

SUNSET SILOUETTES

-submitted by Cheryl Morris-Putman for MVFN

On **Thursday, September 21, 2017 at 7:30 pm.**, the Mississippi Valley Field Naturalists (MVFN) will begin a new season of presentations, which will reflect the theme “**Things That Go Bump In The Night**”. This event will take place in the Social Hall of Almonte United Church, 106 Elgin St., Almonte, Ontario.

We will enter the intriguing world of the Chimney Swift (***Chaetura pelagica***), a bird recognized by many for its distinctive, dark and mysterious silhouette etched into the sky at dusk. Our 'guide' will be **Melanie Farquhar**, an educator by profession, and someone with a passionate interest in wildlife conservation, which was first nurtured in 2006 when she volunteered at Ottawa's Wild Bird Care Centre. She has worked on research projects that included monitoring Ancient Murrelet populations in the Queen Charlotte Islands, recording Common Loon vocalizations in eastern Ontario, and most recently investigating Chimney Swift roosting behaviour in Renfrew County. Melanie's presentation is entitled “**Chimney Swifts: The Threatened Species 'Sleeping' In Our Chimneys**”. The term “**threatened**” means that the species lives in the wild, is not 'endangered', but is likely to become endangered if steps are not taken to address factors that are threatening it. The numbers of Chimney Swifts in North America have declined by 30% over the last three generations (13.5 years), one of the most dramatic population declines of all North American birds.

Before researching this topic, I knew very little about Chimney Swifts. We will not find one perched on the branch of a tree or rummaging for seeds on the ground around the backyard bird feeder. These unique birds are unable to 'perch' or forage on the ground due to their long claws, which are suitable only for clinging to rough vertical surfaces such as masonry chimneys, hollow trees, or caves. Since they prefer a stable ambient temperature while at rest, they tend to roost and nest inside such protective places. The Swift is a small bird up to 5 ½ inches in length with dark gray-brown plumage and paler throat, chin and cheeks. The swallow-like Swift is easily identified by silhouette: the cigar-shaped body, long and narrow pointed wings, short spiny tail, and a unique and somewhat erratic flight pattern consisting of stiff, shallow wing beats. The distinctive chattering, high-pitched chip notes while airborne is also used to identify the Chimney Swift. But perhaps the most impressive displays by these birds occur at dusk. Throughout the breeding season in eastern North America, Chimney Swifts gather each night to roost communally in large masonry chimneys. During migration to the upper Amazon basin of South America, some of these roosts may contain thousands of birds! “**The swifts gather just before sunset and swirl around in a coordinated mass before diving full speed into the chimney for the night—resembling a tornado of birds being sucked into the chimney.**” (-Melanie Farquhar)

This enigmatic little bird spends most of its life airborne and is described as an urban-dwelling, aerial insectivore. It is even known to snatch some of its nesting materials (i.e. small sticks) from the branches of trees while in flight, before using its glue-like saliva to form these twigs into a tiny half-saucer-shaped nest that is anchored to the inside wall of a masonry chimney or other man-made structure. Historically, the Chimney Swift nested in caves or large, hollow trees found in old growth forests, but the logging practices and forest management techniques of early European settlers resulted in the removal of these potential nesting sites. Gregarious by nature, the Swift began using chimneys in which to nest.

Melanie Farquhar's presentation will examine the natural history of Chimney Swifts, factors that

may be contributing to their decline, new research on roosting behaviour, and how citizen scientists can help with the conservation of this unique species of night creature.

Please join us for this fascinating presentation. The doors will open at 7 pm. for those wishing to socialize before the talk begins. Refreshments are available then and during the evening. A discussion will follow the presentation. There is a non-member fee of \$5 and there will be no charge for youth 18 and under. For further information, please contact MVFN's Program Chair, Gretta Bradley at gbradley@icloud.com.