

LOUISIANA BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE

REPORT FORM

This form is intended as a convenience in reporting observations of species on the Louisiana Bird Records Committee (LBRC) Review List. The LBRC recommends the use of this form or a similar format when submitting records for review to assure that all pertinent information is accounted for. Attach additional pages or files as necessary. Please print or type for hard copy. For electronic copy, be sure to save this file to your computer before entering text. Attach field notes, drawings, photographs, or tape recordings, if available. Include all photos for more obscurely marked species. When completed (if hard copy), mail to Secretary, Louisiana Bird Records Committee, c/o Museum of Natural Science, 119 Foster Hall, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-3216, or e-mail electronic copy as an attachment to Paul Edward Conover at <zoiseaux@lusfiber.net> .

1. English and Scientific names: Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*)

2. Number of individuals, sexes, ages, general plumage (e.g., 2 in alternate plumage):

Personally, I saw between 2 and 6 individuals, depending upon the day. But note that the high count for Vaux's Swifts so far this fall/winter was of 7 birds on 23 November 2018 (<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S50163447>), one of the last days the two species of swifts were seen together. Getting proper counts of the Vaux's Swifts became much more straightforward after Chimney Swifts at last vacated the area (which is itself more extraordinary than the appearance of Vaux's). Numbers of Chimney Swifts plummeted around/after about 23 November 2018 and, I believe, the last Chimney Swift reported to eBird was by Erik Johnson on 26 November 2018.

3. Parish: East Baton Rouge

Specific Locality: All observations were in the immediate vicinity of LSU campus and University Lake, save for one. Phil Stouffer reported this lone exception at the nearby LSU Aquaculture Research Station (5 January 2019). Many of the reports stemmed from W Lakeshore Drive (the eastern edge of campus) from Campus Lake all the way north to Dalrymple Drive and the intersection with May Street. For a time in November, it appeared that the vicinity of the UREC and the Lod Cook Hotel were hotspots for this species. But they were also nowhere to be found for days and even weeks, despite people out looking for swifts or simply doing general birding. So who knows where they went when they weren't detected around University Lake.

Oddly, Baton Rouge and Gainesville, Florida, continue to be the two lone meccas for this species anywhere in the eastern United States. Amazingly, as I write this, Texas does not have an accepted record of Vaux's Swift!

4. Date(s) when observed personally:

12 November 2018 (2) - <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S49899061>

15 November 2018 (2) - <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S49962477>

20 November 2018 (2) - <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S50089137> (the final date that I saw Vaux's with Chimney Swifts)

27 November 2018 (4) - <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S50257248>

15 January 2019 (6) - <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S51724588>

So far, this span of dates covers the full range of dates this species has been recorded for 2018/19, but it is highly probable that reports will continue throughout the remainder of this winter.

5. Time(s) of day when observed: Seemingly all times of the day except for very early in the morning (late to emerge from roost site(s)?):

1:15 – 3:00 PM - Temps were in the low 60s, light north wind, and solid low overcast.

2:00 – 2:30 PM - 55°F, north winds 2-5 mph, and clear.

~10:00 – 10:35 AM - Cooler than the day prior (50-54°F) on the leading edge of a front, north winds 5-10 mph, dreary and overcast.

~10:00 – 10:26 AM - Very cold (35-~50°F), north wind ~5 mph, and clear skies.

~5:03 – 5:13 PM - Cold (47-46°F), calm, and partly cloudy. Twenty-five minutes prior to sunset.

To my recollection, peak times for these birds seemed to be in the mid-morning and mid-afternoon time blocks. That said, I seldom went looking for these birds during the middle of the day, though I did twice spot them on days that I had begun birding shortly after sunrise (but didn't see Vaux's Swifts until ~10:00 AM).

6. Reporting observer and city/state address

Reporting observer: Cameron L. Rutt
City: Baton Rouge
State: Louisiana

7. Other observers accompanying reporter who also *identified* the bird(s): In all, a whole host of other birders, but particularly Oscar Johnson and Van Remsen early on.

8. Other observers who *independently identified* the bird(s): This is tough to say, but probably nobody else. As I was the first one to sound the alarm about a large swarm of late *Chaetura* swifts and raise the possibility of Vaux's being present, I don't think that anyone else was really an independent data point subsequently.

9. Light conditions (position of bird in relation to shade and to direction and amount of light): Good morning light as we had partly cloudy skies and direct sunlight, which we were able to position at our backs or over our shoulders.

This was one of the intriguing things about the Vaux's Swifts this winter. Unlike previous years, when they apparently materialized mostly on cold, dreary, rather ugly days of low

cloud cover when a cold front rolled through, we had these swifts on days with a wide variety of weather conditions, including mild temperatures, sunny mornings/afternoons with blue sky, when you could position the sun to your back and obtain really phenomenal looks (and quite passable photos) of these birds. This turned what could have felt like a chore (swift ID under suboptimal weather conditions) into a much more pleasant experience, though the first encounter on 12 November 2018 was much more frustrating due to poor lighting.

10. Optical equipment (type, power, condition): Swarovski EL 8.5x42 binoculars and a Canon 7D Mark II with a 400mm f/5.6L

11. Distance to bird(s): Treetop height overhead at the closest, particularly after Van Remsen used playback on 15 November 2018 to try and attract the birds.

12. Duration of observation: In all, something on the order of three hours, though it really felt like much more (likely due to the amount of time I spent sifting through swift photos). Vaux's Swifts, however, weren't perennially visible during all of the aforementioned time periods. I spent a great deal of time and pixels trying to satisfactorily document these birds; I must have taken approximately 2000 swift photos in all.

13. Habitat: Primarily above the trees and yards of the frat houses/sororities and higher end housing immediately adjacent to University Lake. In general, this is urban/suburban development on the fringes of LSU campus. At times, especially when the Chimney Swift swarm was still en force, a knot of spiraling swifts would wheel about at treetop height by some of the largest trees, apparently attracted to some kind of localized insect concentration. Swifts, including the Vaux's, would come very close to the outer crown of the tree, which is evident in some of the photos that also show trees and greenery. They did not appear to waste much time foraging over the lake itself, instead sticking rather tightly to the buildings and trees along the immediate lake edge.

14. Behavior of bird / circumstances of observation (flying, feeding, resting; include and stress habits used in identification; relate events surrounding observation):

Flying and feeding. When the two species were together, size and behavior were really the easiest ways to distinguish Vaux's Swift, which could readily be identified naked-eye during these optimal conditions. On a global scale, the two species co-occur extremely rarely, thus this was a very unusual if not nearly unique experience. Having the two species flying around together was the best hope for distinguishing Vaux's Swift, especially in dismal light.

In comparison to Chimney Swifts, Vaux's Swift had faster, more fluttery wingbeats and greater maneuverability, making sharper, more abrupt course changes, executing sudden hairpin turns, and generally exhibiting erratic flight. All of this made it particularly challenging to follow Vaux's Swifts with binoculars/camera. (I'm not a Star Wars cult follower by any stretch of the imagination, but something about watching these Vaux's Swifts torpedo around Chimney Swifts reminded me of watching rebel X-wings, perhaps, exhibit their superior mobility in flight. I hope I didn't butcher that metaphor!). I variously

described the wingbeats as appearing rapid, snappier, sharper, and perhaps more scissory. Whether it was real or perceived, the outcome was that these differences in flight style made the Vaux's Swifts *appear* to be traveling faster than the Chimney Swifts. And although you would never describe a Chimney Swift like this in a typical situation, this species showcased a comparatively looser and more floppy flight. I didn't notice any interspecific difference in the amount of time spent gliding.

15. Description (include only what was actually seen, *not what "should" have been seen*; include if possible: total length/relative size compared to other familiar species; body bulk, shape, proportions; bill, eye, leg, and plumage characteristics. Stress features that separate it from similar species, *or for species that are known to hybridize frequently, stress features that help eliminate possible hybrids*):

A small *Chaetura* swift: a blackish aerial insectivore with a blunt body, squared-off tail, and long, sickle-shaped wings. Plumage showed a contrastingly pale throat and rump. It quickly became very apparent that light matters immensely for this extraordinarily difficult visual identification! For example, the Vaux's Swifts were much easier to identify by sight on 15 November 2018 (with afternoon sun and clear, blue skies) than on the first day, when birds were equally as low but lighting was abysmal.

With good light and the two species together, Vaux's Swifts stood out even to the naked-eye from Chimney Swifts by their conspicuously paler underparts (almost white on the throat/chin), paler and browner plumage overall, and slightly smaller size. They were more uniformly pale below progressing in a smooth gradient from a whitish throat in bright light to pale brown on the belly. Chimney Swifts, on the other hand, appeared more ashy- or sooty than brown and their pale throat (which can be highlighted by direct sunlight) appeared to be less extensive, more bibbed (restricted to the throat). I also got a Cave Swallow-like impression for Vaux's Swift, as they appeared to have a dark cap or mask, with the pale on the throat extending around the nape (Chimney Swifts apparently lacked this pale hindcollar). Furthermore, some photos of Vaux's Swift also show a distinct pale forehead band. On the palest Vaux's Swifts, the rump seemed buffier to me than on Chimney Swift and could be strikingly pale in photos.

Aside from this, general differences of body or wing shape were much more difficult to decipher. My impression was that Vaux's Swift has more triangular wings (with a shorter arm?), where the wing seems to be a single entity (more scissor-like, perhaps like a Tree Swallow). Only the forewing is noticeably curved, whereas the hindwing appears very straight. Contrast this with the more sickle-shaped or boomerang wings of Chimney Swift (more curvaceous), that have a distinct banana curve with the wingtips trailing in an arched manner. This imparts a more two-parted feel to the wings of Chimney Swift, thanks in part to the bulge of the inner primaries. In contrast to what Sibley says on his blog (Vaux's having relatively broader wings), to my eye, the wings of Vaux's Swift still look thin and narrow (still absolutely narrower than Chimney?). I also couldn't make out anything about the wingtips of Vaux's Swift appearing blunter - they looked very pointy and aerodynamic. Finally, I thought that Vaux's Swift looked slender-bodied and more streamlined than Chimney Swift, which appeared fatter-bodied or bloated (perhaps particularly wide-bodied,

giving them a rounder look?). I didn't have any impression about which species appears longer-headed/reared and which was more compact. Finally, I should point out that the upstroke is when I think wing shape looks most classically Vaux's-like (shortened and wider), but that pose needs to then be compared with other subsequent wing postures in photos for a more holistic picture of wing shape.

Most of my plumage descriptions here are from my collection of photos (which allow for much easier and thorough scrutiny than a buzzing swift overhead!). Thus, I'll let the attached photos (as well as the other photos on the eBird checklists) speak for themselves.

Some of my better Chimney Swift documentation can be found here:
<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S49963344>

16. Voice: Silent. Only once in all the time that I spent with the swifts did I hear any swift vocalize and it was a Chimney Swift on 20 November 2018. But note that Van Remsen and company heard diagnostic Vaux's Swift vocalizations on 23 November 2018 (<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S50163447>)

17. Similar species (include how they were eliminated by your observation): Described above under my description of the birds' appearance and flight style.

18. Photographs or tape recordings obtained? (by whom? attached?): Yes, by me (attached) and by others, though because they are swifts, few people had the appropriate equipment and opportunity to document these birds well. The notable exception was Marky Mutchler (<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S49994757>).

19. Previous experience with this species: Exceedingly limited experience with Vaux's Swift prior to this, as I've only seen this species at long intervals on their breeding range (last in 2013) and on their wintering range in Central America. And there in its typical range, identification is not based upon this tedium of shape and plumage.

20. Identification aids: (list books, illustrations, other birders, etc. used in identification):

a. at time of observation: Sibley app

b. after observation: Sibley Guides blog
<https://www.sibleyguides.com/bird-info/vauxs-swift/>
<https://www.sibleyguides.com/2010/10/identifying-chimney-and-vauxs-swifts-by-wing-shape/>

21. This description is written from:

	notes made during the observation.	Are notes attached?	eBird checklists
X	notes made after the observation.	At what date?	Mostly 19 November 2018

<input type="checkbox"/>	memory
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	study of images

22. Are you positive of your identification? If not, explain: Yes

23. Date: 16 January 2018

Time: 4:00 PM

24. May the LBRC have permission to display in whole or in part this report and accompanying photos on the LOS-LBRC website and LBRC Facebook page?

Yes

If yes, may we include your name with the report? Yes



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