

Audobon's obsession with Swifts

The Bethlehem Gadfly Environment, Swifts January 17, 2021

🦉 Latest in a series of posts on the Swifts 🦉



The Swifts are coming in April!

Won't you join with us and contribute?

Click [here](#) for the GoFundMe page.

“When about to descend into a hollow tree or a chimney, its flight, always rapid, is suddenly interrupted as if by magic, for down it goes in an instant, whirling in a peculiar manner, and whirring with its wings, so as to produce a sound in the chimney like the rumbling of very distant thunder.”

John James Audobon, c. 1830s

John James Audobon had an obsession about Swifts.

In the delightful chapter on the **“American Swift”** in his classic *The Birds of America*, Audobon takes us back to the Swift's pre-chimney days in the “ancient tenements” in the almost illimitable forests of America,

especially in the “Sycamores of gigantic growth. . . . those patriarchs of



the forest rendered habitable by decay.”

Audobon is captivated by the Swifts abiding in a two feet in diameter hollowed branch forty feet up on a huge Louisville sycamore sixty or seventy feet high and seven or eight feet in diameter at the base.

Audobon not only watches the Swifts, he meticulously counts them.

He not only watches the Swifts, but, ear against tree trunk, he listens to them.

He not only watches the Swifts from a distance, but he scrambles forty feet up the tree to view them, voyeur-like, through a window he bores.

He not only watches the Swifts from the outside, but, if Gadfly reads him right, he goes inside the hollow tree.

He not only watches the Swifts when they are awake, he anticipates the dawn to experience their dramatic awakening:

Next morning I rose early enough to reach the place long before the least appearance of daylight, and placed my head against the tree. All was silent within. I remained in that posture probably twenty minutes, when suddenly I thought the great tree was giving way, and coming down upon me. Instinctively I sprang from it, but when I looked up to it again, what was my astonishment to see it standing as firm as ever. The Swallows were now pouring out in a black continued stream. I ran back to my post, and listened in amazement to the noise within, which I could compare to nothing else than the sound of a large wheel revolving under a powerful stream. It was yet dusky, so that I could hardly see the hour on my watch, but I estimated the time which they took in getting out at more than thirty minutes. After their departure, no noise was heard within, and they dispersed in every direction with the quickness of thought.

Yes, John James Audobon had an obsession about Swifts.

But he has nothing on Jennie Gilrain.

Any day now Gadfly expects to find Jennie rappeling up (hmm, can you rappel “up”?) the Masonic Temple chimney.

He has Bethlehem native Jim Friedman, NBC10 photo-journalist, on speed dial.

So, yes, Jennie Gilrain also has an obsession about Swifts. That’s a good thing. Without it, we wouldn’t have a campaign to save them.

Gadfly invites you to take a few minutes to read Audobon’s **short charming pioneer study** of the Swifts.

*Gadfly is distressed to receive anxious notes from eager potential contributors to the Save Our Swifts campaign who can't locate the GoFundMe page. O my. **Here** it is! Right **here**.*



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