

## Help Us Build a New Home for the McHarg Chimney Swifts!

### History of the McHarg Chimney Swifts



Radford City School's McHarg Elementary School, built in 1957, is getting a long-overdue expansion and renovation and is set to re-open in August 2021. One of the most visible features of the old building was the massive brick chimney that rose above the school.

Photo Courtesy of Douglas Kay



The renovation required that the old chimney, no longer used, be dismantled, and it was taken down in late August 2020. What many people don't know is that Radford lost an important spring and summer nesting site for dozens of Chimney Swifts when the school's chimney was demolished. We propose to build a new McHarg Chimney Swift tower adjacent to the school which is to be completed by April 2021 when the birds return from their winter migration.

Photo Courtesy of Liz Altieri

Paul Reeves Photography/Shutterstock



Chimney swifts are a common and joyous summer sight in Radford, flying in synchronous formation in tight chattering groups of three to four birds. You can see and hear them all summer particularly near the East and West business districts where many old chimneys still exist. Chimney Swifts are beneficial to our city. Each bird eats up to 12,000 mosquitoes, termites, flies, and other insects a day. You can learn more about Chimney Swifts at the Virginia Wildlife Center website <https://www.wildlifecenter.org/chimney-swifts-neighbors> or <http://www.chimneyswifts.org>

However, chimney swift populations are in decline across the country. We are fortunate to have one of Virginia's premier birders and naturalists living near the school, Clyde Kessler. He has been monitoring and recording data on the McHarg swifts since the early 1980s. The chimney swift numbers in the vicinity of McHarg peaked at 209 birds on August 29, 2011. In 2019 the highest count was 74 on September 12.



Swifts have evolved to nest in chimneys; they build small and strong cuplike nests, adhering to the brick and mortar joints. In addition to the general decline in all bird numbers (Cornell now estimates 3 billion north American birds have been lost since 1970), swifts face the added pressures of loss of habitat through capped and lined chimneys. In addition, open chimneys are discouraged and seldom a part of new construction.

Photo from <https://www.nwf.org/Home/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2019/Oct-Nov/Conservation/Chimney-Swifts>

Here is a short video on protecting threatened chimney swifts: Dr. Jessica Hite, now at the **Department of Pathobiological Sciences, School of Veterinary Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMJtJ9eqwjA&feature=youtu.be>

### **How Your Contribution Can Help the McHarg Chimney Swifts and Our Community**

To help the birds, chimney swift towers have been built around the country. We are a small group of interested Radford citizens who would like to build the McHarg Chimney Swifts a new home. We presented the idea to the Radford City School Board at the October 2020 School Board Meeting and received their resounding approval to move forward with the project. Thompson & Litton Architects of Radford have graciously designed and contributed plans for the tower. Avis Construction of Roanoke has given us a cost proposal of \$13,347 and has agreed to complete the project before the birds return from South America in April. Both firms are involved and invested in the McHarg renovation. All plans and materials will blend with the new school; it will be professionally designed and built. Little to no maintenance will be needed. The McHarg Chimney Swift Tower will provide a safe nesting and roosting place for the birds for many generations to come.



Thompson & Litton Architects, rendering of the proposed Chimney Swift Tower

Our fundraising goal is \$15,000. In addition to the funds needed for construction, contributions will also provide funds for a non-intrusive web cam and associated technology and educational materials so students can study and monitor the life cycle of these birds. This could be a significant STEM initiative with students at McHarg and Belle Heth learning about the engineering of the old chimney and new tower, the science of observing the birds and learning about their life history, their migration patterns and their conservation, the technology used to monitor the birds, and the mathematics involved in data calculation, predicting the arrival and departure of the birds, and the timing of the hatching and fledging of the young birds.

For Radford citizens, there are many educational and conservation benefits and opportunities including the simple pleasure of sitting beneath the tower to watch the birds dive in, eager to feed their babies, or return to their roosts at dusk for the night.

### **How You Can Contribute**

The Radford City Schools Partners for Excellence Foundation has graciously agreed to serve as the fiscal sponsor for the project. You can contribute by sending a check to Radford City Schools Partners for Excellence Foundation, P.O. Box 355, Radford, Virginia 24143 and putting Chimney Swift Tower in the note section on the check. Or you can contribute through the Foundation's PayPal link, using the Drop Down Menu to indicate that you wish to donate to the Chimney Swift Tower project. In your note on your check or as you make your PayPal payment, please let us know if you wish this donation to be in

honor or memory of a special friend, family member or community member.

[https://www.rcps.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=250094&type=d&pREC\\_ID=574316](https://www.rcps.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=250094&type=d&pREC_ID=574316)

Wilson Rankin and Liz Altieri have agreed to match the first donations up to a total of \$3000. Contributors of \$500 or more will be acknowledged on a plaque on the chimney swift tower. All contributors will be acknowledged publicly.

### **People Involved with the Project**

Wilson Rankin – Long-time member of Pathways for Radford and steward of Wildwood Park. Wilson has organized and led the annual Redbud Tree Planting project on Sundell Drive for over 10 years. Wilson is an enthusiastic amateur birder and naturalist. He has been a member of the Radford City Beautification Committee and is currently Chair of the Radford Public Library Board.

Clyde Kessler – Local naturalist and long-time monitor of Chimney Swifts and many other species. He was west region editor for Virginia Birds for ten years and did 25 summers of field research for the Forest Service. Here is a link to his most recent article published in the Southeastern Naturalist on the brown-headed nuthatch <https://www.eaglehill.us/SENAonline/articles/SENA-19-2/17-Shoch.shtml>

Bob Sheehy – One of the founding members of Pathways for Radford, Bob has been at Radford University since 1996, teaching genetics, evolutionary biology, ornithology and bioinformatics. Bob is an avid beekeeper and founder of the Radford Vulture Festival. Here is a recent article about his work with vultures <http://www.virginialiving.com/culture/meet-natures-cleanup-crew/>

Liz Altieri – Liz is also a long-time member of Pathways for Radford, and her aspirations are to teach young children about plants, birds and nature someday when she retires. She is currently a professor at Radford University and prepares future elementary and special education teachers. Liz has served on the Radford City School Board since 2018, and is currently Vice-Chair.