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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Apodidae (Swifts)

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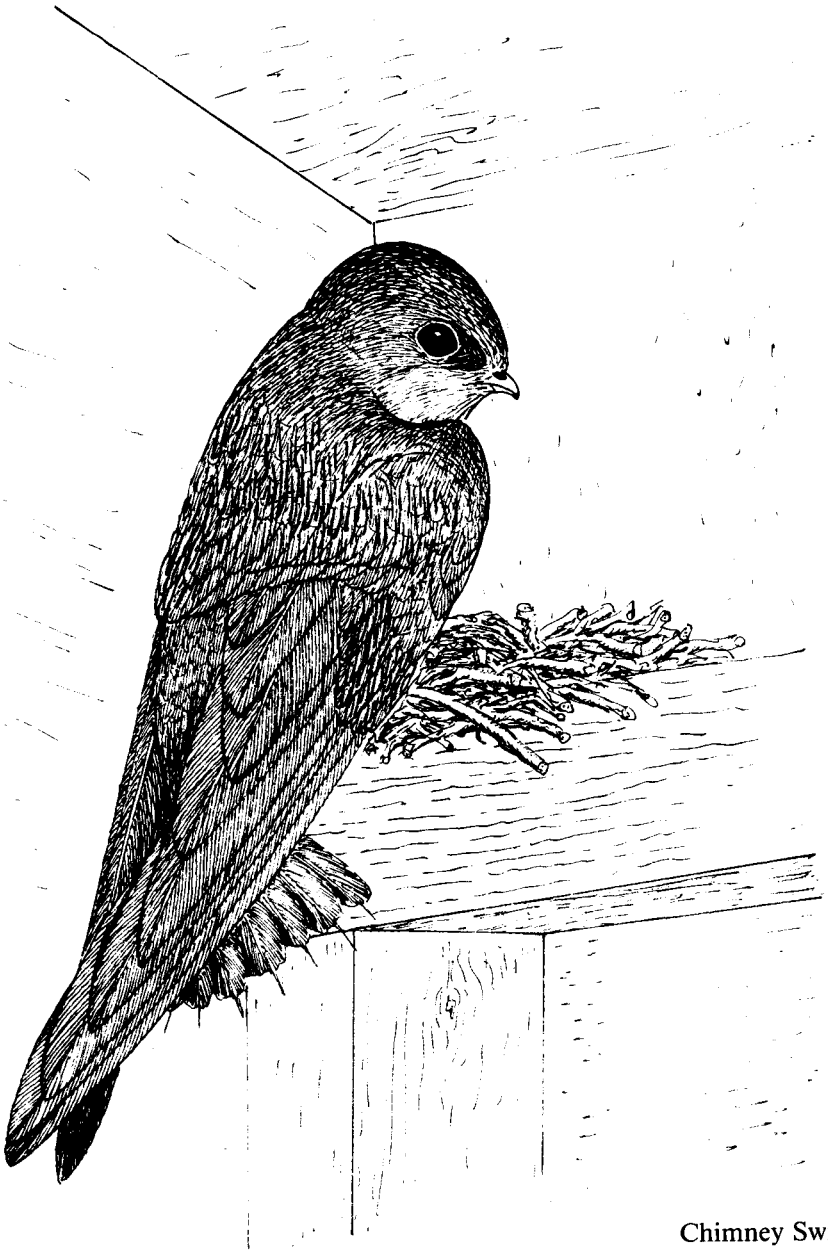
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FAMILY APODIDAE (SWIFTS)



Chimney Swift

Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica*

Breeding Status: Breeds fairly commonly in the eastern portions of the entire region, becoming progressively less common westerly and breeding locally in the western portions of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, eastern Colorado, most of Oklahoma (recorded west to Cimarron County), and northern Texas (Wilbarger County). During the twentieth century there has been a marked southward and westward range expansion.

Breeding Habitat: The chimney swift is not confined to any single habitat; its breeding range is largely dependent on suitable nesting sites. In historical times the birds have thus shifted from breeding in stands of mature trees to nesting around humans.

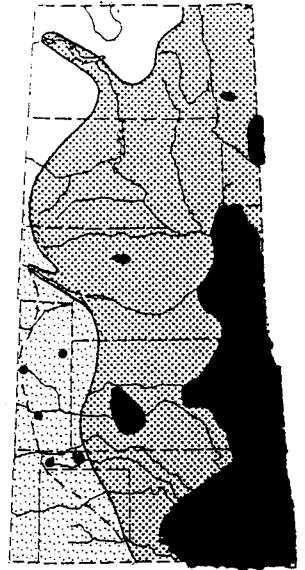
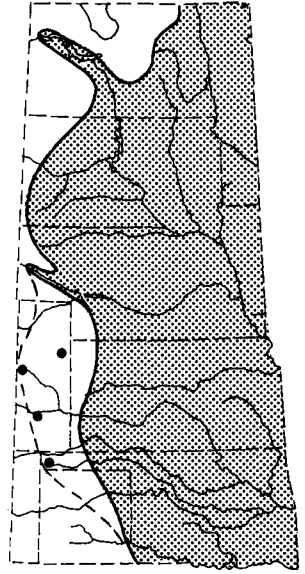
Nest Location: Originally adapted to nesting in caves and tree hollows; most nesting is now in manmade structures such as chimneys. The nest is a small, weak structure of twigs, glued together with saliva and attached to a vertical wall. It may be placed anywhere from near the top of the chimney to more than 20 feet below the top. No lining is present.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 6 eggs, white and glossy. The incubation period is 18-21 days, probably starting with the next-to-last egg. Single-brooded.

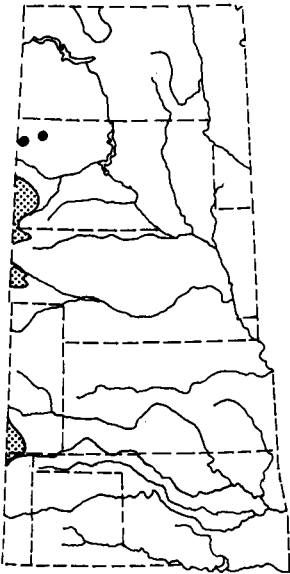
Time of Breeding: Records of birds on apparent breeding territories in North Dakota extend from May 12 to August 2. Kansas egg records are from May 11 to June 30, and Texas egg records are from May 5 to July 5.

Breeding Biology: Chimney swifts arrive on their nesting grounds in rather large flocks. Little is known of courtship behavior, which occurs in the air. Even copulation is performed while in flight. Birds gather nesting materials by striking dead branches while in full flight, breaking off twigs, and carrying them back toward the nest site in their claws. Before reaching the nest, they transfer the twigs to the bill. The twigs are coated with glutinous saliva and pressed against the wall and one another until a small cuplike structure is built. Both sexes help build the nest, which requires from 3 to 6 days. Sometimes a previous year's nest is repaired and used again. Both sexes incubate eggs, and the tiny young are hatched blind and naked. For the first few days both parents feed them by regurgitation. Later the parents bring them tiny insects. Their eyes open by the time they are 2 weeks old, and soon thereafter they begin to venture away from the nest by clinging with their long claws to the vertical surface of the nest cavity. When nearly 4 weeks old they spend considerable time standing in the nest and exercising their wings, and they fledge at about 30 days.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1940; Fisher 1958.



White-throated Swift *Aeronautes saxatalis*



Breeding Status: Breeds locally in the extreme western portions of the region, including the Black Hills of South Dakota, the Pine Ridge, Scottsbluff, and Wildcat Hills areas of Nebraska, and locally in eastern Colorado (Baca County, possibly elsewhere). Listed as a summer resident of Capulin Mountain National Monument, New Mexico.

Breeding Habitat: Steep cliffs and deep canyons provide nesting habitat for this species, at elevations from near sea level to about 13,000 feet.

Nest Location: Nests are placed in cracks and crevices of cliffs or canyons and usually are completely inaccessible. The nest is made mostly of feathers and grasses, thoroughly glued together.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 6 white eggs, usually 4. The incubation period is not known. Probably single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: Breeding in South Dakota probably occurs in June and early July, since copulations have been seen in late May and adults carrying food to a nest have been noted in late July. In Colorado, eggs have been collected during the latter half of June.

Breeding Biology: Most white-throated swifts arrive at their nesting areas in Colorado by late April and in South Dakota by mid-May. They soon begin to construct their unique nests, carrying individual feathers in their bills, sometimes apparently for miles. They also begin their aerial courtship, which may even include copulation while in flight. To initiate copulation, the birds fly toward each other from opposite directions, meet, and begin to tumble downward while clinging together, sometimes falling several hundred feet. But copulation apparently also takes place in the nesting areas, judging from some observations of egg-collectors. It may be presumed that both sexes incubate, but nothing specific is known about incubation behavior or the rearing of the young. During the nonbreeding period the birds often roost in communal quarters, much like chimney swifts. Observations on one such roosting site in California indicated that the birds, numbering 100-200, returned to their roosting crevice shortly after sunset. Within 5 minutes the entire flock had entered the crevice, passing through an entry only about 2-3 inches wide and about 2½ feet long! In very cold weather roosting birds may become torpid, although this is not known to be a regular adaptation of the species for coping with cold periods.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1940.