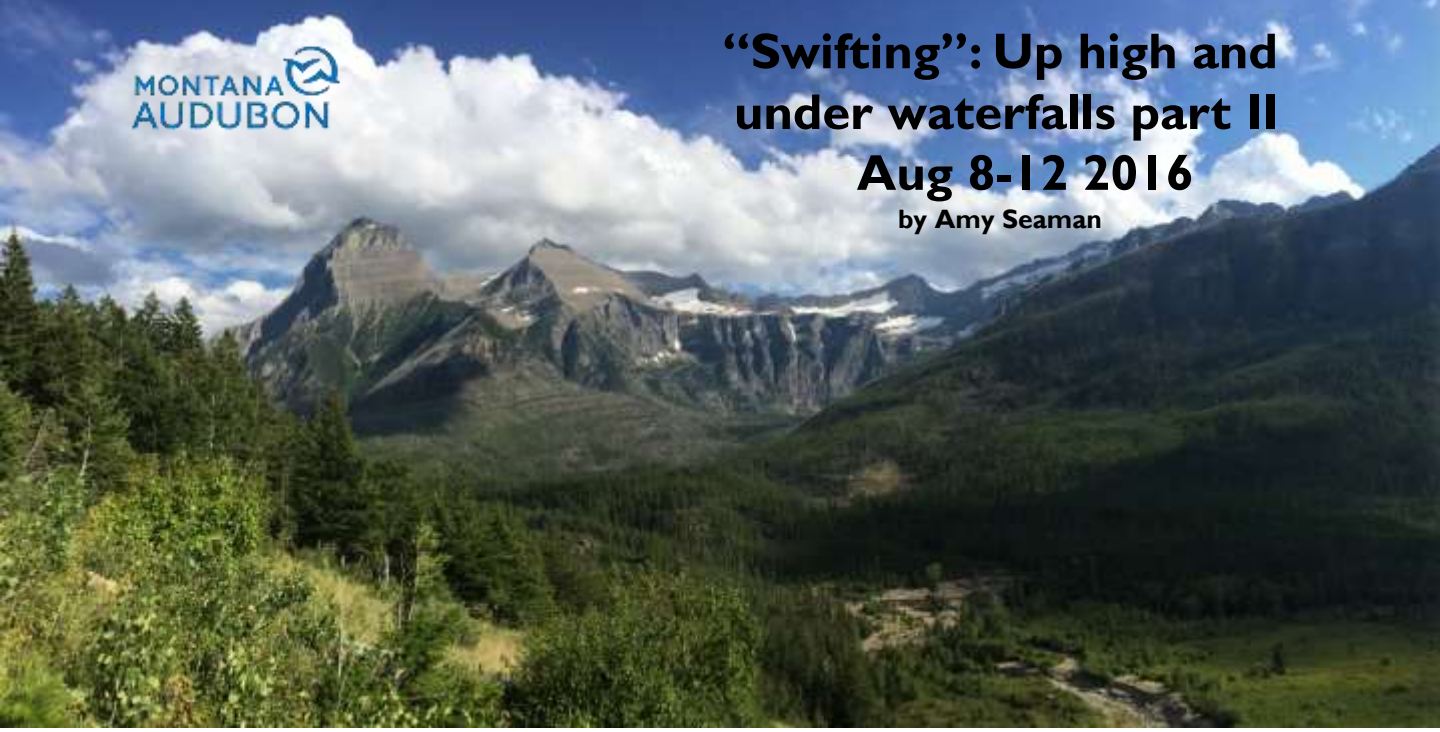


"Swifting": Up high and under waterfalls part II
Aug 8-12 2016

by Amy Seaman

A year has passed since taking to the trails of the Black Swift in Glacier's backcountry, and already a nestling has been spotted underneath Haystack Falls. It's one of six falls known to support Black Swift colonies in the park, and is one of the most accessible. Haystack and the other falls are sustained by glacial water flowing west of the continental divide, and previous surveys on the east side suggested the absence of active colonies. No sites have been found since 2014, and last year's North Fork trip taught us just how far away some waterfalls are and how hard it is to get good dusk survey conditions. We decided to try our luck anyway, at falls towering over Long-knife Creek, another above Kintla Lake, at Lunch Creek on the east side, and at Beaver Medicine and Feather Woman Falls near Sperry Glacier.

(Top) Kintla Peak and Kintla Glacier in the North Fork. (Right) Longknife Creek flowing towards Kintla peak and Kintla Glacier. Three tiers of falls are hidden from view above. Photos by Amy Seaman

Our focus on the North Fork area stems from reports of swifts foraging over the large lakes in the area like Kintla, Logging, and Bowman. Each have multiple waterfalls nearby, tall plunging falls that appear every bit as suitable for nesting as those where nesting has been confirmed. Many falls in this area take two or three days and many hard miles to access, and still some are beyond reach. We started out this year by heading up the Kintla Lake trail to our outpost, the Kintla Ranger Cabin. Park non-game biologist Lisa Bate has had her eyes on the falls in the area for quite a while, and some may even be "easy" to get to! The first site was an-unnamed falls

(Top) Volunteer Jack Toriello (left), Amy Seaman (middle), and Lisa Bate (right) hiking up an unnamed falls above Longknife Creek. We counted 6 American Dippers here. (Above) Volunteer Chris Berry peers over a plunging section of the falls and Jack scans for potential nest locations. Photos by Chris Berry and Jack Toriello

above Longknife Creek that tumbles right over the upper Kintla trail. As we ascended, adult and juvenile American Dippers bounced around edgy rocks and tumbling water, moving in and out of nooks and crannies. Dippers are notable as indicators for the presence of Black Swifts, so we record any seen within ¼ mile of the survey falls. The six we recorded left us eager for dusk.

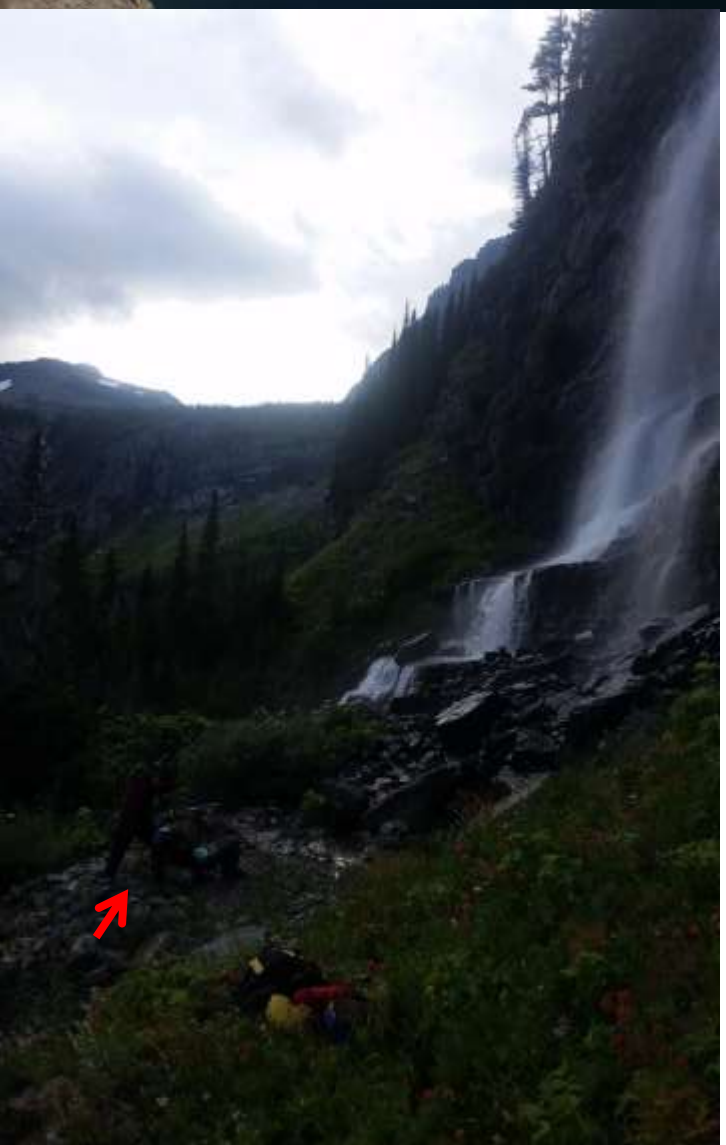
(Left) Along Longknife Falls, Jack found a Townsend's Solitaire nests tucked away in rocky crevices. (Above) Close up of Townsend's Solitaire nest. None were active this late in the breeding season.

What begins as a low angle series of small cascading falls turned into a series of large drops, and four separate tiers seemed to warrant attention. Our crew of four split up to survey three, and despite the presence of mossy pockets, secretive dark ledges for nesting, and ample water, no swifts were seen coming or going. We did see a few others– Cordilleran Flycatcher, Pine Siskin, and two bats, but by far one of the coolest finds were Townsend's Solitaire nests perched in rock crevices all along the falls. Though none were active at this time of year, the half dozen or so we found indicate that breeding conditions here must be just right. The Pine Siskins were actively foraging in and out of the falls, a behavior we would see again many times.

Day 2 brought gloomy skies and low potential for surveying an unnamed falls above Kintla Lake. The dusk surveys (700-930pm) that are often so successful require long dark treks back to camp, and under wet conditions the terrain changes dramatically. But we wanted at least to reach the base of the falls to assess habitat, peer into mossy pockets, and watch for activity. At the top Pine Siskins were again busy foraging, but our tedious ascent and three hour vigil at this promising location revealed nothing in the way of Black Swifts.

(Above) An unnamed falls at the head of Kintla Lake demands our attention. (Below) The unnamed falls up close. Photos by Amy Seaman. (Left) View of Kintla Lake from the falls. Photo by Jack Toriello.

The North Fork had left us hopeful, but empty-handed again! We spent the third day hiking out and relocating to Fish Creek Campground, a busy front-country site near Lake McDonald and closer to the heart of the park. A week earlier swifts were seen exiting Lunch Creek falls east of Logan Pass, and another survey was all that was needed to confirm what is potentially Montana's first Black Swift colony east of the continental divided.



The approach to Lunch Creek was unexpectedly simple, as the falls were right below Going-to-the-sun road. Though hidden below the road, the large falls had expansive views of the valley below and tantalizing waterfalls all around. We posted up around the falls at six, keeping as much sky-view overhead as possible, for a better chance at silhouetting a black shape entering the falls. The survey site was cold and windy, and just keeping spray off of my glasses was a challenge, but the vigil paid off! Just over two hours into our staring challenge we saw a swift enter and exit the falls!

(Above) St.Mary's Lake on the east side of Logan Pass. (Left) Jack and I (red arrow) posted up and surveying Lunch Creek. Photos by Chris Berry

Finding the seventh nesting site in Montana was almost too easy! And sharing the excitement of discovery with Chris and Jack was equally as fun. Nobody reacts calmly when they first catch a glimpse of black feathers slicing the air after two hours of neck-craning observation. Instead over the roar of the falls we are able to shout *bird!* everytime one came and left so we could record the timing of their activity. We saw at least two adults at once, but there appeared to be activity in 3 or 4 locations. In the fading light we failed to find a nest, but the adults presence was proof enough.

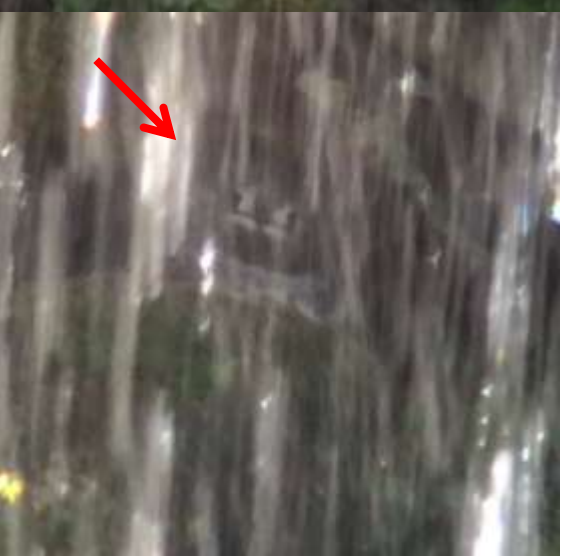
(Above) Looking southeast from Lunch Creek falls as the sun slowly sank. (Below) Looking up at Lunch Creek Falls with areas of activity and potential nest locations circled in red. The start indicates where we saw most activity during the survey. Photos by Amy Seaman.

(Left) Jack and I “cliffed-out” trying to reach the second tier of Lunch Creek Falls. Photos by Chris Berry. (Below Left) Baring Falls on the east side of the divide was surveyed without success in previous years, but based on its features seems to warrant another look. (Below) Volunteer Chris Berry along the Upper Kintla Lake trail.

Our evening’s success was punctuated by the occasional wisp of a midnight shooting star as we made our way back to camp in the later days of the Perseid meteor shower. Two others, Danny Stark and Boo Curry were set to join Jack and I later and we were ready for a small break before tackling Beaver Medicine and Feather Woman Falls. Our volunteer Chris had to head back to his home in Florida too! For the next surveys west of the divide we had the privilege of using the Sperry trail crew cabin along the Sperry Glacier trail which put us within 1.5 miles of both falls.

We discovered Feather Woman Falls along Sprague Creek as a nesting site in 2014, found a nest and nestling here in 2015, and were eager to confirm nesting this year.

(Above) Areas of activity at Feather Woman Falls.(Below left) Jack posted up for the survey. (Below right) Looking up the screen field at Feather Woman Falls. Photos by Amy Seaman.



I knew exactly where to look for the nest at this location, so the long ascent of the scree field felt like an eternity. All I wanted to do was put the scope up on that mossy pocket I had come to know so well. And I couldn't wait to show the others. Last year a small bit of white-wash lead us to the nest location, but this year I knew right where to look, and as soon as we set up shop on the waterfall's flanks, BOOM, there was the nestling on the nest, content behind its protective wall of water.

(Top) Feather Woman Falls from the observation site with nest area circled. (Left above) A zoomed in view of the nest showing the pocket, vegetation, and moss available for nesting. (Left) Zooming in further shows the nestling! Notice the white marks on the inside of each eye and along the gape. Photos by Amy Seaman.

We conducted a successful evening survey here as well, noting up to four areas of activity. This is similar to what we have seen the past two years, and it appears there are as many as four nests at this site. Unfortunately we could not locate any other nest pockets. Activity was spread out during the 8pm hour and kept us on our toes recording the in and out movements of the adults.

Our final survey took us to Beaver Medicine Falls, also along Sprague Creek, and about 1.5 miles from Feather Woman. While usually we hike up to falls, here we had to descend a scree field to our survey site. Weather had thwarted our efforts to get here for two years, so I

(Above) Danny Stark, Jack Toriello, and Boo Curry (from left to right) standing on the Sperry trail above Beaver Medicine Falls before our descent. (Right) Jack posted up Beaver Medicine Falls. Photos by Amy Seaman.

didn't want to mess up this time! We made sure to be ready at the site by 7, and though we left at 4, the bush-wacking held us up until 6:30. So we made it – and again after two long neck-craning hours our efforts paid off! We saw two swifts enter the falls, and they entered so quickly it took all four of our observations to corroborate the siting. Site number 8 was found!

It's always hard to leave the park after the swifting adventures we just had, but knowing we helped add two sites to the record books made our trip feel complete and our return inevitable. The excitement of waiting for these black zips of feather lives on!

(Left, top to bottom 1-4) 1. View of Feather Woman Falls behind the trail crew cabin at Sperry Chalet. 2. Haystack falls viewed from Going-to-the-sun road. 3.Danny Stark posted up at Feather Woman Falls. 4. Our final crew of Boo Curry, Amy Seaman, Jack Toriello, and Danny Stark. (Above) Amy surveying for habitat attributes. Photos by Jack Toriello and Amy Seaman.