

Louisiana Bird Records Committee

Rare Bird Documentation

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Species: Vaux's Swift, *Chaetura vauxi*

Number of individuals: 6-10; 4

Age and Sex: Unknown

Date: 16 & 19 November, 2020

Location: University Lakes, Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge Par.

eBird Checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S76326672>;

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S76420912>

Other Observers: Myself

Original Observer: None

Circumstances. Nick Ramsey reported a Vaux's Swift from Capitol Lake on November 15th, following a cold front, so I decided to try at traditionally the most reliable spot locally: University Lakes. I got to University Lake early, starting at about 7:15; conditions were nice, though a bit breezy: ~50° F, Beaufort 1-2 from the North, clear skies. I started east of the May Street parking lot, where there was a bit of shelter from the wind. Lots of Tree Swallows were flying low over the lake, so I was hopeful some swifts would show up. After about 45 minutes, I was starting to think about heading home when I noticed a small flock of swifts had indeed shown up. They were circling around quite close to me, but all birds were flying fast and erratically, as I expect Vaux's Swifts to fly; this did make it hard to get an accurate count, but I think between 6 and 10 birds is a reasonable estimate. I watched them for a while and tried to record their vocalizations with my recorder, but they were silent. After about five minutes, they had started to drift farther away, so I decided to leave.

On the 19th I was biking around the lakes, counting birds. I stopped at the May Street parking lot to look for an American Wigeon reported a couple of days previously when I noticed a couple of swifts circling around above me. I was a bit surprised, since conditions were not what I associate with late fall and winter swift sightings: temperatures in the mid 70s, clear skies, still, lots of Tree Swallows around, but flying at all altitudes (typical swift weather is much colder, with a breeze that keeps aerial insectivores low over the surface of the lake). After watching them for a minute or so I was confident that there were four individuals. Again, their flight patterns and paler rumps gave me confidence that I was looking at Vaux's Swifts. The most parsimonious conclusion is that these were some of the same individuals that I had seen a couple of days previously, but given that reports by other observers during November 2020 have

come from Capitol Lake to Ben Hur Road, a distance of 10 or so kilometers, there may be more Vaux's Swifts around than we realize.

Description. All birds were generally the same during both observations: obvious swifts with squared off tails, all dark grayish black throughout, though contrastingly paler on the throat and rump. Very fluttery, indirect, bat-like flight constituting mostly powered flight with few glides, none for more than a second or two at a time. The wings were narrower than Chimney without the distinctive secondary bulge. The throats and rumps were obviously paler than the rest of the dark charcoal gray bodies, wings and heads; the rumps were especially noticeable compared to the less contrasting, less pale rumps of Chimney Swifts. All birds were silent.

Discussion. I was able to differentiate these birds from Chimney Swift in several ways. What I first noticed was their flight style: these birds were very erratic, flying fast with few, very short glides interspersed; they reminded me more of bats than of swifts. Chimney Swift in contrast has what I think of as typical swift flight style. Watching them in the summer here in Baton Rouge, I've become very familiar with their more deliberate, direct flight style, where they flap powerfully and directly in short bursts followed by long glides. Vaux's seem to have powered flight for ~90% of the time with ~10% gliding, whereas Chimney is much closer to a 50/50 ratio.

The second ID criteria I used were the relatively pale throats and rumps. Chimney swifts do have throats that are paler than the rest of the body, but their rumps are generally concolor with the back. In contrast, the Vaux's Swifts have distinctly pale rumps, such that they are visible even to the naked eye. The throat of the Vaux's seemed paler as well.

The third criteria is timing. Until 2018, there were very few records of Chimney Swift for Louisiana after the first week of November, while over the past several decades Vaux's Swift has been rare but regular between mid-November and February in Baton Rouge (2018 was an unusual year for *Chaetura* in Baton Rouge, with up to 30 Chimney Swifts and 8 Vaux's Swifts documented in late November). Thus, any swift on November 16th at University Lakes is generally more likely to be a Vaux's Swift than a Chimney Swift.

Photos. None taken.