

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to  
Recovery Strategy for the Chimney Swift in Ontario

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**Chimney Swift**

**Ontario Government Response Statement**

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**Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk in Ontario**

Species at risk recovery is a key part of protecting Ontario's biodiversity. The *Endangered Species Act, 2007* (ESA) is the Ontario government's legislative commitment to protecting and recovering species at risk and their habitats.

Under the ESA, the government must ensure that a recovery strategy is prepared for each species that is listed as endangered or threatened. A recovery strategy provides science-based advice to government on what is required to achieve recovery of a species.

Generally, within nine months after a recovery strategy is prepared, the ESA requires the government to publish a statement summarizing the government's intended actions and priorities in response to the recovery strategy. The response statement is the government's policy response to the scientific advice provided in the recovery strategy. In addition to the strategy, the government response statement considers (where available) input from Indigenous communities and organizations, stakeholders, other jurisdictions, and members of the public. It reflects the best available local and scientific knowledge, including Indigenous Knowledge where it has been shared by communities and Knowledge Holders, as appropriate, and may be adapted if new information becomes available. In implementing the actions in the response statement, the ESA allows the government to determine what is feasible, taking into account social, cultural and economic factors.

The Recovery Strategy for the Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) in Ontario was completed on July 9, 2024.

<p>Chimney Swift is a small dark gray-brown bird (12 to 14 cm long) with a cigar-shaped body, long curved wings and a short tail. They are aerial insectivores meaning they feed almost exclusively on airborne insects while in flight. Chimney Swift give a distinctive chittering call when in flight.</p>
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**Protecting and Recovering Chimney Swift**

Chimney Swift is listed as a threatened species under the ESA, which protects both the species and its habitat. The ESA prohibits harm or harassment of the species and

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32 damage or destruction of its habitat without authorization or complying with the  
33 requirements of a regulatory exemption. Chimney Swift is also listed under Schedule 1  
34 of the federal *Species at Risk Act* and receives protection under the *Migratory Birds*  
35 *Convention Act, 1994*, which protects adults and young birds, as well as their nests and  
36 eggs in Canada.

37 The Chimney Swift breeds in central and eastern North America and migrates south in  
38 the fall to overwinter in South America. In Canada, Chimney Swift breed in the  
39 provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova  
40 Scotia. Chimney Swifts are sparsely distributed across central Ontario and the southern  
41 border of northern Ontario, but relatively common and widely distributed across  
42 southern Ontario having readily adapted to human-made habitats such as chimneys.  
43 The Chimney Swift population in Canada is estimated to be between 20,000 and 70,000  
44 mature individuals.

45 Chimney Swifts spend most of their time in flight feeding on flying insects. They perch  
46 exclusively on vertical surfaces and require rough materials to cling to, roost and attach  
47 their nest. Chimney Swifts are not associated with a particular habitat type but favor  
48 areas with abundant flying insects and the availability of suitable nesting and roosting  
49 sites. Chimney Swifts forage over a variety of habitats including urban areas, rural and  
50 agricultural areas, aquatic and wetland environments and forests. Prior to European  
51 settlement Chimney Swifts mainly nested in caves, cliff faces and in hollow trees or tree  
52 cavities. Today Chimney Swifts are more likely to be found in and around urban and  
53 rural areas, where they nest and roost in chimneys or occasionally other human-made  
54 structures with vertical spaces, such as barns, silos, wells or abandoned buildings. The  
55 Chimney Swift breeding period in Ontario begins around the end of April and ends  
56 around the middle of October, the exact dates vary according to the area of the province  
57 in which the Chimney Swift are located and the climate conditions of each year.

58 Chimney Swifts gather at roosting sites, which are typically larger than the chimneys  
59 used for nesting. These sites are primarily used during migration but in breeding areas  
60 can be used at night or during bad weather, after the breeding period before birds  
61 migrate south, or by non-breeding or failed breeders. Flocks of Chimney Swifts at  
62 roosting sites can range in size from several dozen to more than 1,000 birds.

63 North American populations of aerial insectivores, including Chimney Swift, have  
64 declined significantly over the past 40 to 50 years. Long-term monitoring programs such  
65 as the Breeding Bird Survey show declines in Chimney Swift populations of close to 90  
66 % across the species' breeding range since the surveys began in 1970. Declines over  
67 the past three generations (2005–2018) of Chimney Swift in Ontario were estimated to

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be 57 %. Data collected during Breeding Bird Atlas surveys also demonstrate evidence of population decline in Ontario, as Chimney Swifts were more likely to be observed during the first (1981 – 1985) Breeding Bird Atlas than the second (2001 – 2005). Chimney Swift were recorded in 61 % fewer survey squares in the second atlas, despite a 25 % increase in survey effort.

As a migratory species, Chimney Swift may be impacted by a combination of threats, within their breeding areas in Ontario, and along their migratory (Central America) and overwintering (South America) habitat outside the province. What happens in each of these regions can influence the species' survival. The main threats to Chimney Swift in Ontario include the reduction in insect prey populations and habitat loss and degradation. Other potential threats include climate change and severe weather events.

There is growing evidence that insecticides such as neonicotinoids could be impacting aerial insectivores like Chimney Swift due to direct toxicity to the birds and indirectly as a result of an overall reduction in their food supply of insects. Declines in insect prey populations have also been attributed to loss and degradation of their foraging habitat due to draining or filling wetlands or changes in agricultural practices.

Loss of Chimney Swift nesting and roosting habitat, due to demolition, replacement or modification of human-made structures, such as chimneys, is also an ongoing threat. The availability of nest sites may be reduced as old structures are replaced, capped or lined with metals that no longer allow access or are less suitable for nest establishment. Chimney sweeping or use of chimneys during the breeding season can also impact populations. This species shows high fidelity to breeding sites (high probability that individual birds will return to their previous nesting sites), therefore permanent or even temporary loss of these sites may have negative impacts on their reproduction. While the creation of artificial chimneys (e.g., Chimney Swift towers) has had some success in attracting breeding Chimney Swifts in Canada, further research is required into increasing their use.

Loss of natural nesting and roosting sites, through removal of old-growth forests or large hollow trees also presents a challenge to the species. Large-diameter hollow trees in parks or urban areas may sometimes be removed for safety reasons which reduces suitable natural habitat for the species. Forestry practices that result in forest clearing or favour short harvesting cycles can reduce the number of trees of an age and suitable size for the species; however, forest management guidance for Crown lands in Ontario provides direction for cavities used by nesting or communally-roosting Chimney Swifts, providing protection for already known or suspected nests and those found during forestry operations.

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Greater frequency and severity of weather extremes, as may be seen with climate change, may also threaten the species throughout its range and increase mortality during migration. These events may also impact the presence and abundance of the Chimney Swift's insect prey.

To recover Chimney Swift in Ontario, the rate of population decline must be slowed to a halt, and the population will need to become stable and self-sustaining. It is difficult to estimate how much time is needed to slow the population decline and achieve a stable population given uncertainties with respect to known and potential threats and our ability to mitigate them; however, aiming to maintain a stable, self-sustaining population within 20 years is thought to allow sufficient time to fill knowledge gaps which in some cases will require extensive multi-year research studies and take appropriate action. In the short-term, implementing recovery actions will help manage the population and contribute to slowing the rate of decline. It is acknowledged that further reduction in the current size of the Ontario Chimney Swift population is inevitable until the rate of decline is halted. Through implementation of a comprehensive suite of protection and recovery actions, establishing a self-sustaining population throughout the species' current known range in Ontario is considered to be achievable. However, as research into the sources and magnitude of threats progresses over the next 10 years, the government's goal for the recovery of Chimney Swift may be re-evaluated to better reflect an improved understanding of the factors driving the decline and our ability to mitigate them.

#### **Government's Recovery Goal**

The government's recovery goal is to achieve and then maintain a stable, self-sustaining population throughout the species' current known range in Ontario by 2044 (within 20 years).
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#### **Actions**

Protecting and recovering species at risk is a shared responsibility. No single agency or organization has the knowledge, authority or financial resources to protect and recover all of Ontario's species at risk. Successful recovery requires inter-governmental co-operation and the involvement of many individuals, organizations and communities. In developing the government response statement, the government considered what actions are feasible for the government to lead directly and what actions are feasible for the government to support its conservation partners to undertake.

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The government published a [species-specific habitat description for Chimney Swift](#) in July 2013. The habitat description is a technical document that provides greater clarity on the area of habitat protected for a species based on the general habitat definition found in the ESA.

In July 2013, a regulation came into effect, which conditionally exempts individuals who are maintaining, repairing, modifying, replacing or demolishing an existing structure that provides Chimney Swift habitat from sections 9 and 10 of the ESA (Ontario Regulation 242/08 section 23.8). Individuals seeking exemption must meet all eligibility criteria, register with the Ministry prior to beginning their activity, and fulfill all other conditions required by the regulation. These conditions include undertaking beneficial actions for the species, such as creating and monitoring replacement habitat, keeping monitoring records, and reporting Chimney Swift observations to the Natural Heritage Information Centre.

#### **Government-led Actions**

To help protect and recover Chimney Swift, the government plans to undertake the following actions:

- Protect Chimney Swift and its habitat through the ESA. Continue to implement the [species-specific habitat description](#) and [conditional exemption](#) for Chimney Swift.
- Review and assess the effectiveness of actions undertaken by proponents to minimize adverse effects while carrying out the maintenance, repair, modification, replacement or demolition of chimneys that provide Chimney Swift habitat. This may include reviewing actions undertaken in accordance with current ESA requirements such as [Ontario Regulation 242/08 section 23.8](#).
- Undertake communications and outreach to increase public awareness of species at risk in Ontario (e.g., through Ontario Parks Discovery Program, where appropriate).
- Continue to monitor populations and mitigate threats to the species and its habitat in provincially protected areas, where feasible and appropriate.
- Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.

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- Encourage the submission of Chimney Swift data to Ontario's central repository through the [NHIC \(Rare species of Ontario\) project in iNaturalist](#) or directly through the [Natural Heritage Information Centre](#).
- Continue to support conservation, agency, municipal and industry partners, and Indigenous communities and organizations to undertake activities to protect and recover Chimney Swift. Support will be provided where appropriate through funding, agreements, permits and/or advisory services.
- Work with partners and stakeholders to support beneficial insects in Ontario through actions such as education and promoting integrated pest management and best management practices.
- Continue to manage Crown forests in a manner that minimizes adverse impacts to species at risk and their habitats.
- Conduct a review of progress toward the protection and recovery of Chimney Swift within 10 years of the publication of this document.

### Government-supported Actions

The government endorses the following actions as being necessary for the protection and recovery of Chimney Swift. Actions identified as “high” may be given priority consideration for funding under the Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Where reasonable, the government will also consider the priority assigned to these actions when reviewing and issuing authorizations under the ESA. Other organizations are encouraged to consider these priorities when developing projects or mitigation plans related to species at risk.

<b>Focus Area:</b>	<b>Habitat Management</b>
Objective:	Work collaboratively with landowners and land managers to mitigate threats to Chimney Swift and its habitat and to maintain or improve the amount and quality of available habitat.

The species is closely associated with, and dependent on, human-made structures. Projects that involve repairing, maintaining or removing structures that are habitat for Chimney Swift are common, and implementing best management practices and effective mitigation are required to reduce threats to the species. Use of best management practices in natural nesting, roosting and foraging habitat are also necessary to minimize habitat loss and threats that result in reduced insect availability.

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Promoting beneficial actions that individuals and organizations can take proactively to enhance and secure habitat is also encouraged.

**Actions:**

1. **(High)** Collaborate with municipalities, landowners, land managers, Indigenous communities, the forestry sector, agricultural producers, industry and other organizations to develop, promote, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of best management practices and techniques to mitigate impacts of activities on the species and its habitat. This may include:
  - i. developing tools and guidance for landowners and land managers to maintain, repair, modify or replace existing human-made structures (e.g., chimneys) while maintaining their suitability for Chimney Swifts
  - ii. assessing options and where feasible and appropriate, develop best management practices to promote successful designs for artificial chimneys (e.g., Chimney Swift towers) for both short-term and long-term nesting and roosting habitat. Monitor effectiveness and adapt structures as appropriate
  - iii. planning for the transition from existing human-made structures (nesting and roosting) to natural habitat or Chimney Swift towers (if found to be fully effective)
2. **(High)** Develop, promote and implement best management practices to minimize threats to Chimney Swift natural nesting and foraging habitats and maintain or improve habitat quality and availability, such as:
  - i. encouraging the presence of large hollow trees in forests, woodlots and parks
  - ii. maintaining and enhancing hedgerows, riparian buffers and wetlands to encourage insect diversity and abundance
  - iii. promoting integrated pest management
  - iv. reducing pesticide use, where possible
3. In collaboration with landowners, land managers, municipal governments and environmental organizations identify existing human-made structures that need to be maintained over time, or that have been closed off but could be reopened, to provide suitable habitat for Chimney Swift.

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- 235 4. As opportunities arise, identify and protect lands suitable for Chimney  
236 Swift habitat through land securement in collaboration with existing  
237 partners and initiatives.

238 **Focus Area: Research and Monitoring**

239 Objective: Increase knowledge about the species' distribution and abundance,  
240 habitat preferences, and ongoing and emerging threats to inform  
241 mitigative and management actions.

242 Widespread declines in aerial insectivore species have raised concern as to whether  
243 there have been large-scale changes in insect populations due to insecticides,  
244 environmental contaminants, habitat degradation, climate change or other factors. Many  
245 knowledge gaps must be addressed to understand the most significant threats to  
246 Chimney Swift survival and inform recovery planning. Important information gaps exist  
247 with respect to its habitat preferences and use and whether habitat availability in natural  
248 areas is sufficient to support a stable population of the species. Encouraging  
249 contributions and the sharing of perspectives and information from Indigenous  
250 communities will ensure that conservation efforts are culturally sensitive and inclusive of  
251 Traditional Knowledge. Further understanding of the species' needs will help focus  
252 recovery efforts where they will have the most benefit to the species. Ongoing  
253 monitoring and continuation of citizen science programs are key for tracking recovery  
254 progress and effectiveness of recovery activities.

255  
256 **Actions:**

- 257 5. **(High)** Identify and describe the key characteristics of natural nesting,  
258 roosting and foraging habitat used by Chimney Swift in Ontario to inform  
259 habitat protection, management and enhancement.
- 260 6. **(High)** Increase knowledge of the characteristics of human-made (e.g.,  
261 chimneys) and artificial (e.g., Chimney Swift towers) structures and of  
262 methods for increasing their usefulness and success.
- 263 7. Encourage coordinated research into the link between insect availability,  
264 foraging habitat and population declines in Chimney Swift and other  
265 aerial insectivore species that breed in Ontario, which may include  
266 evaluating:
- 267 i. Chimney Swift diet and factors (e.g., landscape, habitat, land use)  
268 affecting seasonal food availability (quantity and quality)
  - 269 ii. the extent that environmental contaminants (e.g., pesticides) are  
270 directly or indirectly affecting productivity and/or survival rates, and



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- 271                   iii. possible direct and indirect links between climate change and/or  
272                   severe weather events and changes related to timing of insect  
273                   availability and Chimney Swift populations.
- 274           8. Monitor Chimney Swift population trends in Ontario to track short-term  
275           and long-term changes. This may include:
- 276                   i. implementing inventories at regular intervals across the species'  
277                   distribution in both natural and human-made environments using  
278                   established monitoring methods such as the Breeding Bird Survey  
279                   program
- 280                   ii. encouraging the documentation of Chimney Swift nesting and  
281                   roosting sites, reporting on the species' abundance and distribution  
282                   through established provincial and national citizen science initiatives  
283                   (e.g., [eBird](#), [SwiftWatch](#))
- 284                   iii. monitoring reproductive success, clutch size, survival rates and  
285                   population trends in Ontario to track changes in species' distribution,  
286                   abundance and habitat use.
- 287           9. As appropriate, encourage the recording, sharing and transfer of  
288           Traditional Knowledge on Chimney Swift, where it has been shared by  
289           communities, to increase knowledge of the species and support future  
290           recovery efforts.
- 291           10. Coordinate efforts and share information with other jurisdictions to  
292           understand the relative degree to which Chimney Swift is impacted by  
293           threats that occur within Ontario versus threats that occur outside the  
294           province (e.g., on wintering grounds).

295	<b>Focus Area:</b>	<b>Stewardship and Awareness</b>
296	Objective:	Increase public awareness of Chimney Swift, its habitat and
297		threats, and promote stewardship of the species in Ontario.

298 Stewardship and leadership by Ontario landowners and organizations are essential for  
299 supporting the recovery of Chimney Swift. Raising awareness about the beneficial value  
300 of Chimney Swift to humans and the environment, as well as how to reduce threats to  
301 the species, and how to enhance or maintain its habitat and reduce risk to the species,  
302 will help to promote and encourage protection of the species and its habitat in Ontario.

303           **Actions:**

- 304           11. Develop and deliver strategic communications and outreach efforts  
305           focused on educating key audiences (e.g., owners of human-made

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structures used by Chimney Swift, chimney sweeps, building contractors, agricultural producers, forestry sector and other organizations) on ways to minimize threats and promote the protection and enhancement of Chimney Swift nesting, roosting and foraging habitat.

12. Develop programs to facilitate and encourage good stewardship and implementation of best management practices by landowners and land managers with existing habitat for Chimney Swift, including for example developing and implementing awards and recognition programs.

### **Implementing Actions**

Financial support for the implementation of actions may be available through the Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Conservation partners are encouraged to discuss project proposals related to the actions in this response statement with Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks staff. The Ontario government can also provide guidance about the requirements of the ESA, whether an authorization or regulatory exemption may be required for the project and, if so, the authorization types and/or conditional exemptions for which the activity may be eligible. Implementation of the actions may be subject to changing priorities across the multitude of species at risk, available resources and the capacity of partners to undertake recovery activities. Where appropriate, the implementation of actions for multiple species will be co-ordinated across government response statements.

### **Performance Measures**

Progress towards achieving the government's goal for the recovery of Chimney Swift will be measured against the following performance measures:

- The rate of decline in the Ontario population has halted by 2044, and the population trend is stable thereafter.
- The distribution of Chimney Swift in Ontario is maintained or increased by 2044.

### **Reviewing Progress**

The ESA requires the Ontario government to conduct a review of progress towards protecting and recovering a species no later than the time specified in the species' government response statement, which has been identified as 10 years. The review will

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337 help identify if adjustments are needed to achieve the protection and recovery of  
338 Chimney Swift.

339 **Acknowledgement**

340 We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the Recovery  
341 Strategy and Government Response Statement for the Chimney Swift (*Chaetura*  
342 *pelagica*) in Ontario for their dedication to protecting and recovering species at risk.

343 **For Additional Information:**

344 Visit the species at risk website at [ontario.ca/speciesatrisk](http://ontario.ca/speciesatrisk)  
345 Contact the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks  
346 1-800-565-4923  
347 TTY 1-855-515-2759  
348 [www.ontario.ca/environment](http://www.ontario.ca/environment)