

Outdoor Life

Season ends on wings of chimney swifts

Several times this week, in the late morning, I've seen a large flock of chimney swifts circling in the air above my house. This is migration season for these birds, which are with us for only a short time. Typically, they arrive in late spring and leave in late summer. This is early fall, but perhaps the unseasonably warm weather has encouraged them to linger.

Their cheerful, chattering calls and their aerial acrobatics add much to the attraction of the skies all summer. Just now, if you are very lucky, you may observe them as they come in a huge flock to roost for the night. They come in a long line, then form an "O" and circle above the spot before lighting. It may take nearly an hour for them to settle down; meanwhile, birds continue to drop out of the circle and drop back in. They seem to like certain spots — if you have the right chimney, they may favor you!

The swifts number 70 species worldwide but only four breed in North America and just one in our region. Our little chimney swift covers the entire eastern part of the country. The other three North American species are westerners.

This family comes by its name honestly. The avian speed record for "flapping flight" (as recorded by a following airplane) belongs to the white-throated needle-tailed swift, an Asian species, which has been clocked at 219 m.p.h. The chimney swift may not be a record holder, but it too is a champion flier and spends most of its waking moments in the air.

Swifts fly because they cannot perch or walk. Their feet are tiny, with all four toes pointed forward. When resting, they cling to vertical surfaces with their long, hooked toes.

All day they zip about high above us, eating airborne insects. Like the whippoorwill, the chimney swift has a small bill but a wide "mouth," allowing it to scoop in its prey efficiently.

Some young swifts are able to enter a state of torpor during poor weather. If it is too inclement for insects to fly, adults of these species can slow down their metabolism and rest, saving energy until conditions improve. A study of the European swift showed it can survive four and half days of fasting.

When the weather is bad, you may see chimney swifts flying low to the ground with swallows, but when days are fair, they soar much higher. At a glance, swifts and swallows may look alike, but remember the description "flying cigar." Swifts have short tails, small bodies and long curved wings that cut through the air like a knife.

The swifts are more closely related to hummingbirds than to swallows. Indeed, scientists place the two families in the same order, the Apodiformes (from apod, meaning without feet). Characteristics they share with hummers include small feet, some elements of wing structure and the ability to alter their metabolism in periods of



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severe weather.

Swifts conduct almost all the business of their lives in flight. They bathe and drink on the wing, catch their prey and eat while flying, and even mate during flight. They collect their nest materials on the wing too, grabbing dead twigs with their feet as they fly past, but they do have to come earthward to nest.

A mated pair typically builds their nest onto the vertical surface of an inaccessible cliff, inside a hollow tree or, in populated areas, inside a chimney. Swifts use a material secreted from the mouth to glue the twigs to the vertical surface and to each other. This sticky saliva is the basis of the Asian delicacy known as "birds' nest soup."

It may take 30 days for a pair to build a nest. When it is finally finished, the female lays four or five eggs, then male and female share incubation duty for the next three weeks. After the eggs hatch, the parents take turns brooding the young and going for food. The hatchlings first leave the nest when they are 30 days old and continue to be fed by their parents for two more weeks.

Chimney swifts have a single, high maintenance brood per year. For the last three or four years, they've used my chimney and their soft baby calls when the parents arrive are a real treat. By August or September, when the young are on their own, the birds is time to return to South America.

People once had the mistaken notion that these swifts nest in colonies, because large flocks of unmated birds roost together in large chimneys. According to Birds of North America, "Some of these flocks may even roost in a chimney occupied by a single nesting pair.

When the young have fledged, small groups of parents and young from several chimneys move to large staging chimneys in the area." One roosting flock in south-central Kansas was observed to have 10,000 individuals.

Nobody knew where their wintering grounds were until local Indians of the Rio Yanayacu in Peru brought some bird rings to a trader in 1943. Eventually, the tags were traced to chimney swifts that had been ringed in several U.S. states.

As with many other migrant species, chimney swift numbers are declining in breeding bird counts throughout their U.S. range. Part of the problem is that we don't have as many chimneys as we used to.

Some conservation-minded people and groups such as Cub Scouts are putting up "towers" that simulate chimneys.

BNA says that more than 50 such towers have been erected in 20 states so far, and most have attracted nesting pairs in their first season. For more on the status of these iconic summer birds, see chimneyswift.org.



Swifts earned their name. They're among the fastest fliers.



Photos courtesy of Southern Highlands Reserve

The Southern Highlands Reserve in Lake Toxaway consists of 120 acres at an elevation of 4,500 feet.

Explore a magical mountaintop garden

If you are looking for an exciting outing, I have a superb suggestion for you. Southern Highlands Reserve is a magnificent private garden located in the Lake Toxaway community that is open to the public on special Visitor's Days, including one on Tuesday, Oct. 4. There are other open days, but this particular fall occasion should find the grounds spectacular.

The Southern Highlands Reserve was created by Robert and Betty Balentine. They purchased 120 acres of mountaintop property at an elevation of 4,500 feet. They promptly assigned the land to the Carolina Land Trust, thus protecting the property from future residential and commercial development. They envisioned gardens to promote and protect native plants. They also had a long-range plan to develop the grounds to enhance its beauty and turn it into an educational facility. There are garden rooms that are peaceful and beautiful, evoking a sense of nature and the creative process of forests.

For example, there is an Azalea Walk with hundreds of native azaleas, many started from collected seeds by the Balentines and their staff. The Chestnut Lodge and Rooftop functions as the Reserve headquarters



Dr. Bob Gilbert
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and as a classroom. The building is magnificent. The Maple Entrance is really the main entrance to the reserve and features a rare maple, *Freemanii*, which is a natural cross between our native red maple and silver maple. From the Maple Entrance you can proceed into the Woodland Glade, the Core Park and the Wildflower Labyrinth. Continue onto the Vaseyi Trail, where the rare rhododendron *vaseyi* can be found in abundance. There is also a waterfall and cliff site, and The Viewsite is not to be missed.

What is remarkable to me is the Balentines' vision to react responsibly to the environment of the area. They are not school-trained botanists or horticulturalists. For example, they have partnered with garden clubs and the National Park Service on an amazing project to revegetate a wetland close to the reserve. Recently, nine volunteers cleaned 53,000 seeds from red spruce cones. The seeds are germinated and grown on in the Reserves Nursery Complex. Eventually these will be planted in the nearby Blue



The Wildflower Labyrinth is vibrant with color throughout every season

Ridge Mountains. There are very few private or public gardens that spend their time or resources in such responsible ways.

The Reserve conducts educational programs as well. This spring I attended their excellent Native Plant conference and was thrilled with the program put on by Dr. Larry Mellichamp.

The first Tuesday of each month from April through October, there are docent-led tours. Also, group tours can be arranged for five or more people by contacting the Reserve. Friendly, well trained Reserve staff will help you have a memorable visit.

I have been to a fair number of private and public gardens over the years. What is so refreshing about this one is the vision of the owners. They are obviously people of means, but they are doing responsible things

to their environment, are involved with public education and are sponsoring restoration projects of significant scale. And if that is not enough, Betty and Robert Balentine are generous, gracious and enthusiastic hosts. I can promise you an inspiring visit even in the middle of a rainstorm. Do not miss it. This is a place you will never forget.

Other than on Visitor's Days, the Reserve is not open to the public. Reservations are needed in advance for all tours. Contact the Reserve for tickets by going to southernhighlandsreserve.org. The Reserve is located at 558 Summit Ridge Road in Lake Toxaway.

Dr. Bob Gilbert is co-founder of Smith Gilbert Garden in Kennesaw, Georgia.

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