

## HABITAT PRESERVATION

## SWIFT ACTION

FOR A FEW WEEKS EVERY MAY AND SEPTEMBER, the chimney at Agate Hall on the UO campus becomes the focus of fascination as thousands of migrating Vaux's swifts pour themselves from the sky like a funnel cloud into the old brick flue to roost overnight. This phenomenon is like a magnet to the local community, as crowds of onlookers — novice and expert birdwatchers alike — fill the parking lot at dusk with lawn chairs and binoculars in hand to witness the event.

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Swift-watching at Agate Hall (formerly Condon School) has been a pastime in Eugene for at least thirty years, so when the roosting chimney was slated for demolition, a number of UO officials and community members were quick to seek another solution. University planner Chris Ramey says that the building was scheduled for a few renovations — including a new roof — in summer 1999 and that the chimney was on the demolition list because it was considered seismically unsound. “The question came up: ‘Do we really need this chimney? It’s going to fall down in an earthquake,’” Ramey says. “But we thought, ‘No, there’s got to be a better way.’”

At first, the University explored the possibility of forming a partnership with the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Department to seek grants to pay for the preservation of the chimney. The site is rare habitat, particularly in the city. Dan Gleason, a lab preparer in the biology

department and teacher of the UO’s field ornithology course, says that the swifts are unlike other birds because they cannot perch. They have strong feet but must find surfaces that they can cling to, such as the rough, vertical passage of a chimney. He says that like bats, the swifts cling to each other while roosting.

As many as 20,000 swifts — tiny black birds, usually about four-and-a-half inches in length — roost in the chimney at a time. Traditionally, the swifts would roost in hollow, old-growth tree snags, but today they make do with the chimneys of several old buildings along their route through the Willamette Valley. When the swifts stop at the Agate Hall chimney overnight, they are either on their way to their summer habitat in British Columbia and southern Alaska or their winter homes in Central and South America. A few hundred Vaux’s swifts break off from the migration and spend the summer in the local area and the Cascades, where they breed. These swifts usually roost in the chimney every night of their stay.

The partnership never panned out, and University architects eventually came up with a plan to brace the chimney with a collar-like structure and a system of guy wires that won’t interfere with the interior of the chimney. Ramey says that by applying the money the University would have spent on the chimney’s demolition to the new renovations and digging deeper into the budget, the project became feasible without any outside funding. He estimates the renovation of the chimney will cost around \$10,000. Gleason considers it money well-spent and says the site could be used for research to learn more about the swift migration. In addition, he hopes to help create permanent interpretive signs at Agate Hall to educate the public about the swift migration and the University’s role in protecting it.

Judith Raiskin, associate professor of women’s studies, says the University is also preserving an important part of community life. She and her family first



Chris Pritsch/The Register-Guard

Vaux’s swifts at the Agate Hall chimney last spring.

saw the swifts one spring several years ago, when a friend chose to celebrate her birthday by watching them. “We love to go watch the swifts,” she says. “They make several passes at the chimney before they go down — it is an amazing communal dance. Sometimes the parking lot is full of people, and we just stand there talking to strangers — it’s a great community event.”

The “communal dance” of the swifts occurs at dusk and can take between twenty and forty-five minutes. Some people describe it as a tornado — a swirling tunnel of birds with the tip at the mouth of the chimney. Others have said it is like watching smoke curl out of the chimney — in reverse. Joseph Minato, an instructor at Nearby Nature and Spencer Butte Middle School, says he encourages his students and their families to see the swifts. “It’s an incredible value to the community,” he says. “In the city, ‘experiencing nature’ can be harder than when one is in a national park or other open space. Anywhere we can get the beauty and awe of nature is a treasure.”

— BETH HEGE PIATOTE MA '97