

September Is for Swifts

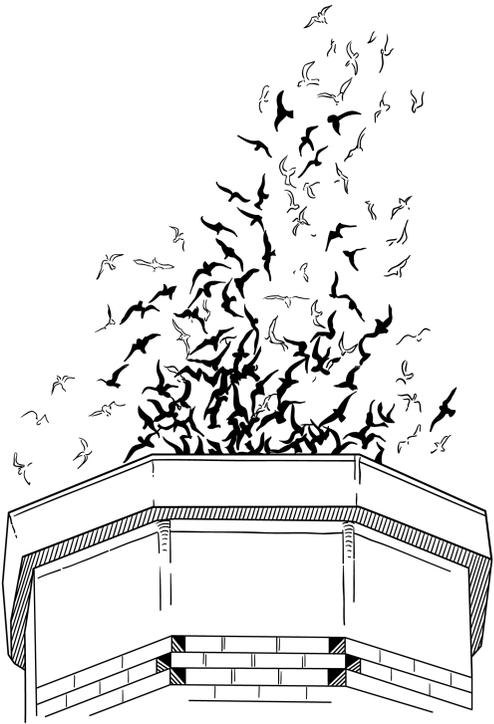
SWIFT WATCH IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL Portland outdoor activity. Each fall, Vaux's swifts gather at the Chapman Elementary School chimney and for a month or so, put on an unbelievable aerial sunset show.

Vaux's swifts (*Chaetura vauxi*) arrive in Portland from their southern wintering grounds in late April and nest throughout the area. During the summer months, you will see and hear them in neighborhoods, flying high in little bands of six birds or so, eating insects. In late August, they start gathering at Chapman Elementary School in Northwest Portland's Wallace Park to roost in the school's large chimney.

Ever greater numbers of swifts gather over the next month and each night treat delighted onlookers to aerial vortices and antics with a climactic downward "pouring" of birds into the chimney—an avian tornado—as the sky darkens. Since 1993, Audubon Society of Portland volunteer naturalists have hosted Swift Watch to invite the community to the event and interpret the phenomenon.

Because Swift Watching during high season from mid to late September has become a bit crowded, I like to go a few times during the season. In late August or early September there are not many swifts or people, but you can see and really hear the birds as they chase each other around with their polite let-me-in "please, please, please, please, please" chirps. The weather is gorgeous, and since sunset is still late, there is plenty of time to get there after work.

By mid-September, the flock of swifts and swift watchers has grown exponentially. The swifts, by the tens of thousands, put on their extraordinary show as they collect, swirl, change direction, chase, and twitter throughout the evening. Just when you think they have all arrived, another hundred come flying in from the east . . . and look! More from the northwest.



The drama has increased in recent years as a neighborhood Cooper’s hawk has homed in on this fine source of an evening meal. Though Coops normally chase their bird prey through dense foliage, this particular bird merely sits out in the open. On the chimney. Waiting. At some point, the swifts need to begin their evening descent into the chimney, and one unlucky bird gets nabbed. The Cooper’s hawk will often fly to a western redcedar tree near the school to enjoy the easy meal.

Also watch for a peregrine falcon that flies quickly through the swirl of swifts. The swifts will turn and give chase, and I have rarely seen a peregrine prevail. When the falcon gets tired and turns tail, the crowd gives a raucous cheer for the underdogs!

It’s not only the swifts that provide quite a spectacle: kids sliding down the hill on cardboard, picnickers with gourmet spreads, a fascinating array of hairstyles and tattoos, dogs (on leash please!), young, old, smart, goofy, Portlanders and out-of-towners alike. Many birding enthusiasts arrange trips specifically to be in Portland for this early fall spectacle.

By late September, the crowds of watchers have increased, but the numbers of swifts have noticeably declined. As the weather changes and our Northwest insects lay their eggs and die, the swifts need to head to Southern California and Mexico with

the other migratory aerial insect eaters. The swifts leave a few thousand at a time, until one very cold, wet day in late September or early October, the last hearty souls move on.

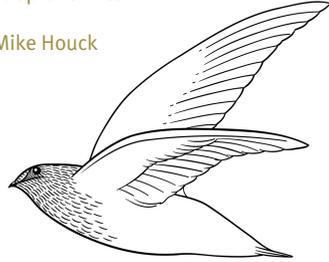
By Jennifer Devlin, illustration by Lynn Kitagawa

More information: Audubon Society of Portland

Did You Know?

The Vaux’s swift, named after William S. Vaux (pronounced “vawks”), is the smallest swift in North America. Large groups are collectively known as a box, flock, screaming frenzy, or swoop of swifts.

—Mike Houck



What About That Chimney?!

Since most of old-growth snags have been removed from our forests, Vaux’s swifts now use chimneys as nesting sites. In 1993, people noticed swifts collecting in the Chapman School chimney and rather than fire up the furnace, students and teachers piled on sweaters and coats. The school was committed to protecting the swifts and in 2000 the school and the Audubon Society of Portland helped raise funds to replace the heating system. The swifts are now provided with a permanent fall roost site in the decommissioned chimney.