: Bird Brief :
Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)

ORDER: Apodiformes (3 Families)
FAMILY: Apodidae (112 Species)

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Summer is a welcomed season for many sensory experiences. It is time to enjoy the sun's warmth, dip your toes in the cool Lake Michigan water, listen to birds sing, watch and smell the aromas of the wildflowers and trees as they change during the season, and sip on iced beverages. Watching birds in the summer is more about listening than spotting, unless you are patient and wait for a bird to come out into the open from the camouflage of a prairie, shrub, or tree. This is also a time to learn and recognize species-specific bird songs. Some common bird sounds heard in summer are from robins, starlings, finches, warblers, vireos, gulls, geese, sparrows, swallows, and one of my favorites - Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*)! These small, brown, flying cigars have the most delightful, staccato, kissing songs. I absolutely love hearing and watching them during the summer. I am also amazed these birds are on the wing all day! They eat insects, drink water, bathe, and even sleep while flying. I can usually find them flying at lower altitudes around Downer Avenue because there are large chimneys for them to roost, mate, and nest within. This popular East Side location is a nice place to grab a coffee, visit a locally owned bookstore, and sit outside listening to the swifts sing.

Chimney Swifts are aerial insectivores that primarily live in flight. They have short legs, rest on vertical surfaces, and build nests using saliva that has adhesive properties. These characteristics are common for birds in the ***Apodidae*** Family which includes over 100 species. The genus *Chaetura* or "spine-tail" is made up of two Greek words: *chaite* meaning "spine or bristle" and *oura* "tail." This unique tail is composed of ten stiff feathers that end in a point which enables the bird to rest or prop itself up on vertical surfaces. Chimney swifts have ***anisodactyl*** feet which means three toes are in front and one toe is behind. However, these swifts can get a better grip on surfaces by moving the back toe, or ***hallux***, forward. Swifts also have a wing anatomy that allows them to change the sweep angle of the wings, improving lift and decreasing drag. The proximal, or upper wing, is shorter compared to other birds and the distal, or lower wing, is longer. This allows the wings to angle from outstretched to sickle-shaped toward the tail.

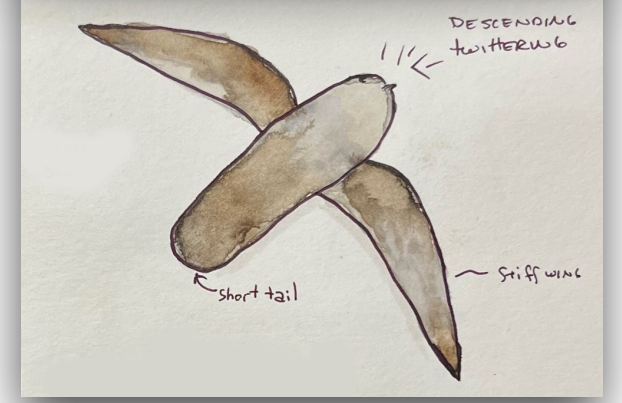
Chimney Swifts migrate from the Amazon basin near Peru. I first saw them in Milwaukee on May 6th of this year as they began colonizing the same breeding sites from last season. Courtship involves a pair flying close together with wings held in a "V" shape. The monogamous pair will begin nest construction by breaking off small twigs from the tops of trees in flight. Glue-like saliva is used to form a half saucer-shaped nest inside the top of a chimney. The pair will often colonize with others in the same chimney and begin laying an egg every other day for a total of up to six

eggs. Interestingly, this species may have two to three helpers assist with incubation and feeding of the nestlings. Around three weeks of age, the sharp-clawed fledglings will crawl and grip on the vertical wall surface and leave the nest.

After breeding, thousands of swifts will begin congregating and colonizing larger chimney structures as stopover points before the long migration to Peru. They will inhabit the stopover location for several days in order to increase fat reserves. Many bird watchers thoroughly enjoy the spectacle of watching hundreds of swifts form into a cyclone-like mass of birds that rapidly dives into a chimney at dusk. Each year I find myself asking questions when experiencing this roosting behavior. Do the swifts dive rapidly in a large flock in order to prevent predation? Does the large number of birds moving very quickly into a solitary roosting habitat cause a distraction to predators?

There are local groups who monitor and count chimney swifts. If you are interested, feel free to visit the Wisconsin Chimney Swift Working Group (https://www.wiswifts.org/) for more information. This web site offers activities, resources, and information on how to get involved. Perhaps you, your neighbor, or your friends will want to make your chimney a habitat for swifts in the near future.

Fast, flecks of feathers
May you find the best chimney
To rest and nurture



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