

If you build it, will they come?

Cantigny hopes to attract chimney swifts this spring with new tower

April is a time of rising anticipation for local birders. We know the best of spring migration is just ahead. Soon the dazzling buntings, grosbeaks, orioles, tanagers and warblers will arrive in numbers, a yearly spectacle that never gets old.

I enjoy the colorful pageant as much as anybody, but this year it's one particular species I'm looking forward to most. Not a flashy one either, just a little sooty gray bird that most people never notice.



Jeff Reiter
Words on birds

I'd never given much thought to chimney swifts until 2011. That's when Ray Kotz and Jackie Vernot, a Naperville couple, approached with an extraordinary offer. Would Cantigny Park, they asked, be interested in a home for swifts?

Ray and Jackie wanted to build a chimney swift "tower" and thought Cantigny, where I work, would be an ideal site. They know the property well from their participation in the park's monthly bird walks.

Soon a package arrived from Amazon.com, sent by Ray. Inside were two books, one about chimney swifts and the other about building swift towers. The Texas-based authors, Paul and Georgean Kyle, are well known for their work in chimney swift conservation. Their books and website, ChimneySwifts.org, are prime resources for anyone interested in *Chateura pelagica*.

The chimney swift is a common species that visits our region from late April through mid-October, give or take a few weeks on either end. It spends the rest of the year in the upper Amazon basin of eastern Peru, northern Chile and northwestern Brazil.

Swifts spend most of their daylight hours in the air, feeding on flying insects. You can hear their loud "chipping" as they dart about the sky on long sweptback wings. At night they roost in groups.



COURTESY OF ROB CURTIS
The chimney swift returns to our area in late April after wintering in South America.

Unfortunately, as with many other neotropical migrants, the swift population is declining. While not classified as a threatened species in Illinois, chimney swift is listed among "Birds of Concern" in the Chicago Wilderness Region.

The swift once relied upon natural habitat for roosting and nesting. It was primarily a woodland species and favored large hollow trees. But as America developed, swifts adapted to the urbanized landscape. Silos, industrial air shafts and brick chimneys became their new haunts.

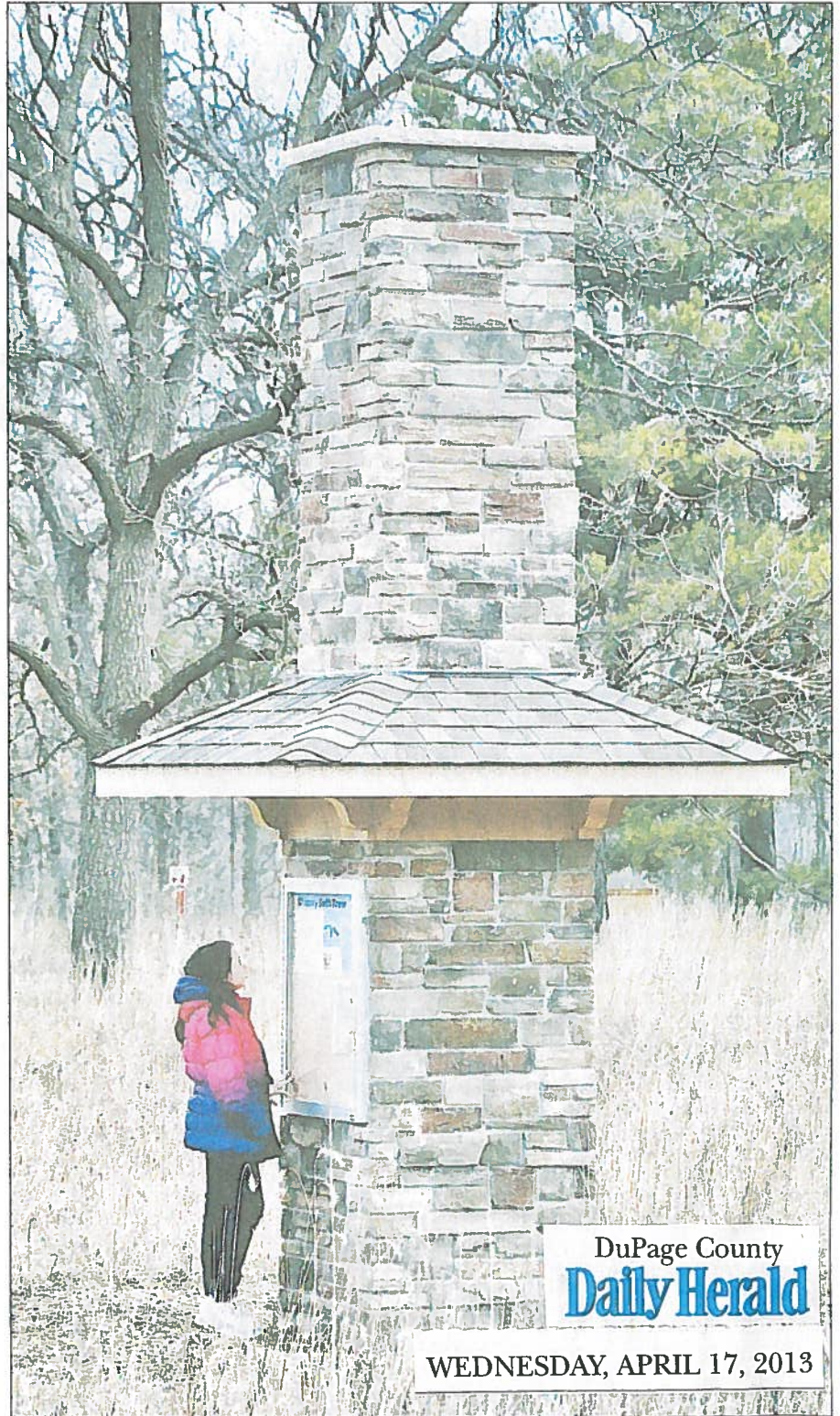
These days, however, suitable man-made structures are in shorter supply. Factory smokestacks are demolished, residential chimneys are capped, and new chimneys are often lined with steel, rendering them useless to swifts.

Fortunately, chimney swifts will utilize "artificial" housing, just like purple martins and Eastern bluebirds. Havens like the one Ray and Jackie were proposing for Cantigny can help.

Well, to make a long story short, the park accepted their generous offer. Ray and Jackie developed the plans, hired the contractor and paid the bills — a remarkable gift.

Completed in November, the 15-foot Cantigny swift tower rises from the park's prairie habitat, near the Idea Garden. The structure includes a display board with facts about the species it is designed to serve.

• Jeff Reiter's column appears monthly in *Neighbor*. Contact him through his blog, *Words on Birds*.



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COURTESY OF JEFF REITER

A tower at Cantigny Park is set to welcome chimney swifts. The birds originally nested in hollow trees, then turned to chimneys and factory smokestacks as land was developed.