

Spring 2000 flight of Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) in the Great Basin

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The Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) is an uncommon transient through the Great Basin during the spring and fall. The bulk of its population winters in Central America and northern South America, and it is restricted as a breeder to far western North America. Although large concentrations of migrant Vaux's Swifts can be found as close as the Pacific slope of the Sierra Nevada and in the coastal ranges of Oregon and Washington, the species for the most part goes undetected in the Great Basin. In a typical season, a Great Basin birder might see a few small flocks of two or three birds; and it is certainly not hard to go an entire season without seeing the species at all. The spring of 2000, however, witnessed an unprecedented passage of Vaux's Swifts through the Great Basin, and area birders were fortunate enough to get a taste of what the Vaux's Swift migration is like to the south and west of the region.

For northern Nevadans, hints of a start of an unusual season began on the overcast and windy evening of 7 May 2000 when Ted Floyd and I saw approximately 150 Vaux's Swifts swarming the skies over the Reno office of Great Basin Bird Observatory on Marsh Avenue. Later that evening, Graham Chisholm called to say that there were *ca.* 50 swifts over his house in southwest Reno. In the next two days, there were many other reports of Vaux's Swifts, although in smaller numbers, from a variety of locations in the Truckee Meadows, Washoe Valley, and Carson Valley. Most of the sightings came from the very narrow window of 6–8 May 2000. Although it is a chancy business to attribute such an unusual presence to climate alone, one cannot dismiss entirely the role possibly played by strong westerly winds out of California on those days.

On top of the strong pulse of Vaux's Swifts through western Nevada in early May, there was a better-than-usual scattering of records from elsewhere in the region. A few birds were found in the course of

Atlas field work in southern Nevada, but these obviously referred to migrants. There was also a 4 May sighting of Vaux's Swifts at Fields, Oregon, an oasis in the Alvord Desert, about 20 miles north of Denio. This was the first sighting for the species at that location. Other eastern Oregon Vaux's Swifts records came from Great Basin locations such as Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

There were very few if any Vaux's Swifts reports from the Great Basin during most of the remainder of May. Then on 30 May, Ted Floyd and I saw two pairs engaged in courtship behavior over Idlewild Pond in Reno. The pairs remained for several days but were not observed beyond 4 June.

The tantalizing questions remains, then, whether the Vaux's Swift, which has yet to be confirmed as a Nevada breeder, in fact, nested in the state in 2000. There are reasons beyond the unprecedented migration to raise suspicions that breeding occurred. Idlewild Pond is right along the Truckee River, an area that supplies an abundance of dead trees and snags with empty cavities. Moreover, the site is in the foothills of the Carson Range, which is very near to known breeding grounds in the Sierra Nevada.

The Vaux's Swift is an interesting bird that has been seriously understudied in the Great Basin. Monitoring programs such as one recently initiated in Oregon's Willamette Valley may help shed light on a bird whose distribution within the Great Basin can only be described as enigmatic. We still know very little about the occurrence of migrant Vaux's Swifts in the Great Basin, and the question of breeding remains open.

Note: dates, locales, and place names referred to in this article were gleaned from the Nevada Birds searchable archives (<http://list.audubon.org/archives/nvbirds.html>).