



WE ARE SWIFTS - WE ARE IN TROUBLE

Swift not to be confused with Swallows:



Swallow



**Swallow builds mud nest in
out building and perches on wires - Swifts do not.**

It has pale breast and long tail streamers - Swifts do not.

Swift not to be confused with House Martin:



**House
Martin**



© Erni/Shutterstock

**House Martin builds mud nest under eaves
of houses and perches on wires - Swifts do not.
It has pale breast and white rump - Swifts do not.**

Since you were born



**There are over 40% fewer Swifts visiting us.
The Swift is now a red-listed bird of conservation concern in Ireland**

Why should you care?

They
are amazing

They
are mysterious

They
are very very fast

They
eat millions of insects

They
are a very important part of urban biodiversity



© Gallinago/Shutterstock

Some facts about Swifts

- They eat, drink, preen, sleep and mate while flying
- They only land to breed between May and August each year
- Their scientific name is *Apus apus*, that means 'no foot no foot'
- Actually, they have small feet with strong, sharp claws which they only use to climb into their nest site.



© Marc Guyt www.agami.nl

Swifts have been around a long time; this fossil of one of their ancestors, who died 49 million years ago, was found in Germany.



© Ulrich Tigges

They fly about 500 miles (800kms) a day.

**During their lives, they fly about 2 million miles -
equivalent to more than four trips
to the Moon and back!**




© Luc Viatour/www.Lucenix.be

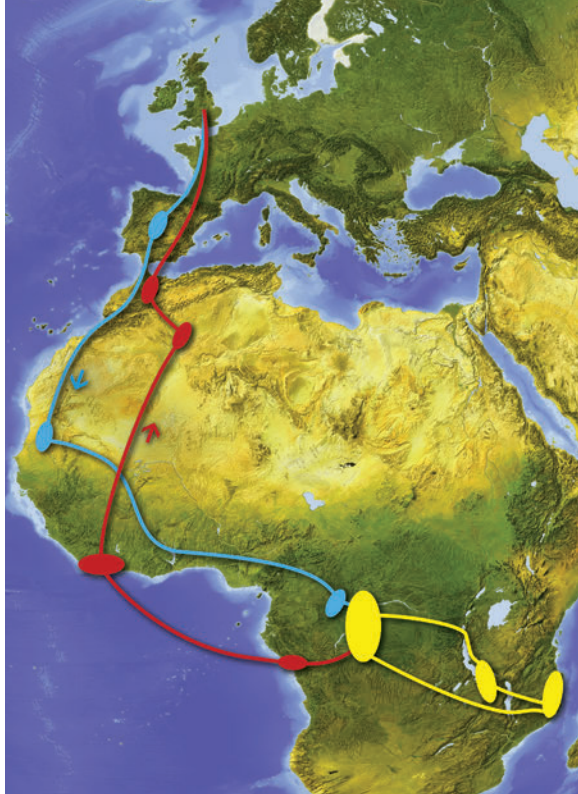




**They eat flying insects like flies,
mosquitoes, midges, and greenflies
as well as airborne spiders.**

- They come to Europe each summer arriving in this country at the end of April/beginning of May
- They start to make their way back to Africa in August/September
- A round trip of 14,000 miles!


-  Southward migration
-  Northward migration
-  Winter range and movements





A life on the Wing!

- At night the non-breeding birds sleep while flying as high as 3,000 metres
- They approach their nest site at more than 40 miles (64 km) per hour and come to a stop without slowing down
- They do not normally land on the ground because it is very difficult for them to take off
- They cannot perch on wires or branches.



**A 'screaming party'
Ballymahon, Co. Longford.**



- They are one of the very best fliers
- They have very rapid wing-beats: 8 wing-beats per second, followed by gliding and zooming about at very high speed, usually screaming as they go
- You will hear and see 'swift screaming parties' around the buildings in towns and villages

Family Life

- Swifts usually stay with the same partners for their whole lives
- The partners stay together from May to August to rear the chicks
- But, we think they don't stay together on migration
- They can live for up to 21 years!



Nest and Eggs

- To make their nest they catch bits of stuff from the air, like feathers, leaves, dandelion clocks and dry grass
- They then stick them together with saliva to make a cosy nest for laying their eggs
- They lay white eggs, usually 2 or 3
- Both partners take it in turns to sit on the eggs to keep them warm until they hatch
- The eggs hatch after about 18 days



© Graham Roberts

Swift Chicks

- When the chicks hatch, they are blind and have no feathers
- Many times a day, their parents bring their chicks balls of 300-500 insects
- This ball of insects is called a 'bolus' and is held in a big pouch in their throat
- The chicks open their eyes about 6 days after hatching
- Their feathers grow and they get quite fat



© Graham Roberts



© Ulrich Tigges

Swift chicks in their nest

- Chicks have an area of white around their beaks so the parents can see them in the dark nests
- They also have a white line along the edge of their feathers

- **The chicks stop eating and lose weight before they leave the nest - you can't fly if you are too fat!**
- **They do push-ups on their wings and tails to make them strong enough for flying**
- **Once they can hold a push-up for 10 seconds and they weigh about 40 grams, they are ready to fly away**
- **They are 6-8 weeks old when they fledge (leave the nest)**





- Young birds can be 100s of miles south only 2 days after leaving their nests
- After they leave the nest, ***they can keep flying for up to 2-3 years*** until they are ready to make a nest, find a partner, and raise a family
- The year before they breed, they check out a possible nest site by flying up to it and having a look. They are called 'bangers' because they bang against the nest site



Swift flying back to its nest with ball of insects 'bolus' in the pouch of its throat to feed its chicks.

© Piotr Szpypa

'Traditional' nest sites



© Ove Claesson

- These are found mostly in old urban buildings
- Usually, their nests are in spaces under roofs or in small holes in walls
- And in the stone walls of some historical buildings such as castles
- You might not realise the nest is there because they do not leave a mess under the nest site

So what's the Problem?

- Swifts nest in old buildings
- Old buildings are being knocked down or repaired inadvertently destroying nest sites
- New buildings have no nooks and crannies for Swifts
- They are 100% faithful to their nest site and return there every year
- So when Swifts arrive back from Africa to raise a new family, they find their nesting places have gone - *they are homeless!*
- Swifts feed on insects whose numbers are declining because of pesticide use

So how can we all help Swifts?

- Leave existing nest sites undisturbed
- When repairing buildings, make sure new access holes match exactly the location of the old ones
- Build nest boxes into the walls of new buildings because they will last a long time - see page 24 and visit www.swiftconservation.ie for more information
- If you can't build-in nest boxes then put up external nest boxes - see page 27
- Survey your town buildings for Swift nest sites - see page 33
- Don't use insecticides/pesticides because swifts feed on insects
- Contact Swift Conservation Ireland if you'd like information on how to help your local swifts, swiftconservationireland@gmail.com

Built-in Nest Boxes



Built-in Schwegler 17a nest boxes at Westport Town Hall, Co. Mayo

The best type of nest box project is when the nest boxes are built into the structure of a building because they are long-term

Note: Swifts don't leave a mess under their nest



**Swifts exploring Westport
Town Hall nest boxes**

Woodstone Swift Nest Box Deep

(made by Vivara Pro)



Ballinrobe National School, nest boxes installed



Wall rendered and painted

For more information visit www.swiftconservation.ie

External Nest Boxes Made in Ireland

They have perfect nest entrance size of 29-30mm x 65mm



www.genesisnestboxes.ie



www.nestboxireland.com

Attraction Calls at Nestbox Locations

It is essential to play the attraction calls to help Swifts find nest boxes.



The calls should be played from 1st May to 31st August.

All day is best or from 8 to 11am and 8 to 11pm every day.

The Irish Wildlife Act requires a licence to play attraction calls.

All Swift Conservation Ireland associated projects are covered by their annual national licence.

Attraction call systems can be purchased from www.genesisnestboxes.ie

More information and advice at www.swiftconservation.ie

Myths and Legends

Aspects of Naming Traditions in Swift Culture

by 'The Swift Whisperer'

Swifts don't have to use names as most of their communication is done by telepathy and signing. But it is an important part of their identity and essential for establishing them as part of the Great Swift Saga. As soon as they hatch, their parents whisper their name to them. It is never again spoken aloud. The other Swifts know that a new name has been allocated and they celebrate by have a screaming party.

Traditional names reflect their environment and Swiftal qualities :

Air dancer

Cloud skimmer

Cloud surfer

Grace wings

Loop lover

Moonbeamer

Rainbow runner

Sky jiver

Sky sprite

Star guide

Star swimmer

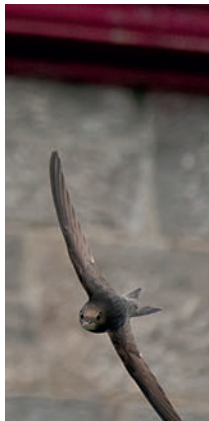
Storm wings

Sun slider

Thermal rider

Wind chaser

Nicknames such as Midge Masher and Bug Buster sometimes emerge but these are short-lived and the traditional names preferred.



Saving 'SWIFT HEART'

Pat Fahy is a biodiversity champion in his home town of Westport. One July morning he was helping the Tidy Towns crew. He bent down to pick up a piece of litter on the path below an old mill building. On closer inspection, Pat realised it was a bird, but no ordinary bird, it was a beautiful young Swift that had fallen from its nest too young to fly. He named it *Swift Heart*.

Pat had to think fast, what to do with *Swift Heart!* The nest site was too high to reach and the entrance hole too small to put the bird back into its nest.

Pat knew he mustn't leave *Swift Heart* on the ground or she would die.



He scooped her up and placed her in a small, ventilated, cardboard box.

With help from Swift Conservation Mayo, *Swift Heart* was fed the special food she needed of juicy wax worms,

cricket bodies and flies. Ten days later she reached the healthy weight of 40g and her wings had grown so that they crossed over when she folded them. She was ready to be set free.

On a bright, breezy morning *Swift Heart* was held in the palm of an outstretched hand with the wind blowing in her face and without hesitation she took off and soared higher and higher to join her Swift friends.

What joy for Pat to see *Swift Heart* fly free knowing that in a few weeks time she'd be in Africa until her return to Ireland next May.



Livestream of GMIT Swifts

GMIT Mayo Green Campus installed 12 nest boxes for Swifts in 2012.

You can visit the college to see them at any time and you can follow the 'livestream' from these nest boxes from May to September every year.

For 2018, 2019 and 2020 a total of 32 chicks were successfully raised.



© Martin Leak

Swift entering Schwegler Nestbox



www.swiftconservation.ie/gmit-swiftcams

Recording Swift Sightings and Nest Site Locations

Citizen science is vital for collecting information about Swift nest site locations. This information can help protect swift colonies in the event of proposed building renovation work.

Ireland's National Biodiversity Data Centre has a recording portal dedicated to the Swift.

<https://records.biodiversityireland.ie/record/swifts>



In Northern Ireland you can submit records to the
Centre for Environmental Data and Recording.

More information can be found on the National Museum of NI website
www.nmni.com

Some useful websites

www.swiftconservation.ie

www.genesisnestboxes.ie

www.nestboxireland.com

www.saveourswifts.co.uk (Northern Ireland Swift group)

www.birdwatchireland.ie/birds/swift/

actionforswifts.blogspot.com

www.swift-conservation.org

www.commonswift.org

www.mauerseglar.com

www.irishwildlifematters.ie

www.wildlifelifehospital.ie

A Swift on the ground needs help

A 'grounded' Swift is unlikely to be able to take off on its own and needs to be rescued.

What to do:

Place it in a small cardboard box with ventilation holes and then get advice from:

WRI Wildlife Hospital
0818 877766 or 01 6877766

www.irishwildlifematters.ie/rehabilitators/

swiftconservationireland@gmail.com

Lynda Huxley 094 9032422





Produced by Lynda Huxley and based
on material from **Action for Swifts**

Contact: swiftconservationireland@gmail.com

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