

What the Swifts have to teach us

The Bethlehem Gadfly Environment, Swifts January 22, 2021

🦋 *Latest in a series of posts on the Swifts* 🦋

“Swifts have, of late, become my fable of community, teaching us about how to make right decisions in the face of oncoming bad weather.”

Helen Macdonald



You have been following Gadfly’s support of our **Save Our Swifts** campaign spearheaded by Jennie Gilrain and with the blessing of Masonic Temple site developer John Noble. You may have even contributed to the campaign. 91 people have so far, and there’s room for plenty more. (*hint, hint*)

There’s word on the street that there’s a move afoot to name the Swifts the official bird of the City of Bethlehem.

There’s further whispers of a resolution at the next City Council meeting.

It behooves us to get to know the Swifts.

We may soon be seeing images of them everywhere from on police cars to our water bills.

I can imagine Swifts illuminated on the side of the Hotel Bethlehem at migration time.

Now Gadfly already told you that you could know Swifts by reading scientist/naturalist **JJ Audobon**, he of considerable fame.

What Gadfly didn't tell you, however, is that ol' Audobon is the typical cold, detached scientist.

While not exactly Dr. Frankenstein, he killed and stuffed his birds.

Gadfly couldn't bear to tell you that before.

On a midnight excursion to the Louisville Sycamore Swift Hotel, JJ and his Igor "caught and killed with as much care as possible more than a hundred [Swifts], stowing them away in [their] pockets and bosoms" for further examination.

Gadfly appreciates the "as much care as possible" gesture, but we're not talking about love here.

We want to love our Swifts.

With a tip o' the hat to Jennie, Gadfly would like to recommend "ornitho-poet" Helen Macdonald's *New York Times Magazine* essay "**The Mysterious Life of Birds Who Never Come Down.**"

Here we will find love.

Here we will find respect.

Here we will find awe.

Gadfly gives you a taste:

The bird was suffused with a kind of seriousness very akin to holiness. . . . Swifts are magical in the manner of all things that exist just a little beyond understanding. . . . they are creatures of the upper air, and of their nature unintelligible, which makes them more akin to angels. . . . If the swifts were flying low over rooftops, I'd see one open its mouth, and that was truly uncanny, because the gape was huge, turning the bird into something uncomfortably like a miniature basking shark. . . . They still seem to me the closest things to aliens on Earth. I've seen them up close now, held a live grounded adult in my hands before letting it fall back into the sky. You know those deep-sea fish dragged by nets from fathoms of blackness, how obvious it is that they aren't supposed to exist where we are? The adult swift was like that in reverse. Its frame was tough and spare, and its feathers were bleached by the sun. Its eyes seemed unable to focus on me, as if it were an entity from an alternate universe whose senses couldn't quite map onto our phenomenal world. . . . They mate on the wing. And while young martins and swallows return to their nests after their first flights, young swifts do not. As soon as they tip themselves free of the nest hole, they start flying, and they will not stop flying for two or three years, bathing in rain, feeding on airborne insects, winnowing fast and low to scoop fat mouthfuls of water from lakes and rivers. . . . Common swifts spend only a few months on their breeding grounds, another few months in winter over the forests and fields of sub-Saharan Africa, and the rest of the time they're moving, making a mockery of borders.

Gadfly usually gives you selections and then a link to full articles or news stories. A bow to your busy lives.

But he would really like you to read [this whole article](#).

It's kinda long for sure.

But it's exquisitely written and should not be excerpted.

Look for the phenomenon of "vesper flights."

See what the Swifts have to teach us.

And be ready to tell me what you think.



Save Our Swifts

The Bethlehem Gadfly