

“Swiftling” Up High and Under Waterfalls: Training the Citizen’s Eye, Year 2 – Part I

By Amy Seaman



During last year’s “Swiftling” season, July – August 2017, we hosted the state’s first in-field, Black Swift survey training sessions; one in Glacier National Park, and one at Holland Lake. Twenty six individuals ranging from agency personnel to seasonal technicians and volunteers joined us that first year. With continued support from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Glacier National Park, and the Glacier National Park Conservancy, we trained another 19 individuals in July 2018, again utilizing both locations. During three nights and one morning, each trainee spent over three hours of one-on-one time with Montana Audubon staff doing “classroom work”, getting to know the unique biology of this extremely fast study species, and learning the particulars of the dusk survey protocol. This classroom time was then followed by eight hours of one-on-one time in the field learning about the physical demands of the survey, and the techniques used to assess waterfall characteristics. During each of three evening surveys and one morning survey, trainees worked in small groups to score

(Above) Dusk view from Holland Falls beyond the Holland Lake to the surround mountains. This was the sunset backdrop to our Holland Lake Black Swift citizen science training in July of this summer. Photo by Amy Seaman



keep safety foremost in your mind while working in and around dark, slippery, bear-inhabited areas deep in Montana's forests and mountains. **Though survey protocol** includes watching waterfalls starting two-hours before sunset and continuing through dusk, recent conversations with biologists in British Columbia have revealed successful detection of swifts at first light as well. Though this method does not help us avoid potential encounters with bears or other field hazards, it does provide a new survey opportunity, and one we want to put to the test. So in 2018 we are setting out to conduct around six paired evening and early morning waterfall surveys.

(Above) Training participants watch Holland Falls during the beginning of an evening survey. (Below) Technician Jack Toriello leads a group through the exercise of scoring a waterfall.

waterfall habitat characteristics such as height, type, flow volume, view over the surrounding terrain, moss availability, shading of nest niches, and falls aspect – all characteristics known to influence the likelihood a waterfall will be used by Black Swifts. As in 2017, the goal of continued training is to help standardize the surveys being conducted around the state.

This will help Montana Natural Heritage Program determine this bird's conservation status in a rigorous manner. Beyond collecting impeccable data, the number one rule when surveying for Black Swifts is to





completed this year, we can already tell you that morning surveys sure are a lot colder than evening surveys. With mid-40 degree temperatures, thoughts of our long winter creep back to mind! **Beyond new survey techniques for 2018,** Montana Audubon hired one new survey technician, Jack Toriello, to assist with all aspects of the Black Swift Project. With two summers of previous survey experience, he has proved to be an asset to our team and our volunteer surveyors. He will help our team during all of July and August

(Above) Survey trainees circle around a power-point presentation on swift ecology, behavior, and survey techniques. (Left) From a distance, Holland Falls reveals a top tier of water plunging into the main falls we survey below.

Photos by Amy Seaman



as we seek to build on our experience with this elusive species. With 35 nesting colonies known in the state at the start of the season, a lot is sure to be revealed. We would like to thank Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Glacier National Park, and the Glacier National Park Conservancy, the Cadeau Foundation, the LEAW Family foundation, and Montana Audubon donors, for helping make this project possible. Each contribution to this difficult project is 100% necessary to keep our work successful.

(Above) A second view of dusk from the Holland Falls survey location. (Left above) Survey technician Jack Toriello surveying in the Cutbank region of Glacier National Park. (Left below) A Black Swift can scarcely be made out among the shadows. Photos by Amy Seaman