

CHIMNEY SWIFTS AT SUNSET

- by Bernie McKenna

On Saturday, May 24th, 2025, 10 Halifax Field Naturalists and several dozen other people gathered in Truro to view a marvellous aerial event. Birds Canada, the Cliffs of Fundy Geopark and Nature Nova Scotia had collaborated to present “The Chimney Swifts at Sunset” in the Truro Library parking lot. This wondrous event has been hosted by Rielle Hoeg of Birds Canada in late May, every year since 2022. Scheduled for 8:00 p.m. many of us started arriving by 7:30 p.m., so this worked fine as it allowed Rielle time to cover some of the interesting, features and characteristics of these fascinating aerial creatures. She told us how they are fairly easy to recognize by their distinctive, in-flight silhouettes, and remarkable aerial abilities. A fairly small bird, they are only 13 to 14 cm in body length with a dark greyish-brown or sooty body and long curved wings. They were very appropriately named Chimney Swifts after their habit of roosting and nesting inside of brick and tile chimneys.

An interesting feature is the design of their feet that does not allow them to land or perch on a horizontal surface; instead, they are only able to cling to vertical surfaces such as a chimney, a tree or other vertical surface. Their sharp, four-clawed feet and stiff tail feathers let them hang on and brace themselves on vertical surfaces, much as woodpeckers do. Rielle said, when they get a call saying someone has seen a swift sitting on the edge of their flue, it's guaranteed not to be a swift! When migrating they roost in colonies of 100's. In Truro we counted 200 or so, while the former Bridgetown Regional High School has upwards of 500 or more. While the swifts roost in colonies during migration, they nest as solitary pairs, one pair per site. They may use a chimney, a hollow tree, an old structure such as a barn, one pair was even documented nesting in a dug well (Robie Tufts, Birds of Nova Scotia, third edition). These Chimney Swifts are long-distance migrants, traveling thousands of kilometres between their nesting grounds in eastern North America and the wintering areas in South America, a round trip of over 10,000 km.

Rielle related how efficient insect eaters they are, being capable of devouring 1000 insects per day. They have evolved perfectly to do this as they have short beaks and very large mouths to scoop up the prey. Their fully open mouth extends past their eyes. Their menu includes: flies, bees, flying ants, moths, spiders drifting on a web thread and virtually anything else that will fit in their mouth. They feed, drink, and gather nesting material entirely on the wing. They drink by skimming low over the water and scooping up a sip in their open mouths. The nest is made of small twigs which they break off of tree limbs while hovering and then carry to the nest site. The nest itself is half-cup shaped and attached by the birds using their glue-like saliva to bind it all together. Swifts are good parents and share all nesting duties, gathering the nest material, building the nest, incubating the 4 to 6 white eggs, and feeding the young until they fledge.

Initially, despite craning our necks and looking up there wasn't a swift to be seen anywhere at 7:30 p.m. However, as dusk started to settle, a few could be seen circling and we heard chattering or squeaking high up as they flew into and out of our view. As time progressed the

birds flew lower and their numbers increased, you would hear `aahs' and `oohs' from the onlookers. The later it got the more fixated they seemed to become on the waiting flue and its roosting spots. After much frenzied circling and chattering, one of the swifts broke off, took the plunge and dove straight into the flue at full speed. What remarkable control they must have to do this in a confined space while at the same time avoiding the turmoil that must occur, as many others also enter the flue. This was such a captivating event to witness, I was just as fixated on the swifts as they were on the flue. My sincerest appreciation goes out to Rielle Hoeg, Birds Canada, the Cliffs of Fundy Geopark and Nature Nova Scotia for arranging a most memorable evening for all of us attending.