

Black Swift

This text is from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.



an illustration of a black swift

An enigmatic bird local to the western United States, the black swift is highly sought after by birders.

Swifts fly very fast (the white-throated swift is considered the speediest songbird), foraging all day for insects, and building inaccessible nests. The black swift flies very high in the sky near mountainous habitats, and only 80 nest sites (behind or near waterfalls) have been found in their breeding range from southeast Alaska through Central America. It's no wonder the species is considered puzzling because of these behaviors and the limited viewing opportunity.

Like many refuges, Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, MT, offers birders a unique and quality birding opportunity - perhaps even seeing a black swift. The best chances come during inclement weather in late May through mid-June, when there is a low cloud ceiling, light rain, and cool temperatures in the 50s/60s [Fahrenheit]. Under these circumstances the high-flying black swift comes "back to Earth" to forage for insects at lower elevations. As a bonus - thanks in part to geography and habitat - Vaux's and White-throated swifts can also be found and identified at Lee Metcalf Refuge, sometimes right from the back door of the refuge headquarters!

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Black Swift Data:

- Size - The black swift is about seven inches long with an 18-inch wingspan; it is the largest swift in the United States and Canada. Black overall with a pale gray head, it has a forked tail and can appear to have long wings when flying.
- Range - The black swift is found from the Arctic to Central America and in the West Indies. In North America, its breeding range extends from southeastern Alaska to southern California, Montana, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico.
- Diet - flying insects
- Habitat - The black swift is primarily a mountainous species, nesting on canyon walls near water and sheltered by overhanging rock or moss. Lays one to two eggs.