

## Observation of roosting behavior by Vaux's Swift in Sacramento and Yolo Counties

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A Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) encounter in the Central Valley often begins with someone in the group yelling "Vaux's Swift!" If you are quick, you may spot a few erratically moving gray forms as they disappear over the treetops. During late April and early May of 2003, however, Vaux's Swifts were a bit easier to find in the Sacramento area.

At dusk on 28 April 2003, Joan Humphrey (pers. comm.) estimated over 1,000 Vaux's Swifts swirling over Davis, Yolo County, in the vicinity of F and Ninth Streets. The swifts were apparently attempting to roost on the exterior of a large tree. Some of the birds were flying as low as three feet above the ground and briefly made contact with the tree before being dislodged by other swifts. Perhaps there was too much disturbance or the tree was not appropriate, but after several minutes the swifts broke up into smaller groups and dispersed.

On 2 May 2003, 200-250 Vaux's Swifts were seen by FO east of the Davis Tower at the University of California, Davis Medical Center (hereafter UCDMC) on Stockton Boulevard in Sacramento, Sacramento County. It was amazing to see the sky full of swifts swirling overhead, all the time chattering to each other. They wheeled between the trees, other buildings, and the smoke stack of the UCDMC's retired power plant, which subsequently proved to be their roost site. Just before they entered the roost, the flock began to tighten and circle over the smoke stack. After a few false starts, they parachuted into the chimney and the sky was silent. On 3 May, FO noted up to 500 swifts swirling around the smoke stack.

On 5 May, CC and John Trochet (pers. comm.) observed the flock of Vaux's Swifts spiraling into the large chimney structure. Trochet stated that he arrived around 1845 and saw the first swift around 1910. Numbers grew to about 350-400 birds at 1950. They wheeled mostly east of a line between the Davis Tower and the Shriner's Hospital to the south, with a few birds found in every part of the sky. Gradually, the flock began to concentrate over the smoke stack. At 2003 a few birds entered the roost, parachuting into the chimney. Within a 70 second span starting at 2010, the rest of the swifts went into the roost, some sailing, some parachuting, most fluttering into the structure.

After FO reported the swifts to the Central Valley Birds listserv on 2 May, many birders came out to witness this phenomenon. The birds were seen daily before dusk from 2 May until 11 May. Activity was reported from 1830 to 2030. Subsequently, Jim Holmes (pers. comm.) stated that the birds had been roosting in the chimney since at least 29 April. He estimated that 500 were present on 30 April. A high of 780 was reported on 9 May by Gil

Ewing (pers. comm.). The last report was of 120 birds on 11 May. Ewing reported that although 2-3 swifts were present by 1930, most birds didn't appear until 1955. They flew higher than on earlier evenings and stayed away from the chimney until they began entering the roost. They went into the chimney within a two-minute span in three separate groups. If the power plant remains idle and the smoke stack is left intact, perhaps the swifts will return in the fall or in subsequent years.

Vaux's Swifts, especially when in large numbers, are often seen during periods of unsettled weather. This may be due to migrant swifts backing up and moving in larger groups during breaks in the weather. They also fly lower than normal in poor weather, making them more conspicuous (Bull and Collins 1993). The large concentrations in spring 2003 occurred during a period of unseasonable thunderstorms, hailstorms, and generally unsettled weather.

As a breeding bird in the United States, the Vaux's Swift is primarily a species of the Pacific Northwest and, to a lesser extent, the interior western mountains. In California, the breeding stronghold of Vaux's Swifts is along the northwest coast, from the Oregon border south to Santa Cruz County, with limited breeding activity in the northern Sierra Nevada and northeastern California (Sterling and Paton 1996). They are rare but regular along the central and southern California coast in winter (Small 1994). They winter as far south as Venezuela, and some populations south of the United States are year-round residents.

In the Central Valley, Vaux's Swifts are only seen in migration. They are generally encountered from mid-April to late May, and again from September to early October (Bell, et al. 1998, Conard, et al. 2001). Observations tend to be of fewer than ten birds, often only one or two. Occasionally there are reports of 20, and, on a few occasions, up to 100 or more (Joan Humphrey and Tim Manolis, pers. comm.). As migrants, they are entirely aerial except when occupying nighttime roosts. When hollow trees or artificial structures such as chimneys are not available, they will cling to the bark of trees (Bull and Collins 1993, Garrett and Molina 1999). There are large, traditional roosts of Vaux's Swifts in areas such as Portland, Oregon, and Healdsburg and Los Angeles, California. Ten thousand or more birds have been recorded at these sites roosting inside chimneys (Anonymous 1996, Robertson 2003, Garrett and Molina 1999). There have been large concentrations of migrating Vaux's Swifts roosting in buildings near Redding on at least three occasions (Bruce Deuel pers. comm.). Nothing similar has been recorded in the lower Sacramento Valley until now.

In California, the Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) is rare but regular. It is recorded in varying numbers during migration, especially along the coast. It is a rare summering bird, particularly along the southern California coast (Devillers 1970, Small 1994). It was first recorded nesting in the state from Fort Bragg in 1975 (Stallcup and Winter 1975). This species is accidental in the Central Valley. There was one possible nesting attempt

made in the chimney of a home in Davis in June-July 1975 (Stallcup and Winter 1975), although a nest was never found (Stallcup and Winter 1976). Chimney Swifts must be carefully observed to distinguish them from Vaux's Swifts, so they may be overlooked. They are slightly larger and darker, with a longer tail and longer wings. Chimney Swifts are more vocal, with calls that are deeper, harder, and more staccato than similar calls by Vaux's Swifts (Devillers 1970, Sibley 2000). Neither we nor any other observers of the birds in the UCDMC roost noticed any possible Chimney Swifts within the roosting aggregation.

As mature forests containing hollow trees and snags have been reduced, limiting suitable nesting sites, it does not appear that Vaux's Swifts are making a large-scale transition to artificial structures as have Chimney Swifts. While there are many records of Vaux's Swifts nesting in chimneys, they are primarily dependent on old-growth forests for breeding sites (Finley and Finley 1923, Bull and Collins 1993). Nesting in chimneys has often occurred in areas that lack appropriate nest trees (Sterling and Paton 1996). As brick chimneys are replaced with screened, smooth-walled chimneys, many potential nesting and roosting sites are lost (Bull and Collins 1993). Declines have been documented throughout the species' range (Bull and Collins 1993), and the Vaux's Swift has been designated by the California Department of Fish and Game as a Species of Special Concern. Large concentrations and roosting behavior should be documented and reported to the appropriate subregional editors of North American Birds.

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