



The official Kent State University Seal, adopted in 1964, includes a soaring chimney swift.



Biology professor Ralph Dexter, PhD, releases a chimney swift. His decades of research on the swift led to its inclusion on the university's seal.

For the Birds

A silhouette of a bird soars above the sunburst on the Kent State University seal—but it's not just any bird, it's a chimney swift (*Chaetura pelagica*). Once a common sight in Kent, chimney swifts were the subject of decades of research by Ralph W. Dexter, PhD, Emeritus Professor of Biological Sciences, a well-known authority on the chimney swift during his tenure at Kent State. (He taught from 1937 to 1982 and died in 1991).

Dexter, a native of Massachusetts, focused his research on the ecology of marine communities, including mollusks, crustaceans and birds. Coming to Kent State, he also studied the chimney swifts that nested and roosted in the chimneys and air shafts of older buildings on the Kent Campus. He banded and compiled data on thousands of swifts to understand their habits.

Chimney swifts spend most of their time in the air and can eat up to 12,000 flying insects a day. Only landing to nest and rest, they use their spit to “glue” the nests to the walls of chimneys and shafts. Among the many papers Dexter wrote is one about the breeding history of a single male swift (Swift No. 42-188523) that he banded as a nestling and followed for 13 years (published in *The Ohio Journal of Science* in November, 1968).

When Kent State adopted a new university seal in 1964—it had previously used Ohio's state seal—it included the chimney swift, “because it is a distinctive part of the campus” and “because of its

seemingly interminable flight, the swift is a symbol for leadership,” according to the minutes of a Board of Trustees meeting on Nov. 19, 1964.

Chimney swifts usually arrive in Ohio in April and leave by October, congregating in the hundreds as they migrate to the Amazon Basin of Peru for the winter. They used to nest and roost in hollow trees but began losing their natural habitat to deforestation and development. The swifts adapted by moving into building chimneys and expanding their range, protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. However, as old buildings with brick chimneys are torn down, the swifts once again face

habitat loss—and their population is steadily declining.

When Rhonda Boyd, a senior engineer for the city of Kent, learned that the demolition of Kent's old police station would displace a large colony of chimney swifts residing in its brick chimney, she became their champion. Spearheading a campaign to build the birds a home of their own, she secured funding through grants, community outreach and donations from local citizens.

Two years later, a 20-foot chimney swift tower, designed by Metis Construction, stands between the new Kent Police station and the Lefton Esplanade extension, across Haymaker Parkway from the Kent State University Hotel and Conference Center. At its base is a garden of native plants that attract pollinators. The brick tower also features handmade ceramic tiles depicting chimney swifts, pollinators and native plants by local artist Emily Ulm.

“We're also looking to add more houses,” says Boyd, who received the 2021 Portage Park District Foundation Award for Environmental Activism. “They won't be as fancy as this, but you can make them out of wood.” She's looking for volunteers to help build the additional nesting structures, which the city plans to place throughout the parks and along the river. ⚡



The new Chimney Swift Tower, built by the city of Kent to provide habitat for chimney swifts displaced by development.

Learn more about chimney swifts and how to construct a tower at www.chimneyswifts.org.