

Swift – Fact Sheet



What is a Swift?

The swift is a medium-sized aerial bird, which is a superb flier. It even sleeps on the wing! It is plain sooty brown, but in flight against the sky it appears black. It has long, scythe-like wings and a short, forked tail.



Amazing Fact 1

As a group, swifts are the fastest of all birds in level flight (the peregrine is the fastest of all birds, but only in a steep dive called a stoop).

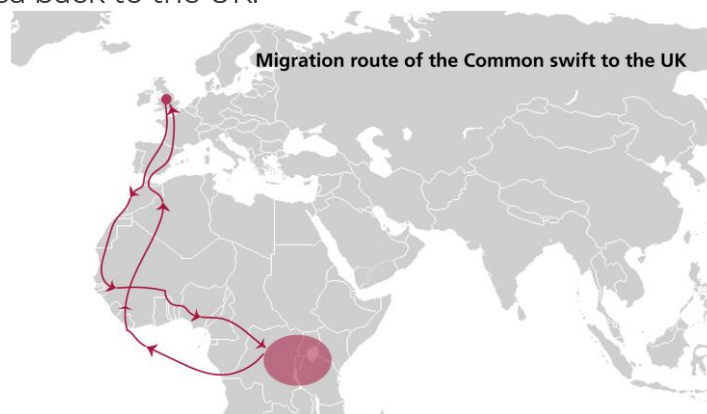
The top speed recorded in a recent scientific study was 69.3mph!

Our Swift

It has the scientific name *Apus apus*.

They are the only British bird that spend three months per year in the UK, the rest of the time they are in Africa. They fly across the Sahara desert in Autumn and some even go as far south as South Africa. Others don't go quite as far and stay around central Africa.

A swift has been recorded covering more than 3,100 miles in just five days during its migration from Africa back to the UK.



They have soft beaks, but very powerful feet. Their wings are superbly adapted for fast flight and the forked tail is closed to a point for extra efficiency.

For its size the swift has an exceptionally long life span averaging about 5.5 years.



Amazing Fact 2

They almost never land, except at their nest sites, doing everything on the wing.

Not many predators can catch a swift, hobbies (a bird of prey) may take a few and so may kestrels, tawny owls and barn owls. They seem to bathe by flying relatively slowly through falling rain.



Amazing Fact 3

It's estimated that swifts fly an average daily total of approximately 500 miles. That's about 1250 000 miles in a lifetime.

The swift probably eats more species of small insects and spiders than any other British bird. They usually take items on the wing 2 to 10mm long. They drink by gliding over smooth water and taking sips.

They can mate on the wing, but they will also mate in their nest holes.



Amazing Fact 4

They use saliva for nest building. Nesting material is collected on the wing so they can only use what they can find in the air e.g. insects, feathers, paper, straw, hay and seeds. Swifts nest in suitable buildings hollows, such as under tiles, in gaps beneath window-sills and most typically under eaves and within gables.



The weight of an egg is about one-twelfth the weight of the female that laid it approx 3.5 grams. Food can be scarce in bad weather, so swift chicks can go cold and torpid and survive for days without food, then regain weight rapidly once supplies resume.

The length of time the babies spend in the nest will vary, depending on how good the food supply has been and can vary by up to three weeks.



Amazing Fact 5

Each ball of food brought to the babies by their parents weighs just over a gram and contains 300 – 1000 individual insects and spiders.



At about a month old, the babies do 'press ups' in the nest, lifting themselves up by pushing down on their wings, probably to strengthen the wings. By the time they're ready to go, they can hold their bodies clear of the ground like this for several seconds. Once they launch themselves off on their very first ever flight, they don't return to the nest and are no longer cared for by the parents. Unlike many birds, the chicks do not necessarily leave the nest together, each going in its own time, when it's ready. It may well head off to Africa almost straight away.

Swifts form pairs that may couple for years, and often return to the same nesting site and partner year after year, repairing any damage suffered during their 40 week migratory absence.

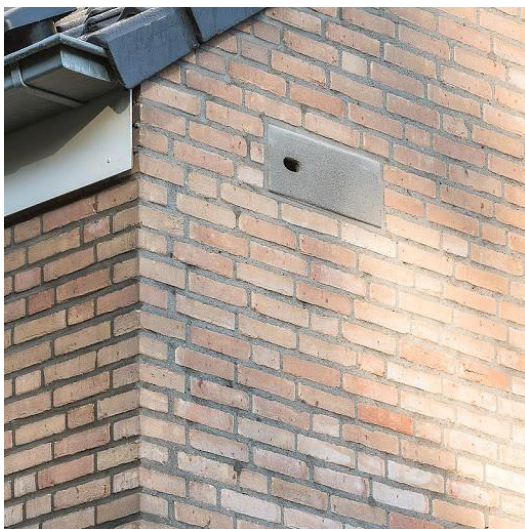
Swifts are in trouble!

The 57% decrease in their breeding numbers in the UK between 1995 and 2016 made swifts an amber-listed species.

The loss of nest sites is at least partly the problem. Due to people sealing up buildings during renovation or knocking them down, swifts are returning to discover their nest sites are gone or access is blocked.

Protecting existing nest sites and providing new nesting opportunities is vital to secure the future of our urban wildlife, even more so for swifts as they return to the same nest sites year after year.

With new residential developments, good practice is one roosting/nesting cavity or integral nest brick per residential unit. Most commercial industrial and public buildings will offer similar opportunities.



Having plenty of green space, both public and private, within the built environment is a key feature for ensuring the health and well-being of residents as well as the wildlife that should occupy our parks and gardens.