

Vaux's Swift *Chaetura vauxi*

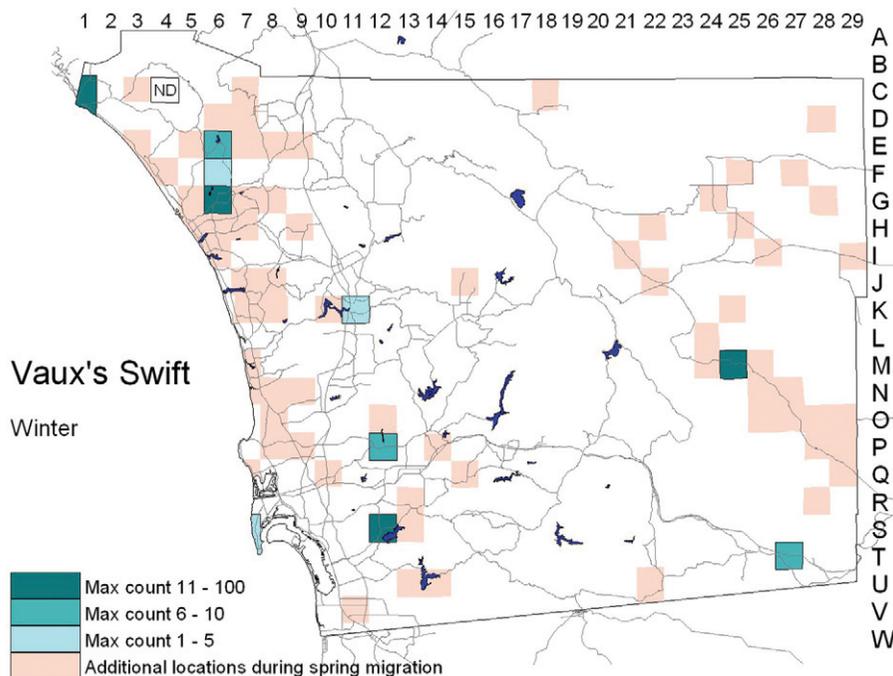
California's smallest swift is largely a migrant through San Diego County, occasionally common. It winters regularly, though, around Oceanside, its only area of regular wintering north of central Mexico. Migrating flocks sometimes roost in large numbers in chimneys and other man-made structures, where they are at risk of being burned or cooked, as well as of blundering into living rooms. Concentrated roosts represent a bottleneck of vulnerability for a species already of conservation concern because of

its reliance for breeding on old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest.

Migration: In spring, Vaux's Swifts are seen mainly in the coastal lowland and Anza-Borrego Desert, with very few observations between; the birds evidently fly over San Diego County's mountains quickly. During the atlas period, our high counts were of 160 at Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 1 May 1999 (K. Estey), 150 near Dehesa (Q15) 22 April 1999 (A. Young), and 145 near the east end of Agua Hedionda Lagoon 4 May 1996 (W. E. Haas).

These figures were eclipsed in 2002 with the discovery of a roost in an old brick chimney at 8th Avenue and Broadway in downtown San Diego (S9). From 4 to 7 May at least 1000 individuals were around downtown San Diego, many entering this chimney (K. B. Clark). In 2003 several hundred used the roost at least from 25 April to 6 May (M. Sadowski). Vaux's Swifts are much less common in the desert than along the coast; maximum counts are of 30 in Vallecito Valley (M24) 6 May 1998 (R. Thériault) and 50 at the Ram's Hill sewage ponds (H25) 8 May 1994 (P. D. Jorgensen).

The species' spring migration peaks in the last week of April and first week of May. From 1997 to 2001, first spring dates ranged from 5 to 11 April and last spring



dates ranged from 1 May (1997) and 10 May to 26 May, except for one in lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8) 6 June 1999 (M. Baumgartel). Extreme dates in previous years are 4 April (1981, San Diego, AB 35:862, 1981) and 2 June (1984, Point Loma, S7, D. M. Parker, AB 38:961, 1984).

In fall, Vaux's Swift is generally seen in numbers smaller than in spring, though the difference may be due to the difference in weather at the two seasons. In cloudy or stormy weather the birds fly low and are more conspicuous than in the clear weather that commonly prevails uninterrupted through September and October. In fall 2002, Vaux's Swifts roosted in the same chimney at 8th and Broadway as in the spring; they were seen 4 September–21 October, practically the same interval defined by all previous fall records combined, with a daily maximum of 70 individuals (M. Sadowski).

Winter: The subspecies of Vaux's Swift breeding in western North America winters primarily in southern Mexico and Central America, being only casual at this season over most of California. Yet it is annual in winter in San Diego County, in the valleys of the lower Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers. It has been recorded on 15 of 34 Oceanside Christmas bird counts, 1968–2001, with a maximum of 208 on 22 December 1979. From 1997 to 2002 we found it at Whelan Lake (G6), Windmill Lake (G6), or O'Neill Lake (E6) every winter, with as few as four in 1999–2000 but up to 40 at Whelan Lake 14 December 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg) and 15 at Windmill Lake 23 December 2000 (P. Unitt). Away from this center Vaux's Swift is far less frequent, recorded on only two Rancho Santa Fe Christmas bird counts, 1981–2001 (one or two individuals), and two San Diego counts, 1953–2001 (maximum 10 on 15 December 1990). Other winter records in the coastal lowland are from near San Onofre (C1; one on 7 February 1996, L. R. Hays, NASFN 50:224, 1996; at least 100 on 24 February 1999, D. W. Aguillard, NAB 53:209, 1999), Baticuitos Lagoon (J6/J7; one on 21 December 1987, D. R. Willick, AB 42:321, 1988), Escondido (I10; one on 22 January 1980, AB 34:307, 1980),

the east end of Lake Hodges (K11; one on 14 December 1997, B. K. Schram, FN 52:258, 1998), San Elijo Lagoon (L7; one on 6 and 22 March 1964, AFN 18:388, 1964), Old Mission Dam (P11; five on 15 January 1980, AB 34:307, 1980), Santee Lakes (P12; nine on 15 January 2001, E. Wallace), Point Loma (S7; one on 6 January 2001, J. C. Worley), Sweetwater Reservoir (S12; 50 on 16 and 17 January 2001, G. Chaniot, NAB 56:224, 2002), and the Tijuana River valley (one on 8 December 1990, G. McCaskie, AB 45:321, 1991). Most unexpected were two small flocks on the east side of the mountains in 2000–01, of about 20 near Vallecito Stage Station (M25) 2 December 2000 (P. K. Nelson) and six at Tule Lake (T27) 16 February 2001 (F. L. Unmack).

Conservation: The northern subspecies of Vaux's Swift has suffered population declines as a result of logging of its breeding range, where it depends on large old trees and holes excavated by Pileated Woodpeckers (Bull and Cooper 1991, Bull and Hohmann 1993, Sterling and Paton 1996). The California Department of Fish and Game considers Vaux's Swift a species of special concern. Of relevance in southern California is migrants concentrating in communal roosts in artificial structures, where large numbers may be trapped or killed. Originally hollow trees served as roosts, but now buildings attract the swifts' attention. A flock at Point Loma died when it attempted to roost in a boiler for heating a building (M. F. Platter-Rieger). Sometimes, especially in stormy or drizzly weather, flocks of Vaux's Swifts attempting to roost in chimneys come down into houses, bringing bedlam to the terrorized residents and death to most of the swifts (e.g., Huey 1960). Large roosts may contain a significant fraction of the entire population; one in downtown Los Angeles is used by up to 10,000 birds (K. L. Garrett, K. C. Molina).

Taxonomy: Only the pale nominate subspecies of Vaux's Swift, *C. v. vauxi* (Townsend 1839), is known from California.