

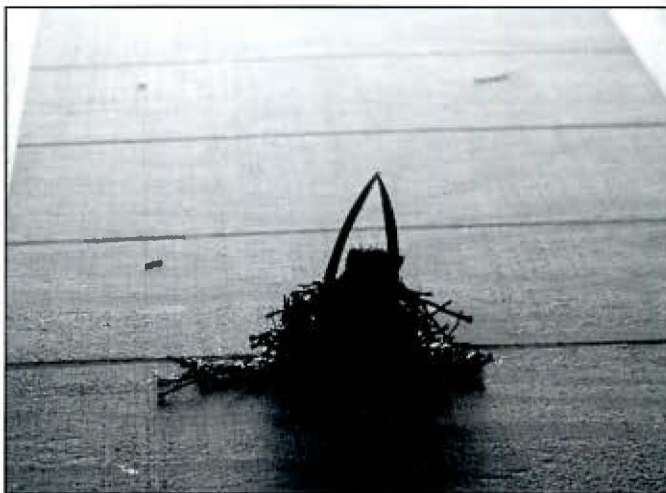
Building a Nest Tower for Chimney Swifts

by Cathie Hutchenson

For home-owners, roofing tile replacement is an inevitability. When we had to face the expense of replacing our roofing, we contacted a contractor who gave us an estimate for the roof work, but said we'd have to remove our chimney or he couldn't guarantee the roof wouldn't leak. Even the mason I contacted said the chimney should be removed, but I wanted to keep it because Chimney Swifts nested in it each

year and I didn't want to lose these excellent insect-eaters. The nation's Chimney Swift population is decreasing as people cap or remove their chimneys. Before Europeans invaded the North American continent, swifts required hollow nesting trees, which restricted their range to mostly east of the plains. After the Europeans settled and built their houses (and chimneys) the swifts adapted to using the man-made structures instead of hollow trees, subsequently increasing their population nationwide.

In southern Illinois, a canoe trip through the Cache River region gives observers the best chance to see Chimney Swifts nesting in trees, where they use the many hollow cypress and tupelos for roosting and breeding. I had been wondering whether I should get a hollow tree from the woods and stand it somewhere near my house to provide a nest site for the resident swifts as well as the migrant swifts who use our chimney as an overnight



Chimney Swift on nest in tower built by Cathie Hutchenson.

roost in fall. I contacted the Driftwood Wildlife Association in Austin, Texas, which I had read about on *TEXBIRDS*, the IBET equivalent in Texas. According to them, the best thing is to keep a chimney the swifts are using, but since that wasn't an option for me, it was suggested that I build a nest tower. I received the plans, bought the materials, and constructed the tower for placement at the back of my house.

I built the tower in the backyard where I planned to erect it, near the old chimney and on the north side of the house so the tower would be shaded from the summer sun. The tower wasn't hard to build, but it was hard to stand upright. Fortunately, we have a large tractor with a front-end loader. I managed to slowly lift the tower until it stood on its legs next to the house. I then attached the tower to the house with an "H" shaped 2x4 affair so the tower wouldn't blow over in a stiff wind. I made a clean out/observation

door at the bottom of the tower so I could remove the debris at the end of the nesting year and watch any nesting activity.

After a few weeks, I noticed some swifts had been roosting in the tower, but no nest was under construction. I had hoped that a nest would be built in the tower, but if the birds used the tower only as a roost, I would still have their services as insect controls and the entertainment of their flying. So

far, we had about six swifts roosting in the tower, which was enough for bug control. In the middle of June, I noticed some sticks on the floor of the tower, so I looked up. A pair had begun building a nest of 30 to 50 sticks and saliva, somewhat reminiscent of a Mourning Dove nest. In the next few days a bird began sitting on the nest, laying and incubating eggs (Photo 1). I checked the tower twice a week, and the bird was almost always on the nest. About two weeks later, a cracked egg was on the floor of the tower. When I removed it, I noticed there was no embryo, so the egg was infertile, but the bird was still incubating since she had more eggs in the nest. A couple of weeks later, there were two eggshells and another complete egg on the floor of the tower, indicating that there were at least two chicks in the nest. A bird was brooding the young most of the time, leaving only to feed. The tower had proven acceptable for a Chimney Swift nest,