

# Black Swift

## First Record for Ontario

*Stuart Mackenzie*

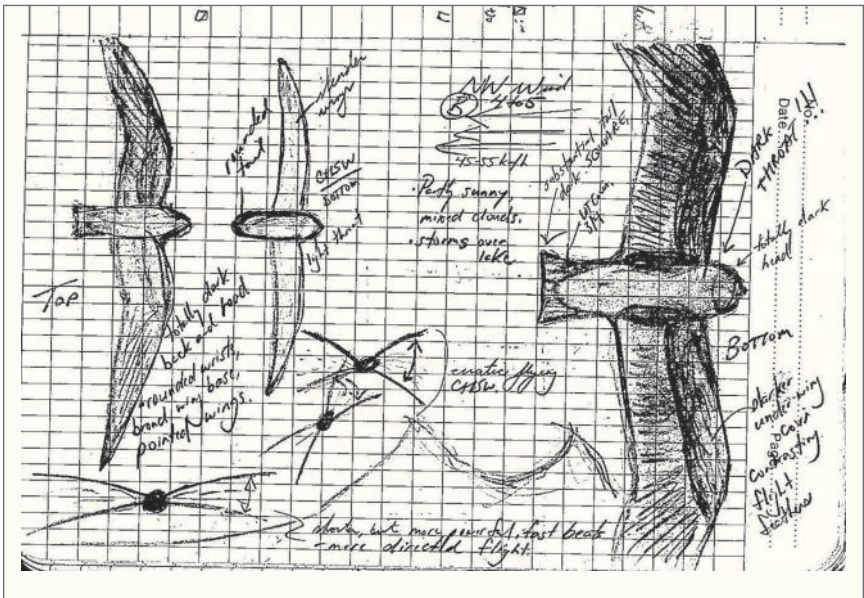


Figure 1. Notebook entry for Black Swift by Stuart Mackenzie on 21 May 2006.

Projecting forty kilometres from the north shore of Lake Erie, Long Point is the largest freshwater sand spit in the world. Its prominence along the shore-line makes it attractive to many migrants, which accumulate on this migratory stepping stone in both spring and fall.

The Point's geography is also critical to attracting rare birds. Every day can present a new assemblage of migrants and the possibility of a truly mind-blowing rarity.

On 21 May 2006, the Tip of Long Point was mainly dreary and overcast, with scattered showers interspersed with

patches of sunlight. A large low pressure system had blown by the previous evening, but had passed by mid-day on the 21st. Strong northeast winds overnight switched abruptly to the west early in the morning. The migration monitoring and banding operation of the Long Point Bird Observatory was hindered due to intermittent rain showers and strong westerly winds gusting up to 50km/h. Birds were plentiful though, as can be expected in May. The morning census alone documented 895 individuals of 65 species. Notable morning highlights included an Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*) and Clay-coloured Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*), as well as a Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) later in the day. In total, 100 species were observed at the Tip that day.

After the morning migration monitoring effort ended, volunteer Dave Brown and I set out to the extreme eastern Tip of Long Point to see what the wind might blow in. Frequently, visits to the Tip can be very productive on windy days. We arrived there around 1130h and took refuge in the 'shanty' — a makeshift shelter overlooking the Tip. Over the next two hours, we examined gulls and terns, and scanned for passerines, swallows and swifts that were slowly flying in off the lake.

At 1345h we noticed a group of nine swifts about 300 m south of us fighting their way toward the Tip. Eight of them were obvious Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*) — long, narrow wings; light,

fast, erratic wingbeats; thin cigar-shaped bodies, and pale throats. The other swift immediately grabbed our attention as, even at some distance, it appeared darker and larger. Its shallow wingbeats were stiffer and more controlled. We didn't dare take our eyes off this flock of birds as they beat their way ashore. Apart from its size, other characteristics became obvious as the swift flew closer. We immediately noticed that the bird had a dark throat. I shouted this detail to Dave and we noted the square tail as well. As the birds approached the shore, they almost flew over us and quickly gained altitude, disappearing behind the trees to the west.

We left the Tip immediately and ran down the beach, hoping for another view. About 100 m west of the shanty, we met volunteer Henri Robert approaching from the dunes on the north beach, looking somewhat perplexed. He immediately asked us whether we had seen the large, dark swift among the flock of Chimney Swifts.

At that point, a rapid-fire discourse ensued over the salient features we had noted in our all-too-brief encounter with this 'monster' swift. Its large size, all dark colouration, apparent square tail, and direct, more powerful flight had been noted by each of us. Did we dare believe that, here at Long Point, far from its normal range, we had just observed eastern North America's first Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*)?

Having previously observed Black Swifts in several countries, it would have

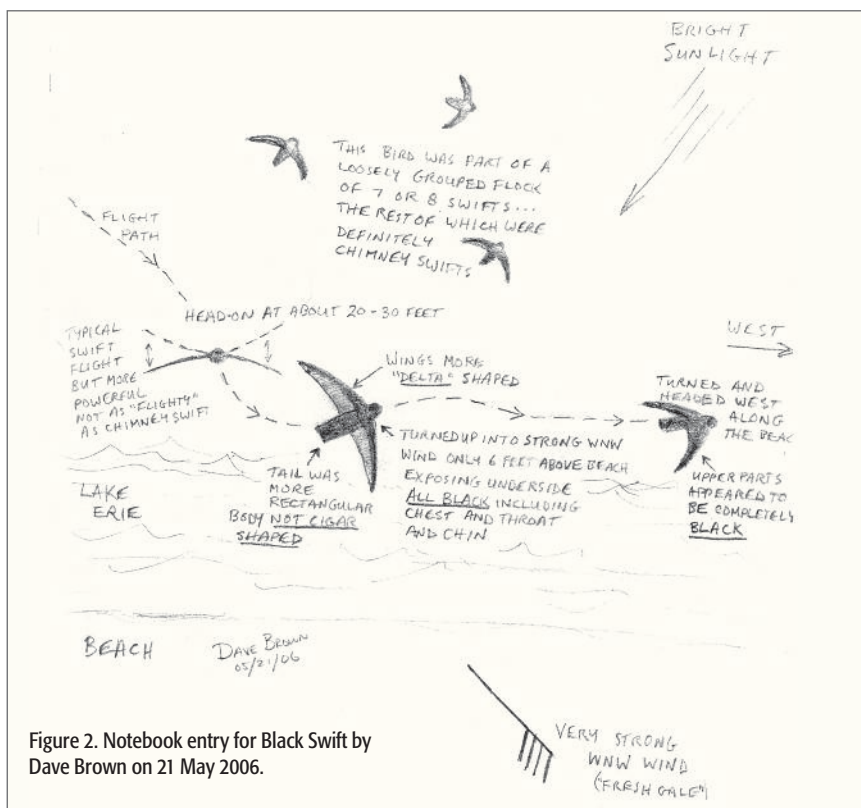


Figure 2. Notebook entry for Black Swift by Dave Brown on 21 May 2006.

been a relatively quick and easy identification, if not for the fact this bird was so far out of range. But, after ruling out a short list of similar species, we were confident that we had just observed a Black Swift. We immediately notified personnel at the stations at Breakwater and Old Cut, and staff at the Bird Studies Canada headquarters in Port Rowan, asking everyone to keep an eye out. Dave and I made sketches (Figures 1 and 2) immediately and wrote detailed notes. A report was promptly submitted to the Ontario Bird Records Committee, that was subsequently accepted as the first record of

this species for Ontario (Richards 2008). The sighting brought the checklist total for Long Point to 383 species.

The Black Swift is North America's largest swift, and is one of the least studied birds on the continent, due in part to its elusive nature and inaccessible breeding locations. North of Mexico, it breeds mainly in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia and Alberta. Scattered, localized populations can be found throughout the western United States as far east as Colorado. There are also breeding areas in Mexico and Central America as far south as Costa Rica.

Resident populations are also found locally throughout the West Indies (Lowther and Collins 2002).

Little is known about the migration of Black Swifts, and observations of them during migration are rare. Northern birds are highly migratory, reaching the breeding grounds in late May and early June, and returning south to wintering grounds in Central and South America throughout September and October.

There are few extralimital records of Black Swift. An occasional bird has been seen as far east as Saskatchewan in Canada. Apart from birds from the West Indies population observed on the Florida Keys, the most easterly record, before the Long Point bird, was from Texas.

Of possible significance are a few substantial movements of Black Swifts documented in the spring of 2006, all of which coincided with the timing of our observation. On 22 May, a record-breaking 1100 Black Swifts were observed feeding over Swan Lake in Vernon, British Columbia. On 26 May, 440 were observed in Douglas, Washington.

At the time of our observation, moderate to strong westerly winds had been blowing at Long Point since 16 May. A sustained low pressure system lingered over the northeast creating unstable conditions during this period. On 19 May, a low pressure system formed in the Midwest and moved south. It then pushed northeast on the 20th and collided with a fairly substantial cold front over the Great Lakes on the 21st. These sustained westerly winds and the frontal move-

ments in days previous may have helped direct this bird to Long Point.

The Black Swift observed by the three of us will be remembered as one of Long Point's many remarkable bird sightings, joining Chihuahuan Raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*), Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapilla*), Hooded Oriole (*Icterus cucullatus*), Varied Bunting (*Passerina versicolor*) and Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*) on the list of southwestern rarities. I'll never forget those few windswept hours we spent at the Tip. To this day I can still hear Henri's shout, "Did you guys see that swift?" We sure did!

### Literature Cited

- Lowther, P.E.** and **C.T. Collins.** 2002. Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 676 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Richards, I.** 2008. Ontario Bird Records Committee Report for 2007. Ontario Birds 26:82-106.

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*Stuart Mackenzie*, Long Point Bird Observatory c/o Bird Studies Canada, P.O. Box 160, 115 Front Street, Port Rowan, Ontario N0E 1M0