

## A SWIFT RESPONSE TO AN ECOLOGICAL PROBLEM



Vaux's Swifts entering the Chapman School chimney to roost for the night  
Photo: "Kat+Sam"

At Chapman Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, U.S.A. North America's largest concentration of Vaux's Swifts, *Chaetura vauxi*, roost in the circa 1925 brick chimney of the school heating system. This gathering has become known as the "Chapman's Swifts".

Every evening from mid-August to mid-October, thousands of Swifts gather in the sky over the school shortly before sunset. Estimated counts of 1,700 to 35,000 birds have been reported at varying times. Over a period of ten to thirty minutes, in the dwindling light, they fly into the chimney to roost on the interior walls until they depart at sunrise. The school is on the birds' migratory route to their wintering grounds in southern Central America and Venezuela.

The Swifts began roosting in the chimney in the early 1980s as a result of decreased natural habitat—old growth Douglas-fir and forest snags<sup>1</sup>, their preferred roosting sites.

To protect the flock, the school did not use the heating system during the weeks of roosting. Instead the students and teachers wore sweaters and jackets to keep warm, especially toward the end of September when classroom temperatures could be 10 to 16°C (50 to 60°F). Starting around 2003, the Audubon Society of Portland, school fundraisers, and corporate sponsors donated about \$70,000 for an alternate school heating system that doesn't utilise the brick chimney, which is now solely maintained for the Swifts.



Roosting Vaux's Swift  
Photo: Kathy Adams Clark

The flock has now become a major tourist attraction for the town with many hundreds to thousands of spectators witnessing the phenomenon each year.

<sup>1</sup>In forest ecology, a "snag" refers to a standing, partly or completely dead tree, often missing a top or most of the smaller branches.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia 