



# Winging It

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## Black Swifts and Waterfalls

BY LARRY SCHWITTERS

The idea that Black Swifts build their nests in seaside caves and behind inland waterfalls has at times been thought too far-fetched to be true. Overcoming some serious obstacles, ongoing research from Mexico to Alaska is confirming that it is indeed true.

The pioneer in linking Black Swifts to specific waterfalls was Owen Knorr, who climbed steep slopes all over western North America in search of Black Swift nests. Starting in the early 1950s, over the next 40 years Knorr documented nearly 40 colonies in five states. More recently, Charles Collins, of California State University, and Kevin Foerster have been conducting research at southern California waterfalls, especially Lawler Falls in the San Jacinto Mountains. They have captured and banded adults that have returned repeatedly to the same site, in one case for as long as 17 years running.

In 1998, Rich Levad of the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and Chris Shultz of the US Forest Service initiated the Colorado Black Swift Inventory Project to identify waterfalls that seemed most likely to conceal nests. So far, the project has identified over 100 waterfalls in central and western Colorado as probable nesting sites.

Until very recently, little effort had been directed at a region just dripping with waterfalls, the Pacific Northwest. In spring 2003, Bob Altman of American Bird Conservancy began recruiting observers to survey waterfalls in northern California, Oregon, western Washington, and British Columbia. More than 100 volunteers signed on to enjoy two sunsets beside a crashing waterfall, watching for Black Swifts to return to their nests.

### Nighttime at the Falls

The jewel of the two waterfalls I “adopted”—both of them within a 20-minute drive of my home in Seattle—was thundering Snoqualmie Falls, a tourist icon with a wheelchair-accessible approach to a covered overlook. Bob and I agreed that that was one waterfall a Black Swift just couldn't pass by.

The protocol Bob developed was simple. “Just visit the waterfall you have selected and spend one evening in July and one in August for a 2-hour period just before dark. The highest count of adult Black Swifts seen at any one point in time is the population for the site.” This was followed by two paragraphs of safety concerns: Steep, slippery, and dark could add up to trouble.

The July visit to Snoqualmie Falls got me thinking that this might not be that easy. My wife and I put in our two hours, and we did observe a small flock of swifts hunting over

*continued on page 4*

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*The author's wife awaits the evening return of Black Swifts to Burney Falls near Shasta, California (see p. 6 in this issue). This site holds as many as 25 pairs of nesting Black Swifts, and the birds are reliably seen here in season from a short paved path suitable for wheelchairs. Photo © Larry Schwitters.*

the falls, but they didn't seem to have any interest in spending the night.

My second waterfall, Twin Falls, required a 1.5-mile hike in. The view point is a tiny platform at mid-level, a stunning 50 feet from the falls. I came away from this one swift-less, and the hike out was dark and unnerving. It was easy to imagine you were trolling for cougars.

So I was 0 for 2, and it didn't feel good. Still wanting to make a positive contribution, my wife and I spent a couple of weekends tracking down falls nobody else wanted. In 1961, Knorr, the legendary finder of Black Swifts, had developed a list of that species' exacting nesting requirements: a commanding, high-elevation view; an unobstructed flight path; a nest site in shade for most of the day; and inaccessibility to ground predators. None of the sites we visited looked promising.

Until, that is, Bridal Veil Falls. There is a sandy spot at the very base of the waterfall where one can lie down, look up to the open sky, and try not to blink. One hundred minutes in, I was doubting the notion of Black Swifts nesting behind waterfalls. But then, just as the bats were beginning their evening hunt, I was treated to one of those rare, mission-accomplished thrills. That was no bat! That's a huge swift! It dazzles me with its airborne prowess, then offers a view few humans ever experience, a Black Swift hooked to the edge of what I'd already identified as the most likely crevice. In a heartbeat the bird disappeared into the wet rock face, where it

was joined by its mate ten minutes later. My elation lingered for days.

Of the 70 waterfalls volunteers staked out that summer, Black Swifts were seen flying into sixteen, and flying over but not entering another eleven.

### *The Summer of '05*

**B**ob Altman called me in June 2005 with an offer that seemed too good to be true. Would I consider checking out 15 or 20 waterfalls in Washington that hadn't been monitored two years before? I jumped at the chance.

Each waterfall was to be staked out twice, once in July and again in August. With 62 days in those two months, and being able to observe only one waterfall a day, fifteen wouldn't be much of a strain. Twenty, however, would mean two days on before one off. If there was a run of bad weather, twenty might be tense, especially with many swifts already headed south by late August. Bob and I agreed that I would start right away.

Late June found me near Huckleberry Falls, machete in hand and ready for what is described on "Waterfalls of the Pacific Northwest" ([www.waterfalls-northwest.com](http://www.waterfalls-northwest.com)) as a difficult bushwhack. It's only a quarter mile. How hard can it be? Thirty minutes and a sprinkling of lost blood later, I had a clear view. But with lots of sticker bushes and exposed ledges still between me and the base of the waterfall, I settled for a good enough. It looked like Huckleberry, baking in the sun, would run dry before summer's end, and so I decided not to waste an evening there.

I bagged my first swift on the third waterfall that season, a pitiful little thing trickling out of a Bellingham foothill. The approach was fairly easy, and it even looked like there was a potential nest site—but really, what are the chances? Sixty-four minutes before sunset, two sickle-shaped wings rocketed over the falls and downstream. The chances just got a lot better. At 9:46, the bird is back, high-speed and low over the falls, a black streak splat into the center of the rock face. What a rush!

But there was only one bird. Did its mate come in after it was too dark to be detected? Or was this an unmated bird roosting alone? Thirty days later, a second evening's two-hour observation drew a blank.

My own observations and my reading of the latest research convinced me that high elevation and a clear flight path, stressed by Knorr as essential, were not in fact crucial. A safe, flat surface with a waterproof overhang seemed to be enough to lure a pair of Black Swifts to a particular waterfall. But these conditions are scarce in the Pacific Northwest, where non-stressed flow basalts do not offer the same



*Black Swift at nest, Box Canyon Falls, Ouray Co., Colorado. Photo © Bill Schmoker.*

potential sites as sedimentary rocks with horizontal layers and fractures.

Nevertheless, by early July we were boasting a better batting average than Ichiro.

A high water mark was reached July 27th at Emerald Pool, a nifty, though not spectacular waterfall in the North Cascades. Here, just off US Highway 20, a northeast-facing, 400-foot-long box canyon tapers from a 100-foot-wide opening down to 35 feet. Water veils down 45 feet into the canyon's closed end.

Looking forward to an 8:53 sunset, I ate my evening meal perched on the bumper of my mini SUV, secure in the knowledge that any Black Swift coming into the canyon would pass right over me. Lunch-To-Go has just begun the digestion process when I pick up a swift slowly working its way up the Skagit. It makes two lazy circles over the river, then passes over me and up the box canyon. It soon comes back out, makes another circle, goes back in—and doesn't come out. Time to get to the base. Fifty minutes later, we catch another Black Swift doing wide circles out over the road. It heads into the box canyon, where it demonstrates just how maneuverable these birds are, performing ten screaming 18-foot-radius circles, the last of which appears to swing the bird just over the top of the falls.

Four minutes after sunset, there is a second swift spinning tight circles overhead. It's become difficult to see in the canyon, and I'm ready to call this a three-bird falls. But fifteen minutes later comes the real action, with swifts all but brushing my face continually for fifteen minutes. I estimated 8-14 individuals in the canyon with me that evening, and I fell asleep wondering if there was a nice covered ledge just out of sight near the top of the falls.

The next morning's first light found me appraising the



*Nestled in old growth between the eastbound and westbound lanes of I-190, Franklin Falls is the most reliable location in the Metro Puget Sound region for Black Swifts, which can be seen on a 0.2-mile walk. Photo © Larry Schwitters.*

steepness of Emerald Pool's east canyon wall. There was certainly an element of risk, but it didn't freak me out. My slow and careful scramble up was followed by a tippietoe around the ledge and over the top of the falls, where I discovered a second, unrecorded waterfall. It sported two superb long, deep horizontal cracks. If one could find the time, the rope, and the courage, here would be a likely spot to document a Black Swift nest in Washington.

By summer's end, more than 100 waterfalls had been examined for Black Swift nesting

potential. Forty evening observations had produced 16 probable new nesting sites; only two of the waterfalls I expected to have swifts did not. Sixty-seven individual swifts were observed late in the day, low and close to the falls. The number of birds most often observed at a single waterfall was two. The most likely sighting time was fifteen minutes after sunset, late and dark. Nearly twice as many birds were seen in July as in August.

It is the night before the night before Christmas as I write this. This afternoon, the family made a winter visit to Franklin Falls, the most reliable waterfall in the Seattle area for nesting Black Swifts. Huge icicles were hanging out of every crack. The birds, of course, had known this was coming, and four months ago they led their fledglings south down the Pacific Coast. I wish them a warm and insect-filled winter, followed by a safe return to their remarkable nesting sites.

*Larry Schwitters is a retired teacher. He and his wife, Leora, now prowl the edges of North America expanding their ABA lists.*

## Borneo: Young Adult Birders' Conference 2007

Borneo: island of headhunters, orangutans, and mighty Mount Kinabalu, the highest summit between the Himalayas and New Guinea! This magical equatorial island has long been shrouded in mystery, but today, Malaysia has one of the Far East's most advanced economies, with a superb infrastructure and some of the best accommodations and park facilities in southeast Asia. The ABA's second conference designed especially for young adult birders will be housed at the edge of the Kinabalu National Park, in the shadow of Mount Kinabalu, and is limited to 22 participants from 19 to 27 years old.

Borneo is one of the richest places on earth in its wildlife (see *Winging It* July/August 2006). Vast tracts of tropical rain-

forest support a tremendous diversity of exotic flora and fauna, and the birdlife is rich and varied, with endemic species ranging from trogons to broadbills, black-eyes to bristleheads. We will be exploring the state of Sabah in northern Borneo, which is the ideal location for an introduction to the birds of Asia.

If you have always wanted to see fascinating hornbills, bristleheads, pittas, and the many other exotic birds of Borneo, join this Young Adult Birders' Conference for a spectacular adventure. We will find the birds and much, much more as we gain a new understanding of the tropics and the role of birders in conservation. For information and registration forms, visit [americanbirding.org/mtgs/conferences/2007borneo](http://americanbirding.org/mtgs/conferences/2007borneo). See you in Borneo!