

“Swiftling” Up High and Under Waterfalls: Training the Citizen’s Eye, Year 3 2019

by Amy Seaman



For the third year in a row, Montana Audubon has launched our July-August Black Swift or “Swiftling” season, with a citizen science field training. This year’s training at Holland Lake brought another nine volunteers and two new avian technicians into the fold of our seven-year Black Swift survey project. For the first time this year we are fielding a team of three avian technicians to survey Black Swifts throughout western Montana. Our training was a great place to launch their work, and with the help of veteran technician Jack Toriello, the training was a great success; the weather holding to a drizzle. Like past years, our overnight training workshop allowed trainees, numbering 56 after three years, to get to know the unique biology of this extremely fast study species, and to learn how to conduct surveys for their presence in a standardized way. During our training, Jack and I spent one-on-one time with participants, explaining the physical demands of the work, the specifics of Black Swift ecology, and how to assess waterfall characteristics like overall

(Above) A Stormy view from Holland Falls, beyond Holland Lake to the surround mountains. Luckily we escaped rain this year at our Holland Lake Black Swift citizen science training, July 2019. Photo by Jack Toriello



height and structure, water volume, view over terrain, moss availability, shading of nest niches, and aspect. These are the primary characteristics known to influence waterfall occupancy by Black Swifts. As an addition this year, our Big Sky Watershed Corp member and 2019 avian technician, Caroline Provost, provided attendees with a watershed-based view on the headwaters habitat that supports Black Swifts in state. Interestingly, Triple Divide Peak in Glacier National Park, marks the divide of the Hudson, Atlantic, and Pacific Ocean watersheds. In our state,

Black Swifts occupy waterfalls within each watershed, though the majority of the 47 nesting sites known state-wide are found within the regions feeding the Pacific Ocean. Just a handful of occupied waterfalls lie along the St. Mary and Belly Rivers in Glacier National Park, feeding the Hudson and Atlantic Oceans. We are continuing this long-term work to help the state determine this specie's conservation status in a rigorous manner and to assist land managers with species presence data. And our expertise has been recognized internationally! Just in July we trained a Park's Canada biologist to utilize our survey techniques before they set out to begin surveying Waterton Park in 2020. These trainings were a great

(Above) Big Sky Watershed Corp member and avian technician Caroline Provost intensely watches a waterfall in Glacier. (Below) Technician Jack Toriello leads volunteers and technicians through the exercise of scoring waterfall habitat – Photograph courtesy of Jeff Van Tine.





start to the season, and we look forward to sharing our progress! As always, when we train and when we survey, we are careful to keep safety foremost in our minds. It's important to remember we'll be working in and around dark, slippery, bear-inhabited habitats deep in Montana's forests and mountains. Bears really are showing up in more and more Montana locations, so all of our technicians are bear aware for sure, and you should be too!

(Above) Survey trainees circle around a power-point presentation on swift ecology, behavior, and survey techniques. Photograph courtesy of Jeff Van Tine. (Left) Montana Audubon's second team of Black Swift survey technicians, Danny Stark and Caroline Provost attended training to prepare for another seven weeks of surveying throughout western MT. Photo by Amy Seaman

We wish to thank the Glacier National Park Conservancy, The LEAW Foundation, The Cadeau Foundation, The Sargent Endowment, and individual donors for supporting this important research.