

Tour group gathers to watch rare species-at-risk

By **Jim Eadie**

At dusk Monday, July 21 a Bancroft OPP two-person patrol car checked out suspicious activity at a private parking lot in the Town of Bancroft, and discovered a flock of avid naturalists watching a rare local flock of Chimney Swifts 'gathering' by the hundreds into a chimney for a nights rest.

'We are very lucky to be able to see this,' explained Batty Coutu, a member of the Bancroft Field Naturalists Club. Assisted by local bird expert Sharon Howard, they were conducting the most recent of the Nature Discovery Tours, organized by a partnership between the Bancroft and District Chamber of Commerce, and the Bancroft Area Stewardship Council.

Tour participants first learned about the endangered chimney swift, and the work being done by Ontario Swift Watch to try to protect its habitat. The chimney swift is in steep decline, along with other insect eating birds such as barn swallows. Some studies have pegged that decline at 96% overall decline in the past 40 years.

'That is a huge decline,' said Coutu. 'It is affecting aerial insectivores [insect eaters] who have long migrations. It is believed to be due to climate change, and loss of habitat.'

Swifts depend on food supplies along their migration routes, which have now been affected recently by changes in local climates. In addition, swifts originally nested and gathered on large old hollow trees, but the forests have changed dramatically with logging activities. The swifts adapted by gathering and nesting in larger chimneys such as old industrial buildings and schools. Modern chimney construction practices now use materials other than mortar, which is a requirement of the swift; and by designing chimneys to prevent bird infiltration. Swifts cannot perch, and so fly most of the day catching insects, and must hang from a surface much like a bat to rest. Attempts to build fake chimneys for them to use have proved unsuccessful to date. chimney swifts over-winter in the Amazon forest. They mate for life, and may be seen locally during the month of June coming and going chimneys or old hollow logs, as they catch and feed thousands of insects a day to their young. Unmated birds will often assist other parents with the feeding chores.

'The blackfly is a great source of food for them,' said Coutu.

After the OPP patrol car left, tour participants watched as an estimated 400 to 500 birds swirled like a funnel cloud into the chimney under observation.

'Down like a tornado!' said Colleen Stevenson, a seasonal resident from Oshawa as she watched with binoculars.

Anyone can attend any of the different scheduled tours during the summer and fall by contacting the chamber for information at 613-332-1513.

Yet to be conducted will be tours of the fish hatchery, the elk tour, and a forestry tour.

Kim Burke, tourism and project development coordinator for the chamber offered the last hint of things to come:

'Where are the Chimney Swifts in town? You have to come on the tour to find out,' she said. 'Oh, by the way ? you can't miss the next elk tour either ? the bulls are back.'

That might be very interesting.