

A CHIMNEY SWIFT STORY

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Pershing Middle School Quick Action Saves Chimney Swift Roost

by Stennie Meadours, HAS Past President

In mid-May, Pam Smolen, Don Verser and other birders counted hundreds of Chimney Swifts returning to a tall boiler stack at Pershing Middle School. They also noticed that a company was on-site demolishing the buildings around it, and the boiler stack looked like it was next. Don had monitored this site over several years and knew it to be one extensively used by Chimney Swifts. He believes that in the fall perhaps a thousand swifts may use it as a roost.

Pam and Don reported the potential danger to Houston Audubon. I emailed school authorities, called the demolition company. and, in a very friendly way, explained that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act protects any swifts that may be nesting in the stack. I also advised them that the TPWD may not allow them to demolish the stack.

TPWD Game Warden Susan Webb visited the site and left a message that the stack could not be demolished without obtaining a permit from USFW. HISD responded very promptly by requesting Gilbane Co., who is managing the project, to hold off demolition and to determine if the stack could be saved.

I had a very productive discussion with the Project Manager, Mr. John Risher II, during which I was able to explain the Migratory Bird Act by referring to the resource page on the Houston Audubon web site. After a structural engineer determined the stack was sound, HISD has now decided to leave the stack in place and incorporate it into the new building design.

The Pershing Middle School Chimney Swift Stack is a great demonstration of a structure that is available for bird conservation and education that worked in a very cooperative, supportive way. The stack would be down today, and most of us would not know any different, if one person had not made the decision to take the first step.

I would like to thank the birders, Ted Eubanks, TPWD Game Warden Susan Webb, and all who contributed essential information to this, most positive, outcome. HISD and Mr. Risher are to be commended for their great cooperative spirit and prompt attention to protect the birds.

We hope that a partnership between HISD and HAS can be established to interpret the stack and use it for science education, as Portland Audubon is doing at a school in Portland. Mary Anne Weber has already been in contact with the school to present a program there in the fall.

Editor's note: This was the beginning of "Swift Nights Out" at Houston Audubon. Thank you Stennie and Mary Anne!