

Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*)

Species Status Statement.

Distribution

Broadly speaking, black swift occurs in the mountains of western North America in summer, and in indistinct areas of South America in winter. More specifically, black swift currently occurs in four widely separated areas: (1) central Colorado through central Utah; (2) central and southwestern coastal California; (3) southern Alaska to Washington and inland to southwestern Alberta, Idaho, and northwestern Montana; and (4) Mexico to Costa Rica, with additional populations in the West Indies.

Despite this extensive distribution, only a few hundred specific nesting sites have been documented, all of which are on cliffs or in caves. Nowhere in this range is it considered to be an abundant summer resident (Lowther and Collins 2002, Wiggins 2004, Leivad et al. 2008). There are 10 documented nesting sites in Utah; near Provo Canyon, Little Cottonwood Canyon (Salt Lake County), the Uinta Mountains, and Zion National Park.

Table 1. Utah counties currently occupied by this species.

Black Swift	
CACHE	SEVIER
DUCHESNE	UINTAH
IRON	UTAH
KANE	WASATCH
SALT LAKE	WASHINGTON

Abundance and Trends

Black swift has an estimated global population size of 170,000, and a U.S. population of 9,100 (Partners in Flight 2019a), though there is no known estimate for Utah. Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) results for the Western Region show a decline of -6.6% per year (-9.7 to -3.6) between 1966 and 2015, and a non-significant decline of -4.9% per year (95% CI: -11.1 to +2.3) from 2005 to 2015, though these estimated declines are imprecise and may not detect changes of 3% per year (Sauer et al. 2017). Partners in Flight estimate 94% of the black swift population has been lost (2019a), and at the current estimated rate of decline, swift populations will decline by another 50% in 16 years (Partners in Flight 2019b).

Currently the black swift is:

- Listed as *Vulnerable* on the Red List of Threatened Species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature

- Identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a priority species at the continental and Bird Conservation Region scales on the Birds of Conservation Concern list (draft U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2017)
- Partners in Flight list it as “REVERSE DECLINE: Yellow Watch List ‘D’ – Species with population declines and moderate to high threats” (Rosenberg et al. 2016)

Statement of Habitat Needs and Threats to the Species.

Habitat Needs

Black swifts are aerial insectivores thought to spend the majority of their life on the wing; they forage exclusively while flying, either thousands of feet in the air or low just above the surface of ponds and streams. Black swifts are thought to depend on irruptions of flying insects such as dispersing winged ants. As a result, breeding swifts travel widely, possibly in excess of 25 miles, to forage in diverse habitats from montane forests to open areas (Lowther and Collins 2002). Breeding areas occur in mountainous riparian areas near or behind waterfalls between 6,000ft and 11,500ft in elevation during the breeding season. Ideal nesting sites typically have water (waterfalls), high relief (cliffs), are inaccessible to humans and predators, with dark ledges or cracks (for nest placement) and unobstructed flight paths (Knorr 1961, Knorr 1993, Lowther and Collins 2002).

Threats to the Species

Nest sites may be a limiting factor for swifts, due to the specific requirements for nesting near waterfalls or wet cliff sites (Lowther and Collins 2002, Wiggins 2004, Levad et al. 2008). Threats to these nesting sites include loss of water due to drought or diversion, and disturbance by hikers and climbers while nests are active. Black Swift nests are active (i.e., with eggs or nestlings) up to 80 days, making the nest vulnerable to disturbance longer than most cup-nesting species. Black swifts also show strong site fidelity and only lay 1 egg per clutch (Lowther and Collins 2002, Levad et al. 2008). Therefore, popular recreation sites causing annual disturbance and continual nest failure may have greater consequences for maintaining populations.

Black Swifts are exclusive aerial insectivores, therefore declines in arthropod populations due to excessive pesticide use and environmental changes (e.g. drought) have the potential to affect swift populations negatively.

Table 2. Summary of a Utah threat assessment and prioritization completed in 2014. This assessment applies to the species’ entire distribution within Utah. For species that also occur elsewhere, this assessment applies only to the portion of their distribution within Utah. The full threat assessment provides more information including lower-ranked threats, crucial data gaps, methods, and definitions (UDWR 2015; Salafsky et al. 2008).

Black Swift
Medium
Droughts
Rock Climbing

Rationale for Designation.

The status of black swift populations, as well as its distribution and range in Utah are not well understood. Although surveyors discovered two new nesting sites in 2012, it is unclear if many historical nesting sites are still in use. Many of the historical nesting sites are along the Wasatch Front, where human population and associated outdoor recreation are projected to increase dramatically in the coming decades. Rock climbing along cliffs and waterfalls at these nesting sites could adversely affect the black swift population in Utah. Loss of water in the watersheds used by nesting swifts, due to changes in water use and climate, could also impact this species. Designating black swift as a Sensitive Species will facilitate local research, leading to more information on the breeding distribution and the probable effects of drought and recreation in Utah.

Economic Impacts of Sensitive Species Designation.

Sensitive species designation is intended to facilitate management of this species, which is required to prevent Endangered Species Act listing and lessen related economic impacts. An ESA listing of black swift would impact management and development of headwater water resources statewide. There would also be increased costs of regulatory compliance for many land-use decisions and mitigation costs.

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