

ABOUT THE COVER: JOHN SILL'S CHIMNEY SWIFT

The **Stephen Greene Press** of Lexington, Massachusetts, who publishes yearly *THE BIRD IDENTIFICATION CALENDAR*, generously gave us permission to reproduce on our August cover this beautiful painting from the calendar by **John Sill**.

The artist is a native of North Carolina and a graduate in wildlife biology of North Carolina State University. His training in watercolor came from his father, Charles Sill, a well-known artist and teacher in the South. John paints exclusively in transparent watercolor, and his work has won a number of awards in shows of wildlife art. His concern for biological accuracy matches his desire to paint birds to reveal their individual personalities. John has been the artist for *The Bird Identification Calendars* since their beginning. He and his wife Cathy live in Franklin, North Carolina, where his work is displayed in the family gallery.

A famous "Swallow tree" is described in *Wilson's American Ornithology*. From early May through September, large numbers of swifts would emerge at dawn from a hole sixty feet above the ground and return at sundown to descend in a stream through the same opening. When this elm was struck violently with an axe, the birds "would rush out in millions, and with a great noise."

The falcon-shaped bow-and-arrow forms of these tiny diurnal migrants first appear in the skies over our state in late April and remain with us until early October, when they leave to winter as far south as the Amazon basin. The Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) is a true inhabitant of the ocean of air (hence the *pelagica* of its Latin name), possibly even mating in flight. This bird flies open-mouthed on rigid wings, alternately sailing or flickering bat-like with a noisy chattering accompaniment, in a manner suited to funneling diverse insects into the open gape. (That swifts do not beat their wings alternately in flight has been proved by slow-motion filming.)

This species nests primarily in chimneys, in large groups or single pairs depending on the space. The bracket nests of fine twigs (snapped off by the feet of the flying swift) are attached to the wall of the nest cavity by the birds' glutinous saliva. The young occasionally spill out of the nest to the hearth below, where they will perish unless returned aloft. To save them, a piece of terry cloth to which they will cling can be suspended within the chimney ten feet down from the top. The chimney (or other hollow structure) is also the site of the evening roost. Audubon reported nine thousand birds, chiefly males, in one tree. The birder who has not witnessed the evening return of Chimney Swifts, when they wheel in a large circle over the roost and plummet spectacularly, wings raised in the dive, tail fanned at the last instant, at an unbelievable rate (ten thousand in 37 minutes), has one of the most exciting prospects in birdwatching still awaiting.

Dorothy R. Arvidson