

Chimney Swift Surveys 2020

By Carmen Borchelt



Chimney Swifts are a unique aerial insectivore with a very fitting name, as they typically nest in brick or stucco chimneys! This also makes them fairly simple to monitor in your eastern Montana town. Before the Industrial Revolution, scientists believed that chimney swifts were more rare. As infrastructure began to rise, large facilities and houses were being built. This provided a suitable environment for chimney swifts to flourish, increasing the specie's population. Their preferred foraging habitat includes water, grassland, pasture-hay, or forest land cover, which Montana is not short of. Unfortunately, in the last 2 decades, many of these structures have been removed, covered, or left to deteriorate, with unknown impact to swift breeding habitat.

That is why Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and Montana Audubon have come together for the 4th year of this unique survey effort; to get better population counts on Chimney Swifts actually nesting here each summer.



Photos: (A) A chimney in Viranda, MT. (B) An Chimney occupied by nesting swifts in Forsyth MT. Photos by Carmen Borchelt.



Efforts to understand the status of these birds will help decide future management practices and help us understand how aerial insectivores are fairing in a changing world. Specifically in Montana, Chimney Swifts are a species of Greatest Inventory Need, due to habitat loss and an unknown status. For 2020, Montana Audubon citizen science programs adapted to precautions of COVID-19, and we were lucky to be able to get out to conduct ‘Swift Nights Out’ with small groups of eastern Montanans. This year, in my Big Sky Watershed Corps role, I hosted trainings in Lewistown, Billings, and Glendive, with over 20 people showing up to learn how to survey for Chimney Swifts.

We are asking folks to be careful not to share private chimney location information during this work, but want to encourage you to peer through the eastern MT skies! Thank you to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks for continuing to partner on this project, and to our supporters for making this possible.



Photos of Chimney Swift watching in Billings, MT, by Alina Garner