 by Harold S. Peters, now a Service flyway biologist, in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1931. In all,

Biologist Peters has banded 23,450 of these birds. John B. Calhoun and J. C. Dickinson, operating a banding station at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, have banded 27,440; Mrs. F. C. Laskey, of Nashville, Tennessee, 17,330; Ida Merriman, of Kingston, Ontario, 15,400; and R. J. Fleetwood, manager of the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge at Round Oak, Georgia, 14,640.

So far as is known the chimney swift migrates in the daytime only. For years it was not seen in wintertime, and it was thought by some that the bird hibernated. Then it was discovered on migration in the West Indies and Central America. No winter specimen has ever been collected, but it is thought the swift winters in Central or South America.

Arriving on the Gulf Coast in its northward migration around the middle of March, the swift spreads out and ranges from the Atlantic Seaboard westward to eastern Texas, Montana, and central Alberta. The species moves as far north as southern Canada.

How fast the swift moves northward depends on the supply of aerial insect food. According to W. L. McAtee, technical adviser to the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service: "The bird's food consists almost wholly of insects, and beetles, flies, and ants are the principal items. It gets many beetles, the most serious enemies of our forests, when they are swarming, and takes also the old-fashioned potato beetle, the tarnished plant-bug, and other injurious insects. The bird is, of course, largely beneficial to the agricultural interests of the country."

Apparently because it has little contact with man, the swift shows no fear when taken in banding traps. Constance and E. E. Everett are quoted as saying

that the birds are "very quiet and apparently comfortable at all stages of the game. When held in the hands they would snuggle between the fingers confidently, and when held against the clothes they would wiggle under the folds of the garments and contentedly go to sleep."

But few people have the opportunity to stand on a rooftop and hold chimney swifts in the hand. Many people will be fortunate enough during August, September and October, to see the large flocks zipping down chimneys or flying toward South America.