The Wonder of Swifts

Common Swift (Apus Apus)

Swifts are incredible birds – flying at speeds of up to 70mph and spending most of their lives on the wing. We are lucky here in Addingham to still have a good-sized population which has just started to return this week.

They travel huge distances to breed here, and their distinctive calls fill the air as they form ‘screaming parties’ swooping down low over the rooftops at great speed. Look up and you may see them careering along Main Street or whipping over the chimneys in School Lane.

Extremely proficient flyers, swifts do almost everything on the wing. They roam the skies to feed on insects, mate and even sleep in flight. They can fly as high as 2 to 3km, and switch off one half of their brain to sleep for brief periods as they ride the thermals. On average an adult swift will spend 10 months of the year in the air, only coming down to roost and brood in their nests during the summer breeding season. Incredibly, from the moment a young swift leaves its nest it will not touch ground for three or four years until it is ready to breed.

Migration

Our returning swifts will have flown an astonishing 4000 miles (6,400km) from the Congo and Uganda. Travelling north west, they pause to feed up for a week or so before making the four-day flight across the Sahara. In Morocco they feed up again, and then may make the final flight back to Yorkshire in the space of just a couple of days.

The first birds to return are the breeding pairs, and the young adult birds who are ready to mate for the first time. The second wave of birds, arriving in late May and early June, are two- to three-year-olds who will be starting to check out nest sites for the following year. They bang up against potential sites, checking if they are occupied (which gives them the nickname 'bangers'). The final wave, in late June, are the one-year olds.

The breeding adults will leave in late July, with the younger birds following in August, to make the arduous journey back to their feeding grounds in the insect-filled skies above tropical rainforests and open savannahs.

Feeding

Swifts feed on the wing at speeds of at least 25 mph. They have binocular vision that enables them to close in on selected insects with great accuracy, for example choosing stingless bees over ones that sting, and targeting the choicest morsels in their varied diet. They consume a huge range of small creatures, including flies, mosquitos, aphids, bees, beetles and airborne spiders.

Breeding

Pairs mate for life and adults can live for up to 20 years, though 6 to 8 years is more common.

Nests are built in small holes in roof spaces, and lined with just a few feathers or similar items plucked out of the air, such as hay, straw or even paper. Eggs are laid at two to three day intervals, and incubated for around 20 days. Both adults share feeding duties, bringing 300-500 insects back to the nest at a time, as a ball of food (bolus) in a pouch in their throat. If the food supply is low, or the weather bad, the chicks can go into a torpid state for several days, while the adults range further afield in search of food.

At about a month old, the chicks start doing 'press-ups' – lifting themselves up on their wings to strengthen them. Once they can hold their bodies up like this for several seconds, they are ready to fly.

Click here for a fascinating talk by Linda Jenkinson of the Leeds Swift Group, with lots of footage of chicks in the nest and stories of swifts she has rescued and reared at home.

Threats to swifts

Since the mid-1990s we have lost almost half of our breeding swifts in the UK. Refurbishment of old buildings, including old warehouses and factories, is one of the reasons, with sealed roofs and eaves leaving no space for swifts to enter and nest. Modern buildings are often similarly sealed up and inaccessible. The huge reduction in insect numbers is also, of course, a major factor.

How you can help

If swifts are nesting in your roof space or nearby already, it's important to make sure they can continue to breed there by not disturbing them during the breeding season, or doing work that means they no longer have access. If swifts can't return to their usual nest site, they may give up breeding altogether.

You can also put up a nest box to encourage new nest sites. There's lots of information on how to do that on the Swift Conservation website here.

AEG Swift Group

Last summer a small group of us started keeping an eye out to see where swifts are nesting in Addingham and making a map of all the sites we found (about 25 so far). It's a fascinating thing to do, and very rewarding when you see a swift zooming into its nest. You have to be vigilant though – they can be doing 40mph when they go in, so it can be over in a blink of an eye! Later in the season you may also see the tell-tale sign of a small streak of white poo just below the nest.

If you know you have swifts nesting in your roof, or you would like to join us for some swift watching, do get in touch on the email below. It's a lovely thing to do on a summer's evening, and vital work in helping us to identify and protect nest sites - ensuring that our incredible swifts keep returning to us and breeding successfully for years to come.

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Useful links for further information on swifts:

https://www.swift-conservation.org/

http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/

https://www.startbirding.co.uk/leeds-swifts/

https://www.bto.org/our-science/topics/tracking/tracking-studies/swifts

https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/swift/