

The Common Swift: meet one of the UK's most iconic species – *they can even fly when they are asleep!*

By Becky Ingham, CEO, Action for Swifts

Often mistaken for swallows and house martins, the common swift (*Apus apus* – meaning 'footless') is the one species of Apodidae found in Britain and they are not related. In fact, the closest relative of the swift is the hummingbird.

Over-wintering in Africa, they arrive in Britain from late April to early May to breed, after a 3500-mile migration, their piercing screams and scythe-like black silhouettes filling the skies until August.

The return to our skies was captured perfectly in Ted Hughes 1973 poem....

*"Fifteenth of May. Cherry blossom. The swifts
Materialise at the tip of a long scream
Of needle. 'Look! They're back! Look!' And they're gone
On a steep
Controlled scream of skid
Round the house-end and away under the cherries.
Gone."*

Reaching nearly 70mph, they are the fastest bird species in level flight – the peregrine in a dive outpacing them at 200mph. They rarely land, finding it difficult to take off again. They spend almost their entire lives in the air – eating, mating, bathing, and sleeping on the wing.

Swifts eat as many as 12,000 flying insects every day. Sleeping in flight is made possible by switching off one half of their brain during sleep, so one half can rest while the other stays active. The only time they stop flying is to lay and incubate eggs, which take 2-3 weeks to hatch, with young birds fledging at around 6-8 weeks. Pairs stay together for life and generally return to the same nesting sites. Although naturally occurring holes in trees and cliffs could be used, British populations are generally reliant on buildings, nesting in small gaps under eaves or in roofs.

Swift Decline?

The population of swifts fell by nearly 70% between 1995 and 2021, and they are now on the Birds of Conservation Concern Red List. A shortage of nesting sites in modern buildings is undoubtedly one of the factors in this decline.



A local Coltishall-based company is trying to reverse their fortune. Action for Swifts Trading (AfS) manufactures the **S Brick** and works with industry to encourage installation of swift bricks in new-build housing. Recently made mandatory in Scotland, this has been the topic of a parliamentary debate and campaign since 2022 in England.

S Bricks can be easily installed in new-builds or retrofitted. We can usually match your brickwork exactly, keeping the look neutral. Swifts naturally seek out crevices, so installing S Bricks at height under the eaves provides a safe and natural-feeling nest for them. There may be other factors contributing to the overall population decline, but this is a very easy way to help.

S Bricks have been fitted locally at the Crocus Homes Bure Gardens development, along with bat bricks. Crocus Homes and AfS have funded the installation of swift boxes, a caller system and nest cameras at Coltishall Primary School.

Action for Swifts Trading website has a full range of products available at www.actionforswifts.com. They are always happy to provide advice or bespoke solutions for your building project.

If you find a grounded swift:

1. NEVER 'launch' a swift in the air
2. Bring the swift indoors. House in a deep plastic container, or a ventilated shoe box, lined with a folded tea towel. Keep the swift in a quiet room.
3. NEVER feed it
4. REHYDRATE carefully by placing a damp cotton wool bud to the side of the swift's beak. Take care to avoid the nostrils and don't try to open the beak as they break easily.

5. Contact local swift rehabber Claire. Texts, calls, WhatsApp to 07773 226963 or Becky 07535 270077

Below left: swift brick installed in Bure Gardens, Coltishall

Below right: swift leaving stone S Brick, pic Paul Wren

