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 CAPTURING BARN SWALLOWS AND  
CHIMNEY SWIFTS AT NIGHT

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READERS of *Bird-Banding* will recall E. A. McIlhenny's fascinating account of capturing birds at night, which appeared in the January, 1942, issue. The present writer was especially interested in that paper, for he, too, has been a confirmed night hunter for several years.

While vacationing in the Catskills in 1939, I discovered the thrills which await every night hunter. One night I chanced to walk through a barn, near our place, in which a pair of Barn Swallows (*Hirundo erythrogaster*) had nested earlier in the season. Something prompted me to flash my light up at the old nest as I passed under it, and there sat one of the adult swallows. I returned to our cottage, where I fastened my trout landing net to a short pole, provided myself with a powerful flashlight, and then sallied forth. Quietly entering the barn, I walked to a spot directly beneath the nest, which was plastered to a beam about eight feet above the floor. I was amazed at how easily this swallow was captured—I merely snapped the light on the bird and quickly slipped the net

over it. I have been capturing Barn Swallows at night ever since.

After this initial success I later enlarged my activities to include Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*). The first swifts I captured were taken in an unused silo, in which they were nesting, by sweeping them up in the net as they fluttered about. An excellent opportunity for banding is offered by swifts nesting in low barns or icehouses, for then the roosting birds are within easy reach of the net and can be pinned against the wall before they have a chance to fly. Even if the birds should take wing before you are ready for action, they will soon alight, perhaps on another wall, because the type of flight they employ under these circumstances is very tiresome.

Since those first experiences, I have learned a few things about the respective species which should be useful to those who may wish to capture birds at night. Every move one makes in the immediate attempt at netting a bird, be it swallow or swift, must be done speedily and deftly. The element of surprise is most important, not only in time saved but also in the increased number of captures. Having located a nest during the day, the bander returns after dark and, without using a light, approaches it cautiously. When close enough, raise the net slightly and snap your light on the nest. Now if the nest is a Barn Swallow's, both birds will usually be found perched on it. They will stare into the light for a few moments before taking flight. Clearly, your problem is to net them before they fly, since it is much less easy to capture the birds when they are flying, especially if they happen to be in a large room or in the hayloft. Chimney Swifts are much easier to work with when, as above, their nests are within reach of the net. They will tolerate much more noise than the swallows, and remain clinging to the wall considerably longer after the light is flashed on them. If there are eggs in the nest, only one bird will be found on it. When the swifts have newly hatched young, both parents brood them during the night. Finally, if the young are well grown, the parents roost clinging to the wall, often one next to the other with their bodies touching. In the last two cases, then, the bander may often catch both adults at one time.

Such convenient opportunities for banding swallows and swifts are generally the exception rather than the rule. When the birds are nesting on the ground level, or elsewhere in the barn, but within reach of the net, they may be taken easily but in limited numbers. There are almost always many more birds occupying the hayloft, six or more pairs of swallows and an occasional pair of swifts being not uncommon in my experience. At Beaver Kill, New York, where I do most of my night work, the barns usually have two

gable ends with a window below each gable. If each of these windows has panes missing, and if the barn door generally stands open, there are sure to be many swallows nesting up in the hayloft. In addition to bands and pliers, the equipment consists of three or five-celled flashlights or headlights; light, long-handled nets with deep sacs (insect nets are perfect); several gathering cages; a light pole about twenty feet long; and a gasoline lamp.

During the day, the group visits some of the local barns and selects one or two which have a good number of swallows nesting in them. Having chosen our barns we explain to the owners what we expect to do and request his permission and cooperation. We then enter the barn and explore it thoroughly, familiarizing ourselves with its entire lay-out. From the level of the hay in the hayloft to the gable-end windows is a climb of twenty feet or more. In many barns the farmer has nailed crossboards to two adjacent vertical beams beneath the window, thus forming a ladder; when this is not the case we nail the boards on. Before leaving, we fasten a large burlap or feed bag to the top edge of every window, using a carpet tack on each end and one in the middle. Then the bag is rolled up from the bottom and the roll is tacked lightly above the window.

After dark, the crew cautiously slips into the barn and the men proceed to close all doors and all but the two windows at the gable ends. Next, two people each equip themselves with a net and flashlight. The flashlight is slipped face up between the belt and trousers on the left hip if the bander wields the net with his right hand, or on the right hip if the left hand is to be used. The net is carried on the other hip, or its sac may be gripped in the teeth. Headlights are vastly superior to ordinary flashlights, for they not only leave both hands free, but also throw a powerful beam on every object toward which you turn your head. A gathering cage fastened to your trousers' belt completes the preparations. These two people then climb up to their respective windows and, removing the tack, allow the bags to unroll and cover them. There are two important reasons for doing this. In the first place, the birds fly in and out these windows all day long and they naturally attempt to use them as a means of escape after dark. Furthermore, each window stands out as a light place in the dark barn, and the swallows are attracted to them just as they are to the lights; thus, even a strange bird could easily find his way out. The lower sash is left open a few inches from the bottom so that the bander may hook his arm over the sill and hang on. Should the barn have a platform between the floor of the loft and the roof, the other men mount this, taking with them a net, a cage, lights, and the long pole.

Everything is done quietly until when all are ready, the lights are flashed on. The men at the windows have their lights on, and the surprised birds, which are soon fluttering about all over the place, are attracted to the lights and even occasionally alight on their would-be captors. The swallows (and the swifts, if there are any in the barn) employ a slow, fluttering, hovering type of flight and never fly into anything as long as the lights are kept on. I have found that Chimney Swifts, which are less easily captured in a hayloft than are Barn Swallows, can be lured to the bander if he will make short squeaking noises with his lips, squeaks like those which field students use to coax shy birds out of hiding. When a bird comes near enough it is netted. Should two or more come along, several turns of the net's sac on the handle will hold those already captured until the others are within reach. This technique was more fully outlined in a previous paper (*Bird-Banding* 13 (1): 31, 1942). Captured birds are placed in the gathering cages when convenient or necessary.

Meanwhile, the men on the platform are not idle either, for birds are also attracted to their lights. One of them nets the birds while the other, with the long pole, prods those which have found perches for themselves. As long as the birds are kept flying, they will sooner or later be attracted to the lights.

When the last bird has been captured, we climb down from our stations and band them in the barn by the light of the gasoline lamp. The birds are released as banded and have little trouble in finding perches. After reopening the doors and windows, we head for the next barn. Although we never make any "big hauls"—twenty to twenty-five birds being considered a good catch for the night—we always have an enjoyable time. The bird-bander who has never done this kind of work has been missing a unique experience.

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### GENERAL NOTES

**Unidentified Bands.**—In November 1943 Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy received the leg of a gull found as a well-macerated skeleton on a beach on Marthas Vineyard, Massachusetts. Three rather battered bands were affixed to the leg in the following sequence:

Distal band.....	Red celluloid on copper	Not numbered
Middle band.....	Aluminum	66561 MS
Proximal band.....	Tinned iron (very rusty)	21868 ME

The writer's investigations in connection with the color-banded Herring Gull project have not disclosed such a band combination, and inquiries of Mr. F. C. Lincoln and other ornithologists have failed to provide any clue to the identity