

# Record number of birds find home in FHS chimney

**Members of bird species that is declining in number make local stop while migrating**

**By Sloan Brewster**  
Senior Staff Writer

A record number of chimney swifts made their way into the chimney at Farmington High School on a cool summer night last week.

The tiny little birds nest in chimneys and when they are migrating south, hundreds of them share close quarters in long narrow chimneys on larger industrial or municipal buildings, said Farmington Land Trust Executive Director Tina Delaney.

Delaney and her husband Michael, master wildlife conservationists, have been counting the swifts taking refuge in the chimney at Farmington High School for the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

On Wednesday, July 9, though she was

not taking an official count, she was awed by the number of the cigar-shaped birds circling the air and then diving into the chimney.

"I think this is a record," she said repeatedly, bemoaning the fact she was not keeping track, though estimating that 500 of the birds had shown up that evening.

"The chimney swifts are a bird that are experiencing rapid decline for various different reasons," Delaney said.

The birds migrate to the Amazon, but come to the Northeast to raise their young.

Unlike the migrating birds that merely cling to the sides of large chimneys in large numbers, nesting swifts raising young chose smaller chimneys on homes where they build tiny nests, she said. The nests are so small that they are not a fire hazard.

Originally from England, the birds ar-

rived in the United States with the settlers, Delaney said.

"Over in England, before, there were huge old trees, chopped off [at the top]," she said. "They would be able to go into these huge chimney-like trees and find shelter."

The tendency for old forests to be clear cut, however, forced the small winged creatures to adapt, she explained.

That is how they began to cling to the insides of chimneys.

Recently, though, new developments have led to the restructuring of chimneys making it impossible for the birds to nest in them anymore, she said.

That has translated to the decline in their population.

"This bird has had a 50 percent decline since the late 1960s," Delaney said. "In 20 years maybe you won't see them."

She compared chimney swifts to bats, which have declined by between 80 and 95 percent at sites in the Northeast, due to a disease called white-nose syndrome, which is named from a fungus seen on bats during hibernation, according to the DEEP.

The disease has been killing bats since the winter of 2006-2007 and has now spread to 22 states and five Canadian provinces.

There were plenty of the cigar-shaped birds making their dance into the chimney at the high school.

First, they gathered in large numbers in the skies above the school, circling in waves, their voices joined in a buzzing chirping nightly song, the music surrounding the atmosphere as the birds feasted on

a few last insects before capitulating to the call of sleep.

Like bats, chimney swifts eat insects, Delaney said. They are a valuable resource to help diminish the bug population.

"They eat a ton of insects a day for free and they're wonderful to watch," she said.

The Farmington Land Trust suggests that folks interested in seeing the chimney swifts as they make their nighttime gathering take self-guided strolls at the high school.

The birds' meeting place is in the air above the chimney near the main entrance to the school.

They will continue the nightly roost until August.

The Land Trust began offering strolls on a Sunday afternoon in May at the Careny Parcel, when it gave a workshop lead by Conservationist Fred Lowman on "Attracting Bluebirds."

In June, Jay Kaplan, executive director of Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton, headed a stroll on butterflies and insects.

On Sept. 14, Will Wadsworth will lead a stroll to Will Warren's Den on the Metacomet Trail on Rattlesnake Mountain. And the grand finale, according to Delaney, will be the Oct. 5 stroll at Town Memorial Forest with Eagle Scout Will Stanford.

"It's just a nice [opportunity] for people to come out," she said. "The Land Trust is trying to get people out and about on the lands and it doesn't necessarily have to be on our parcels."

More information about chimney swifts can be found on the DEEP's website at [www.ct.gov/deep](http://www.ct.gov/deep).

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