

Questions & Answers for the conservation of the Chimney Swift

What is the status of the Chimney Swift in Canada?

In 2009, the Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) was listed as Threatened under Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). The number of Chimney Swifts has declined by 4.1% per year between 1970 and 2021, meaning a long-term reduction of 87.9%. Many birds that rely on insects for survival, including swifts, swallows, and nightjars, have suffered population declines. The main threats to Chimney Swift are declines or changes to insect populations (due to pesticide use, urban development and other factors), chimney modification or demolition, chimney sweeping or use of chimneys during the breeding season, forestry practices on the breeding grounds, and logging on the wintering grounds.

Before the arrival of Europeans in North America, Chimney Swifts nested and roosted in large, hollow trees. Deforestation then reduced the number of large trees for nesting and roosting, so Chimney Swifts adapted to use brick, cement, and stone chimneys, among others, which is how this species got its name. **As a landowner with a structure that is suitable for Chimney Swift nests or roosts, your cooperation in the protection and maintenance of your structure is necessary for the recovery of the species.**

Why is protection of this species important?

Canada's natural heritage is an integral part of our national identity and history. Wildlife has value in and of itself and is valued by Canadians for cultural, spiritual, recreational, historical, economic, and ecological reasons. Protecting each and every species supports biodiversity, which in return provides us with many services, such as purification of air and water, flood control, control of biting insects or pests, and beautiful natural landscapes. **For example, Chimney Swifts are able to eat thousands of insects per day, which helps to control insect populations.**

How can I help Chimney Swifts?

The survival and recovery of Chimney Swift depends on the actions of landowners like yourself to conserve habitat for this species at risk.

If you are the owner of a structure used by Chimney Swifts (see below), the best way to help is to keep the structure in its current state for as long as possible. The birds have probably been returning to your structure for many years and require this structure for survival. If work on a chimney or other structure is required, refer to table 1 at the end of this document to plan the work to occur when the birds are not present in your area. By providing important habitat for this declining species, you are contributing to the protection of a species at risk.

You can also volunteer to monitor and be a steward for Chimney Swifts in Manitoba through the Manitoba Chimney Swift Initiative; in Saskatchewan through the Saskatchewan Chimney Swift Initiative; in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, or Ontario with Birds Canada; and in Québec with QuébecOiseaux. Contact information for these organizations can be found in table 1 at the end of this document under the heading "Report a sighting". As a community scientist, your data will fill critical information gaps contributing to the overall conservation of this species.

What structures on my property do Chimney Swifts use?

Chimney Swifts use structures for nesting and structures for roosting (also called roost sites). Most of the known nest and roost sites are located in chimneys, but Chimney Swifts also use silos, wells, woodsheds, barns, large hollow trees and other structures. One structure can serve to house the nest for a single pair of Chimney Swifts, as an overnight roost site for many non-breeding birds, or it may be used for both of these purposes. Chimney Swifts access their nests and roost sites through an opening such as the top of a chimney flue or an open window in a barn.



A roost site is a gathering place primarily used during the migration period where Chimney Swifts spend the night or seek shelter during cold or inclement weather. Hundreds of Chimney Swifts may use one roost, making large chimneys such as those attached to schools or churches very important for the birds. Usage of roosts can vary. Some roosts are used throughout the time the birds are in Canada, while others may only be used in the spring and/or fall.

How are Chimney Swifts and their habitat protected?

Chimney Swifts and their nests and eggs have protection under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994* (MBCA) and the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) anywhere they are found in Canada. **Both laws prohibit damaging or destroying the nest (according to MBCA) or the residence (according to SARA) and it is also prohibited to kill, harm, harass, capture or take individuals.** A residence refers to a dwelling place, such as a nest, den or similar place and therefore includes the nest, as well as the nesting and roosting structures for this species.

SARA can also provide protection against the destruction of critical habitat, which is the habitat necessary for the survival or recovery of a species at risk. Chimney Swift's critical habitat is identified in the recovery strategy posted as final, which can be viewed at <https://species-registry.canada.ca/index-en.html#/documents/2971>. The protection of critical habitat is however not immediate upon the posting of the final document but must be done by regulatory mechanisms under SARA. Although there are no immediate additional protections that apply for structures housing the nest and structures used for roosting that are identified as critical habitat in the final recovery strategy, those structures are already protected by SARA as residences.

Provincial protections and restrictions may also apply in your province. To find out what provincial protections apply, visit <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/migratory-birds-legal-protection/overview.html> for legislation on wildlife and visit your province's website for species at risk legislation.

When do Chimney Swifts use my chimney or other structures on my property?

Chimney Swifts migrate to Canada from their wintering grounds in South America between late April and early June, depending on the region. During this period, they mostly use communal roosting sites. Once Chimney Swifts are ready to breed, they disperse in pairs to find a nest site. Pairs build a nest by attaching small twigs to the inner walls of chimneys or other structures using their unique glue-like

saliva. Both parents share the responsibility of incubating the eggs and feeding the chicks. Unlike roost sites, which can provide shelter to multiple birds, each nest structure hosts only one nest. **The nests are small, about 10 cm wide by 10 cm deep (see image on page 3).** Once the young have mastered flight, a proportion of the families return to the communal roost they used in spring, which they use until they migrate south. Refer to the table 1 at the end of this document to see when Chimney Swift arrive in your area in the spring and when they leave to migrate south.

When can I make repairs to my chimney or other structure and do I need a permit?

Repairs and other work should take place during the time Chimney Swifts are not in your region. Repairs during this time are unlikely to affect the future use of the structure by the species **as long as this work leaves the interior of the chimney or structure intact and accessible for the birds when they return.** Use table 1 at the end of this document to determine when Chimney Swifts are in your region. If the proposed work might damage or destroy the structure so that it cannot be used by the birds when they return to it, a SARA permit may be required and provincial requirements may be in effect.

Examples of activities that would damage or destroy a structure used by Chimney Swift include but are not limited to:

- Permanently modifying or destroying the structure housing the nest and/or roost site such as by lining the interior of a chimney with metal or cutting down a nesting or roosting tree;
- Blocking access to the structure housing the nest and/or roost site such as by capping or screening the chimney opening or;
- Significantly increasing the chimney's temperature (e.g. by using a heating appliance or lighting a fire) during the breeding period.

If the work is related to emergency or health and safety and may need to take place during the time that the birds are in Canada, please contact us. To find out more information about permitting in your region, refer to table 1, under the heading "Permitting contact" or visit <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/species-risk-public-registry/permits-agreements-exceptions/permits-agreements-information.html>.

We encourage you to ask about whether your repairs will require a permit and are happy to answer any questions.

If you are doing work to modify the chimney or other structure, you may also need to follow provincial

requirements. Contact the provincial authorities in your area for more information.

Pieces of bricks are falling off my chimney, creating a hazard. Can I demolish the chimney?

If you are the owner of a structure used by Chimney Swifts, the best way to help the species is to **not demolish the chimney**, but instead repair it. You may be eligible to receive financial support from *the Chimney Swift Chimney Restoration Fund*, which has been established to help maintain nesting and roosting sites for the Chimney Swift in Canada. Please visit <https://www.birdscanada.org/about-us/funding-opportunities/chimney-swift-fund/>, or call 1-888-448-2473, for more information. Demolishing the chimney could kill Chimney Swifts if they are present and/or destroy their residence and would likely require a federal and provincial permit or authorization. It may be possible to receive a SARA permit if demolition is the only option.

Can I do work on my roof when Chimney Swifts are around?

Repairs and other work should take place outside of the time when Chimney Swifts are in Canada. However, if work must be done when the birds are in Canada, you may not need a permit to do work on your roof, such as re-shingling, **as long as you are not making any changes to the chimney, blocking access to the chimney while the work is being done, or causing disturbance (noise, vibration, etc.) at a level that prevents Chimney Swifts from using the chimney/structure.** Work undertaken when the birds are in Canada must be done during daylight hours, not during inclement weather, and must not block Chimney Swift access to the structure. If your activity may result in Chimney Swift abandoning their use of the chimney, please contact CWS for direction and to determine if a permit is required. Refer to table 1 at the end of this document to determine when Chimney Swifts are in Canada.

What time of year can I sweep my chimney?

The best time to sweep a chimney is before the arrival of Chimney Swifts in the spring or after the birds have left Canada for their wintering grounds. Sweeps should take place from mid-late October until April, outside of the breeding season in your region (refer to table 1 below). **Chimney sweeps that take place during breeding season will destroy Chimney Swift nests, eggs, and chicks, which would violate the MBCA and the SARA.** A permit cannot be granted for chimney sweeps that take place while the birds are present.



A Chimney Swift nest collected from Stanley, New Brunswick with a \$1 coin for scale. Photo: Birds Canada.

Annual chimney sweeping when Chimney Swifts are not present in the chimney benefits the birds. Wood fires create a creosote and soot build-up on chimney walls. A sweep eliminates this build-up, making it easier for Chimney Swifts to solidly attach their nest to the walls of the chimney therefore preventing nests and baby birds from falling to the bottom of the chimney.

Does the presence of nesting Chimney Swifts in my chimney increase the risk of fire or affect the health of my family?

No. A Chimney Swift nest will not damage your chimney and is not known to cause fires or pose health risks. Only one pair occupies a chimney that is being used as a nesting chimney. The nest is small (see image above), is not near the top of the chimney and does not block the chimney's flue.

The nest often detaches over the winter and does not pose a fire hazard. Chimney Swifts spend most of their time outside hunting insects, which is beneficial to landowners, and do not present a health risk to homeowners, nor do nesting pairs create a substantial mess in the chimney.

Chimney Swifts only use roosting sites for a short period of time each year. The availability of suitable roosting sites is very important for the survival of this threatened species, so your cooperation as a landowner is greatly appreciated.

How can I report a Chimney Swift sighting?

If you think you have Chimney Swifts in your chimney, barn, or other structure on your property, or if you see them entering or leaving a structure, report the sighting. You can report your sighting from anywhere in Canada through the **Birds Canada SwiftWatch**: <https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/swiftwatch>

Table 1: When are Chimney Swifts in my region?

Region	Chimney Swift arrival	Chimney Swift nesting period	Chimney Swift migration south	Permitting contact	Report a sighting of a Chimney Swift entering or leaving a structure
PRAIRIE Manitoba & Saskatchewan	Mid-May	Late May – mid August	Late August – early September	sarapermitPNR@ec.gc.ca	Manitoba Chimney Swift Initiative <i>Online:</i> https://www.mbchimneyswift.com <i>Phone:</i> (204) 943-9029 <i>Email:</i> mbchimneyswift@gmail.com Saskatchewan Chimney Swift Initiative <i>Online:</i> https://www.naturesask.ca/what-we-do/saskatchewan-chimney-swift-initiative
ONTARIO	Late April – May	Late May – mid August	August – mid/late October	wildlifeontario@ec.gc.ca	Birds Canada SwiftWatch <i>Online:</i> https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/swiftwatch <i>Email:</i> OntarioSwiftWatch@birdscanada.org
QUEBEC	Late April – Early June	Late May – late August	Late July – early September	Permislep.Qc@ec.gc.ca	Regroupement QuébecOiseaux <i>Téléphone/Phone :</i> 514 252-3190 <i>Sans frais/Toll free :</i> 1 888 647-3289 <i>Email :</i> martinetinfo@quebecoiseaux.org
ATLANTIC New Brunswick & Nova Scotia	Late April – early June	Late May – early September	Late July – mid September	sarapermittingatl@ec.gc.ca	Birds Canada SwiftWatch <i>Online:</i> https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/swiftwatch <i>Phone:</i> 506-364-5196 <i>Email:</i> marswifts@birdscanada.org

Refer to table 1 above for additional information on regional initiatives allowing for sighting reports.

The Canadian Wildlife Service is happy to answer any questions you may have. For all general questions, please refer to the contact information above. Thank you for your cooperation in supporting species at risk in Canada.