

# Developer John Noble commits to preserving our spectacular aerial acrobats

The Bethlehem Gadfly Swifts January 10, 2021

🦉 Latest in a series of posts on the Swifts 🦉



**The initial campaign surge has slowed!**

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*selections from Christina Tatu, "For the birds, a Bethlehem developer takes the unusual step to preserve a chimney during demolition." Morning Call, January 7, 2021.*

When Jennie Gilrain saw the massive flock of birds, spinning like a dark tornado over her South Side neighborhood, she made it her mission to track them.

A member of the Lehigh Valley Audubon Society, Gilrain and her husband, Mark McKenna, found the birds at the former Bethlehem Masonic Lodge on Wyandotte Street, where she observed them coming and going from the building's 95-year-old chimney like plumes of swirling smoke.

That was two years ago, and it was the first time Gilrain had seen chimney swifts, a small gray bird named for its favorite urban roost: tall hollow structures like chimneys and smokestacks.

“They are like aerial acrobats. They court in the air and the male will fly in tandem with the female. They swoop together, and when they go into the chimney, it’s the most spectacular sight,” Gilrain said.

The birds have plenty of options in Bethlehem, once an industrial hub with older buildings and former factories. But Gilrain knew this particular [building was slated for demolition](#). When chain-link construction fences went up around the Masonic Lodge and neighboring Wilbur Mansion last month, she asked developer John Noble to reconsider his plans.

“He called me and I just told him about the birds. I was a little scared because I had my own prejudices about developers. I thought he might try to get rid of the birds,” Gilrain said.

Instead, Noble wanted to see the birds’ habitat preserved.

In the past week, Noble and his team have slowed their demolition, taking care to keep the 45-foot-tall chimney intact even as they remove the building it’s attached to.

“More than likely if we were to demo it at a normal pace, the chimney would already be down,” Noble said. “The guys doing the demo are really talented, and it’s made life more interesting for them. They don’t normally tear down a building and leave a staircase or chimney.”

Noble said he was compelled to help after learning about the birds and seeing a video of their aerial acrobatics. Like Gilrain and McKenna, what he saw inspired him to act.

“I’ve got to do something to make sure these birds are impacted in the least amount possible,” he said.

The chimney swifts spend their winters in Brazil, but in April they return to North America to lay eggs. Gilrain would expect no more than five pairs to nest in the chimney this spring since they are territorial during that time.

It’s from August to October, when the birds are migrating back to South America, that they put on a spectacular aerial show, with huge flocks stopping at known roosts along the way. Gilrain counted 2,200 birds coming from the Masonic Lodge’s chimney last year.

The demolition of the building is expected to take another five to six weeks. If for some reason the chimney can’t be saved, Noble plans to construct another one, about 60 feet from the original.

Noble says his redevelopment of the 4-acre property will transform the city’s gateway at the Hill-to-Hill Bridge, with an upscale hotel, apartment complex and new restaurant.

His plans involve tearing down the Masonic Lodge to build an addition to the former Wilbur Mansion at 623 Cherokee St., expanding it to house nine hotel rooms, a 120-seat conference center and 90-seat restaurant and bar. Noble is also planning 50 one- and two-bedroom apartments with a lobby and lounge, exercise room, mail room, storage units and rooftop terrace with fire pits.

It’s not yet clear how much it will cost to preserve the lodge’s chimney.

The Lehigh Valley Audubon Society started a GoFundMe page to raise \$50,000 [for the preservation](#). The group hopes some of the money from

the “Save Our Swifts” campaign can go toward educating the public about the birds.

“Potentially tens and thousands of birds use this chimney as a secure roosting site at night and without it, they end up on the sides of buildings and trees in the area. And if you have a cold raining night, they can succumb,” said Peter Saenger, Lehigh Valley Audubon Society president.

It’s more critical than ever that the public understands the birds’ importance and their impact on the environment, said Saenger, a biology professor at the Acopian Center for Ornithology at Muhlenberg College.

Some of the factors contributing to their demise include habitat loss, domestic cats and window collisions as more buildings go up, Saenger said. People should be concerned because birds help make our environment more comfortable by removing thousands of pests every day.

A single swift can eat up to 2,000 insects a day, he said.

It’s unclear how many swifts call the Lehigh Valley home because they roost in hard-to-access areas, but it’s safe to say tens of thousands make their way through the area during their fall migration, said Scott Burnet, a member of the Lehigh Valley Audubon Society.

As more buildings are torn down and chimneys capped, Burnet has taken to making “towers” for the birds. He’s built 19 throughout the region, including one in his Allentown yard.

He and other members of the Audubon Society hope to raise enough money for an official count of the population and educational efforts. Gilrain has applied for a grant from the Lehigh Valley Engaged

Humanities Consortium to organize public forums with the Audubon Society and Bethlehem Public Library.

“It’s so fascinating to me these birds have adapted to an urban environment. Originally they rooted in old-growth forests and hollowed out trees,” Gilrain said. “Now that the old-growth forests are almost completely gone, they have adapted. It’s almost like the swifts have grown up with our city.”

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