

Chautauqua Watershed Notes  
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy  
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Chimney Swifts

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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Above: The chimney swift, which Roger Tory Peterson described as "like a cigar with wings" is one of dozens neo-tropical birds that arrive to breed in the Chautauqua Watershed each spring. Illustration from Peterson's *Field Guide to Eastern Birds*.

The Chautauqua Watershed presently serves as temporary home, love bower and nursery for thousands of tropical birds. These birds are known as neo-tropical migrants – birds that inhabit Central and South America for most of the year. They come in every color imaginable – rich blues, fiery oranges and reds, emerald greens – and fill the woods of the Chautauqua Watershed with territorial songs unique to each species. Their names are as attractive as the birds themselves: scarlet tanagers, indigo buntings, blue-winged warblers, red-eyed vireos, and many, many more. These birds of the American tropics come here for one purpose only – to breed – and then quickly descend back to their home latitudes near the equator.

Of the neo-tropical migrants that inhabit the Chautauqua Watershed in summer, the one I see most regularly from my backyard, and, therefore, one that I am very fond of, is the chimney swift.

Chimney swifts spend autumn, winter, and early spring in the Amazon Basin of Peru. They reach the continental United States in late March and arrive over my backyard by early May. Sometimes I hear them before I see them, a sharp squeaky "chipping" sound alerting me to look up. There they are, soaring and flapping in a way that seems erratic and bat-like, on big scythe-shaped wings that look disproportionately large for the rest of the body – an appearance that Roger Tory Peterson aptly described as "like a cigar with wings."

Chimney swifts historically nested and roosted in hollow trees. As European settlers and American pioneers began to inhabit the continent, the swifts readily adapted to using the masonry chimneys of people's homes. Swifts are adapted to clinging to rough vertical surfaces with sharp claws and stubby tails tipped with pointed bristles. They actually are

unable to perch or stand upright in typical perching-bird fashion. The swift's nest is made of twigs, attached perhaps 20 feet down the inside of a chimney (or sometimes an air shaft, silo, or similar structure) by glutinous saliva they produce, which hardens and binds the material. Three to six eggs are laid, which are incubated for 18-21 days.

Once the single brood is fledged about 30 days after hatching, they fly around noisily with their parents in the area of the nest site. Chimney swifts catch flying insects on the wing, doing a wonderful job of consuming mosquitoes, biting flies and flying ants.

In fall chimney swifts join with others in communal gatherings of hundreds or even thousands at suitable roost sites, and ride south on the first major autumn cold front that blows through, on their way back home to Peru.

Like many neo-tropical migrant songbirds these days, chimney swifts are in decline; open masonry chimneys kept cool in summer are not as common as they once were. As our economy becomes more dependent on tourists – human seasonal visitors – it would be a good idea to remember that one of the keys to the ecological (and therefore, economic) health of the Chautauqua Watershed is the annual return of the neo-tropical migrants. It would be a sad summer without my South American friends.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, public benefit corporation supported primarily by membership donations. Its mission is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. For more information, or to support these efforts, please call 716-664-2166 or go to [www.chautauquawatershed.org](http://www.chautauquawatershed.org).