

A Miracle of Cooperation at Assisi Heights – Chimney Swift Style

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Can orphan swifts find a flock to help them migrate south this late in the year? I was recently privileged to witness the amazing answer to this question.

Jessika Madison-Kennedy is a songbird rehabilitation specialist from the Wildlife Rehab Center in Roseville and has the enviable job of rehabilitating many orphaned and injured Chimney Swifts, Martins, Hummingbirds, etc.

She had five late-born Chimney Swift orphans that were ready for release and was trying to connect with any place nearby that was still seeing roosting Swifts. She was desperate to get these babies hooked up with a migrating group before all the Swifts were gone for the year. I wrote to her and after communication with Sister Marlys Jax, Greg Munson and others, we arranged for her to come to Rochester. Jerry Pruett, a local birding expert, also came along to help and take pictures.

We met at the privately owned Academy of Our Lady of Lourdes Franciscan facility at Assisi Heights. Jessika had the five Swifts in a pet carrier, clinging to a cloth she had hung from the edge of the cage. Chimney Swifts cannot perch or stand like other songbirds and must find something to vertically cling to or they can't land.

While waiting for the local swifts to show up, Jessika fed the fledglings some of the vitamin-coated meal worms they had been raised on, but they were having none of it now! They were ready for the real thing – insects

(and there were plenty of those around feeding on us!).

When the local Swifts started circling they wasted no time going down the chimney, and we hustled to get the orphans over by the chimney so they didn't have far to fly. She opened the carrier and the fledglings scattered, staying low. They didn't seem to understand that they needed to fly up to the top of the chimney.

Then the most incredible thing happened. Some of the local Swifts that had already gone in to roost, came back out and went after the fledglings, trying to round them up. Gradually they coaxed them to gain altitude and after about 10 min, all the birds had entered the chimney, and none were left circling.

It seemed as if the Swifts all knew the journey to South America was long and just wanted to get some rest rather than waste energy circling.

Jessika said she's seen them help strangers before and once watched some Purple Martins fly under a struggling orphan she'd released to give it some lift to help it gain altitude.

The fledglings are still weak flyers, so I sure hope they can gain the necessary strength to migrate successfully over the next few days.

Mr. & Mrs. Willinghanz counted 149 birds flying in this evening, much lower than previous counts, so these lucky little fledglings were released just in time.

We wish them Bon Voyage and thank Jessika for the chance to witness this inspiring example of avian cooperation! She asked that we continue to watch and report the date they were finally gone. That data will help to advance our knowledge of swift migration.

The spirit of St Francis truly hovered over Assisi Heights that night. Why can't our society be more like these birds and help others who are not part of our particular 'flock'? These birds show us that it helps all of us to help each other.



Ready to be released!



Being offered some meal worms for their journey.



Swifts in the pet carrier before release.