

Chimney Swift Towers

The chimney at Orange Elementary School in Waterloo, built in 1915, has been the home for nesting chimney swift pairs for many years. It has also served as a migration stop over for up to 200 birds at a time. In the fall, the number of chimney swifts flying down the chimney in the evening has been spectacular.

The school building was old, and it was finally replaced with a beautiful new building 1/2 mile north of the original school in 2013. At that time the school board voted to tear down the old school to make way for a housing development. Students and staff became concerned for the chimney swifts, knowing the Orange School chimney swifts would lose their home.

Our first goal for this project was to build two chimney swift towers near the old school before it was taken down. We planned to place one tower at the new school and a second tower at a farm directly across from the old school. We wanted to establish a home for nesting pairs as well as a migratory stop for other swifts. We have created a wetland and a prairie, and we have planted over 90 trees and bushes since the new school opened. We realized building the chimney swift towers would help us learn more about this bird as well as provide a home for chimney swifts once the school comes down.

Mike Henning, an Orange Township resident, read the book Chimney Swift Towers and analyzed the tower at McFarlane Park. He created the blueprint for building a tower, and he priced the materials at Lowe's. He then volunteered to build the towers. Construction began in an unused room at the new Orange School. Throughout the building process, Mike involved students whenever possible in the construction of the tower. When spring came, the completed tower was moved outside, and several students painted the tower orange. After the base coat was

completed, every child at Orange School wrote his or her name on the tower. The Waterloo School district maintenance staff poured cement for the foundation and placed the tower near the new prairie.

The second goal of this project was to educate elementary students at Orange Elementary School about birds in general, chimney swifts in particular. Orange School has a Student Environmental Committee consisting of approximately 20 students in grades two and five, ages 7 and 11. They worked in our six raised bed gardens, they helped water trees, they picked up trash around the campus, and they have been involved in other activities related to the outdoors. This project was very exciting for them, because they used to watch the chimney swifts fly around the wetland at the old school. A team of fifth grade students did research on chimney swifts, then they developed a Power Point presentation to share what they learned. They traveled from classroom to classroom last spring and talked about their research with other Orange School students.

All summer, Mike Henning and Carol Boyce checked the tape of recorded chimney swift calls that was placed at the base of the tower to make sure it played continuously. We were rewarded for our efforts this fall to find a pair had nested in the tower over summer! We also observed 40-50 swifts entering the tower during migration time.

Grant money received from the Iowa Ornithology Union purchased the materials needed to build the chimney swift tower. We were able to build one tower this year, but we hope to find funding to build a second tower. If a second tower is built, we decided we would like it also placed at Orange School rather than at the farm across the road.

We feel this project has had a huge impact on the future of chimney swifts roosting in a chimney about to be taken down (2018). It has informed and educated not only Orange School

students, but the entire community about this elusive bird. An article in the Waterloo Courier about this project led to an invitation to the Tom Schilke, Audubon Club president, to talk about chimney swifts at a Waterloo Kiwanis meeting. We regret that the chimney swifts will lose their home in a few years, but we are deeply grateful to the IOU for assisting us in providing an alternate home for these amazing birds.

Submitted by Carol Boyce