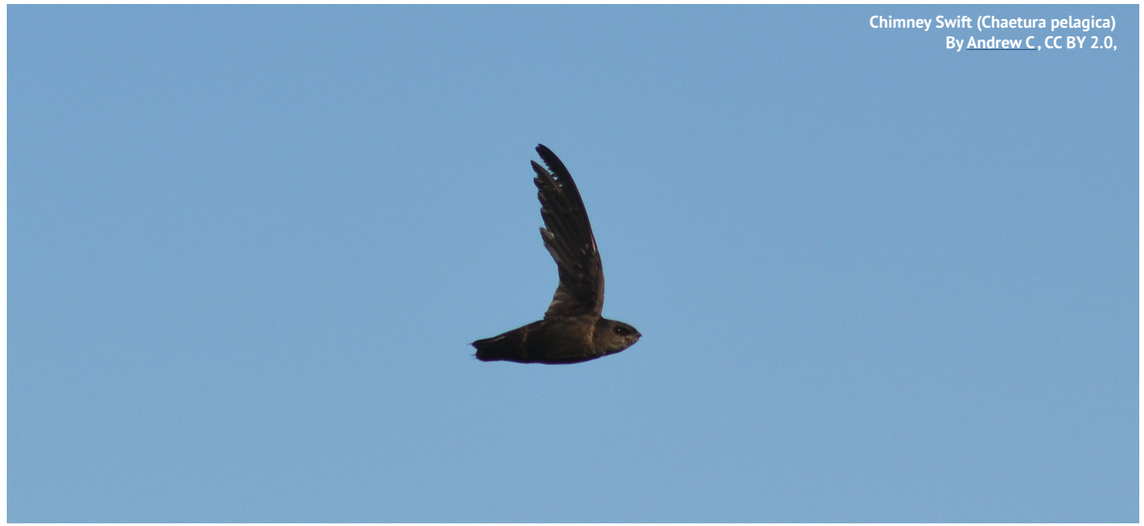

Chimney Swift (Chaetura pelagica)
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Sharing Our Chimneys: Efforts Underway in Canada to Support Threatened Chimney Swifts

By Tim Beatley

One of the things that I look forward to most every spring is the return of Chimney Swifts. It is an absolute delight to hear, usually one day in April, their beautiful chattering overhead. Their aerial feats are spectacular, and I feel like their presence is a big part of what "home" feels like to me.

Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*) are not doing well, however. Recently, I had a conversation with Veronica Connolly of Birds Canada, who heads the Chimney Swift Fund, with funding from Environmental and Climate Change Canada, to support Chimney Swift conservation projects.

The year 2022 has been the fund's pilot phase, Connolly told me, providing funds for seven projects. Most of these projects are chimney retrofits or repairs, all of which are specifically classified as critical habitat under Canada's endangered species law. There are some 1,000 specific sites throughout Canada that have been identified. The sites are often identified through a local swift monitoring effort; especially helpful have been localities participating in a citizen science effort called Swift Watch.

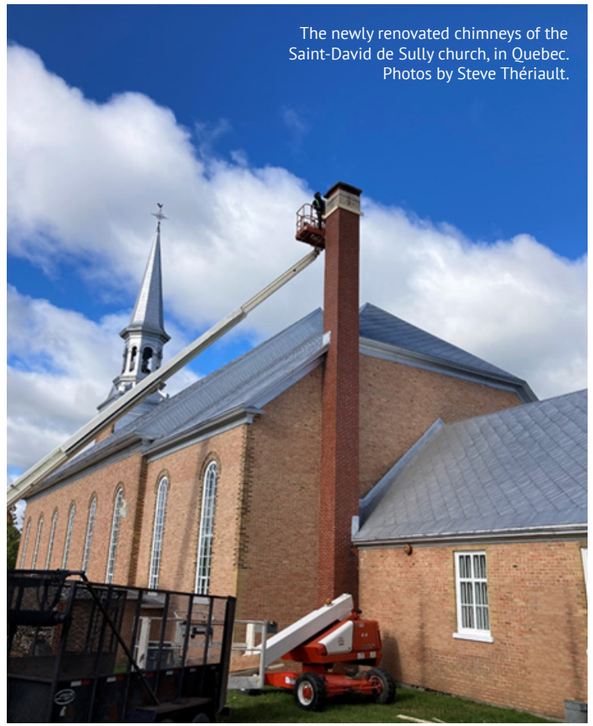
The seven projects funded in this initial round demonstrate the special role that buildings and the built environment can play, in the case of this bird species at least. Chimney Swifts once depended on cavities in larger, older trees, but over time building chimneys alternatively became sites for nesting and roosting during migration. But, in recent years, many of the chimneys the birds rely upon have been capped or lost to demolition. "In Canada, most of the chimneys that are used by swifts were built before the 1960s," says Connolly. "So, a lot of those chimneys are damaged and they're in need of repair and often what people do is they end up demolishing them [rather] than repairing them." Largely as a result of these trends, Chimney Swifts have seen a sharp decline in their numbers. Connally tells me that the current Canadian population has declined by 90% since the 1970's. Chimney Swifts become another good reason for preserving older buildings.

The sharp decline in numbers has led to their designation as a threatened species, which, in turn, requires the preparation of a recovery plan and designation of critical habitat. The map of critical habitat consists of about 1,000 specific sites in Canada, which for the most part are individual buildings with chimneys used by the swifts. As Connolly explained, each of these building owners would have received a letter telling them of the status of their home or building and its importance for swifts. How do homeowners respond, I wondered? Some are clearly not happy with the news, but many are quite excited, she told me. There are legal implications, of course, but also the chance to learn about and actively care for these magical birds, to add a layer of wonder and meaning to one's home space and to create the opportunity to view a house or a building as a form of habitat.

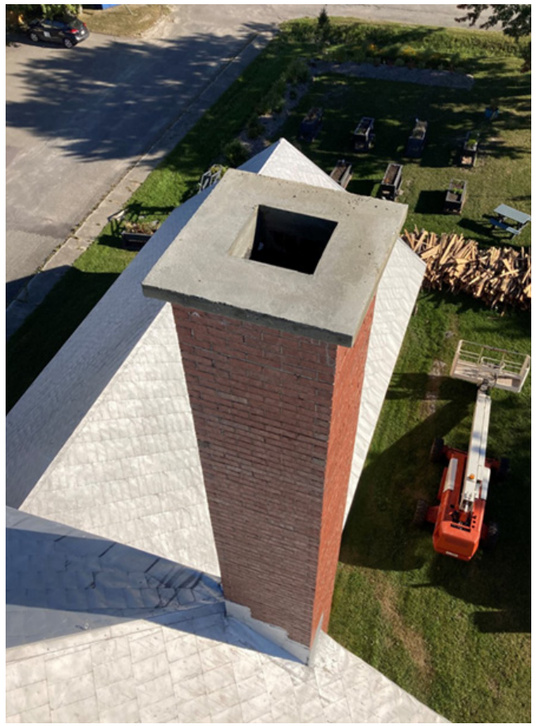
And the Swift Fund offers at least some financial help in making sure these habitats remain. The grants offered are modest in size, to be sure, ranging from $1,100CAD to $43,000CAD, and cover up to half the cost of a project. Connolly hopes the funding level and numbers of projects supported will increase in future years.

Two of the projects funded in the pilot year involve churches. In one case, the parishioners raised money to cover the church's share. In this case, Connolly explained, the president of the parish has a special interest in birds. Churches may be an untapped source of energy and resources for these kinds of urban conservation projects, as the fate of these magical birds so engaged in heavenly flight ought, one would think, to be a matter of alarm and concern to churches and church members.

How to stop the conversion and capping of chimneys is a challenge. Connolly explained that it is a combination of upgrades made to home heating and cooling systems (that typically lead to the installation of metal linings that make it impossible for swifts to build nests or attach to the sides), and many homeowners seeking to cap their chimneys to prevent critters like racoons from getting inside. It is possible to design a special chimney cap that allows swifts to roost and nest but also excludes other critters. One such cap has been designed and built by a company called Maçonnerie JB and has been installed on two of the chimneys at the



The newly renovated chimneys of the Saint-David de Sully church, in Quebec. Photos by Steve Thériault.



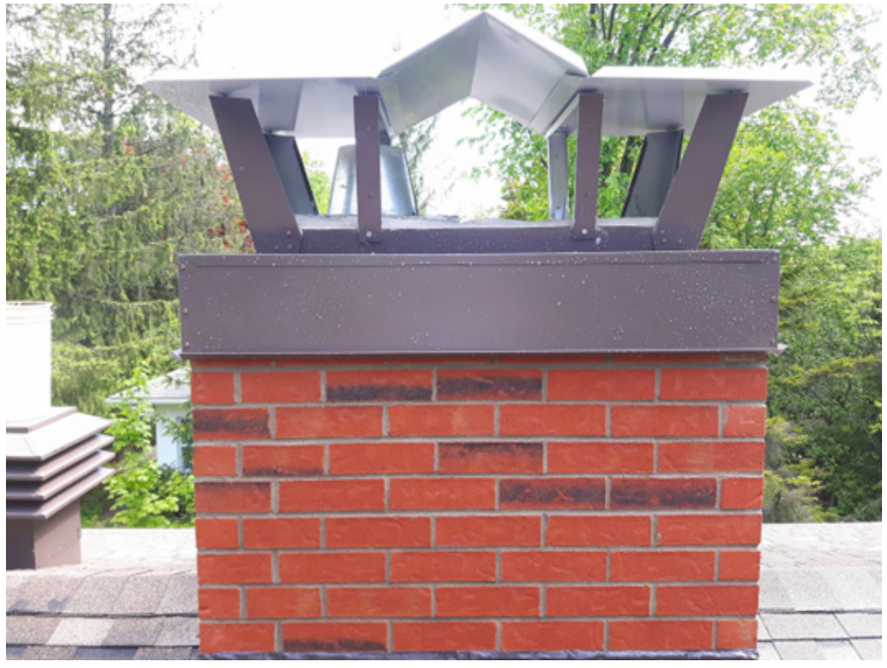
headquarters of Éco-Nature in the Quebec city of Laval. It is a clever design though not yet a commercially available product.

There are other things that cities can do. In many places, swift towers have been built, though in Canada these have not been very successful. The experience in U.S. cities has, for unknown reasons, been more successful. A prominent example is the Chimney Swift tower constructed in Atlanta's Piedmont Park (to hear more about this and efforts to make Atlanta bird-friendly, see our short documentary film here). In some places, the building of small nesting towers has become a civic project (like a tower I visited in West Virginia built by boy scouts). Communities might mandate or at least expect that when an existing older chimney is demolished or capped that a compensatory nesting and roosting space be provided. A growing trend in European cities is the building of wildlife-friendly developments that often include the inclusion of "swift bricks" that provide nesting spaces in building facades for Common Swifts.

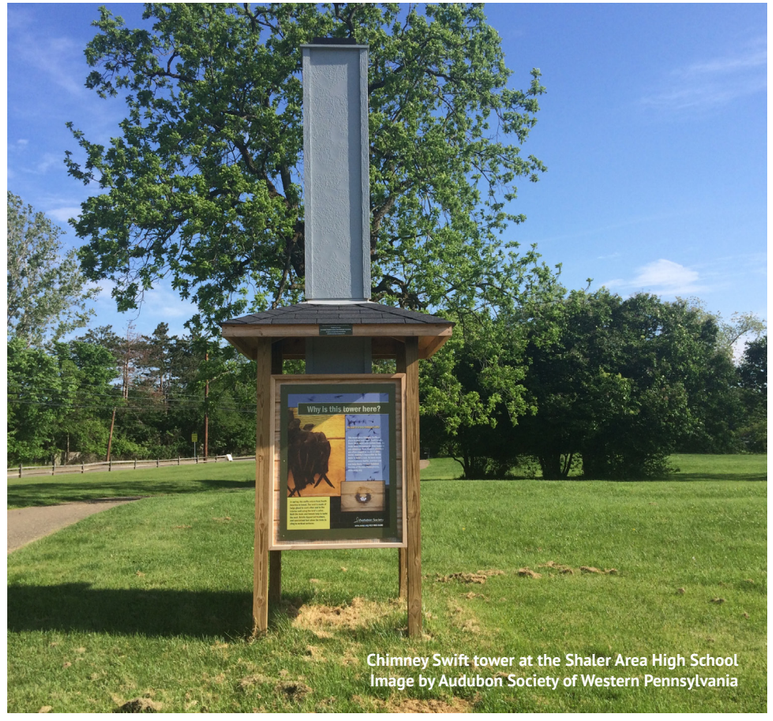
Some localities, such as the City of Béarn in Quebec, prohibit the sweeping of chimneys during the nesting season. This reminds me of the conversation I had several years ago with Jim Bonner, Executive Director of the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania, which is an area that includes the City of Pittsburgh. He told me of the encouraging work to install swift towers in the parks around that city, but also some creative ideas for engaging homeowners in swift conservation, including the unique idea of working with local chimney sweeps: could they not offer interested homeowners the service of taking away the chimney cap during nesting and migration seasons, and re-attaching them during the late fall or winter when the swifts are gone?

I asked Connolly about the importance of also saving large trees, those with nesting and roosting cavities, that were so important to the Chimney Swifts in the deeper past. Not much is known about how current populations use large trees and there are typically few efforts to map or monitor such trees in and around cities. To conserve Chimney Swifts, every city should attempt to take stock of the nesting and roosting sites, chimneys certainly, but also older trees and forests where natural cavities may be found. This is yet another reason to leave grand snag-trees in parks and along streets and to cultivate an alternative aesthetic that sees such dead or dying trees as beautiful and, as long as they are not a hazard to the public, worthy of appreciation and protection.

Chimney Swifts are also in jeopardy because of a rapid decline in the supply of flying insects, implicating the excessive use and increased toxicity of pesticides, but also factors such as light pollution. And of course, we need in turn abundant trees and plants to sustain what E.O. Wilson called those "little things that run the world". Look up at the end of the day in many parts of North America and you will see those Chimney Swifts banking and swooshing at high speeds, a charming and animated reminder of the interconnectedness of the nature of cities.



Chimney cap designed by the company Maçonnerie J.B.
Photo Credit: Maçonnerie J.B.



Chimney Swift tower at the Shaler Area High School
Image by Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania

Resources:

Making Atlanta a Bird-Friendly City [video]. Biophilic Cities Films. https://www.biophiliccities.org/bird-friendly-atl-film.

Chimney Swift, Austin Texas
Photo by Jim McCulloch (CC BY 2.0)