

## Swifts

Swifts are enigmatic birds. Apart from when they are breeding they live their lives on the wing – feeding, collecting nest material, sleeping and even mating in the air, often up very high. You never see a perched swift – they never sit on wires or come to the ground – in fact they have difficulty taking off from the ground. However they can cling to on vertical surfaces such as walls, and they often need to do this in order to approach their nesting sites, which can typically be just under the lowest part of a roof on a building. They often access such sites through a narrow gap in the eaves. (Incidentally such sites are also much beloved of House Sparrows and Starlings.) Such roofs are typically only available on older-style or poorly-maintained buildings.



This habit of nesting in “old fashioned” open style roofs is thought to be the cause of a big swift population crash in the UK. Many houses have had their roofs replaced, or made enclosed so that creatures cannot access them, thus removing potential nest sites. And the trouble with Swifts is that they seem to be rather fussy – many Swift nest boxes are supplied to replace these lost spaces and remain unused. Part of the problem is that they like to nest in colonies so of course starting a new one is a bit of challenge!

Swifts in the UK are almost entirely dependent on man-made structures. But of course it cannot have always been this way. Our buildings would only have been suitable for swifts once they became solid structures with tile or slate roofs – so perhaps only a few hundred years. Before that, and in some areas where they breed in Europe and Asia where suitable man-made structures are not available, they nest in crevices in cliffs and in tree holes. So although the Swift is being mourned as a bird in steep decline, maybe it is just going back to its original population levels. Many of us can remember huge parties of screaming Swifts in our town centres 50 years ago which are no longer present or much reduced. Maybe this was a time when the Swift population just happened to be at a peak with a large number of suitable buildings with the right kind of roof structure.

It is thought that Swifts once nested in Marloes. Certainly they were seen there quite regularly in the early 2000s and are still seen there now occasionally. Multistorey nest boxes have been provided on the side of the village hall, but are, as yet unused, as are other nest boxes in the village. Swifts are also seen near St Brides Castle – do they nest there? It is hard to prove breeding as you have to spot a bird zooming quickly into its nest hole, and they don't visit very often. (They accumulate insects in a pouch under their beak so don't need to visit the nest to feed chicks very frequently.)

So lastly, how do you identify a Swift? Well they are dark plumaged all over, including the belly, unlike Swallows and House Martins. And they will be flying, often very fast. They have long wings and a short tail. They may be screaming, which is how you usually find out that they are present. And they are always very exciting to see!

Rosemary Royle

*PS It is undoubtedly true that the crash in insect populations will also be affecting Swifts, not just the lack of nest sites. The same factors are also thought to be true for House Sparrows.*