

Similar Species

Swifts can be confused with a couple of other species, particularly the Barn Swallow and House Martin. However, there are some noticeable differences to help identify each of these species:

- Swifts are larger and have boomerang shaped wings when flying;
- Swifts are brown in colour (often appearing black against the sky), lacking any obvious white parts;
- Swifts have loud screaming/screeching calls, most noticeable in late evening when they fly in groups through the streets of towns and cities;
- Swifts will never perch on telegraph wires or fences; they have tiny feet and legs and can hardly walk.



House Martin



Barn Swallow

About BirdWatch Ireland

BirdWatch Ireland is the largest independent conservation organisation in Ireland. A registered charity, its aim is the conservation of wild birds and their natural habitats. Established in 1968, it has over 15,000 members and a growing network of 30 local branches. It manages nature reserves which protect threatened habitats and the wildlife that relies on them, works to conserve Ireland's biodiversity, produces a range of media to raise wider awareness of nature conservation in Ireland, and carries out important education, survey and research work.

BirdWatch Ireland is the official Irish partner of BirdLife International, the world's largest partnership of conservation organisations, which strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity.

Local Contact Information

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Acknowledgements and copyrights

BirdWatch Ireland would like to acknowledge the Swift Conservation Organization (www.swift-conservation.org) for their help in putting this leaflet together. We also wish to acknowledge the following copyright holders who kindly allowed us to use their images in this leaflet:

Swift front cover © David Moreton, Swift in the hand © Dick Coombes, Man on ladder © Beth Hales, House Martin © Stephen Sheridan, Barn Swallow © Stephen McAvoy



The Swift



By providing suitable nesting sites, you can help to save this amazing bird. This information leaflet explains how.

About the swift

- Swifts can travel up to 4.8 million kilometers in their lifetime.

- They can live for up to 21 years.

- They eat, sleep and mate on the wing, landing only when nesting.

- They spend the winter in Africa and come to Ireland to breed and raise their young in the summer months.

- Swifts are nest site faithful, returning to the same nest site year after year.



- Swifts normally arrive back to Ireland in early May from their wintering grounds and the majority will have departed again by late August.



- Nest sites in Ireland are generally found in old buildings such as churches, castles and houses, where they often nest under the eaves of the roof in loose colonies.

- They only produce one brood of young per year. Normally 2-3 white eggs are laid at intervals of 2-3 days and incubation takes about 19-20 days before they hatch.

- Swifts eat insects, which they catch on the wing. They will sometimes travel a long distance to feed. Insects such as flies, gnats and aphids are fed in vast quantities to their young until they fledge somewhere between 40-50 days.

- Swifts are very clean birds at the nest site and, unlike some other species, do not create a mess.

Swifts in Decline

Swift numbers are in decline in Ireland. Although we don't yet fully understand the exact causes of this decline, it is thought the loss of nest sites is a major factor. Modern building techniques and renovations to old buildings, particularly the installation of new fascia and soffits, block up existing holes and crevices used by Swifts for nesting.

Unfortunately, once a nest site is lost to a breeding pair of Swifts it may be many years before that pair will breed again.



Helping the Swift

We can help Swifts to nest in our buildings (domestic and commercial), without any adverse effects on the building.

All that is needed is a simple nestbox or hole in a suitably sized living space. Once well built and installed, boxes will need no maintenance or cleaning.

When replacing the fascia and soffit, if you suspect that there could be existing swift nests, you can allow the swifts to continue using this nest by cutting a small hole in the soffit at the existing entrances as shown in the photograph on the preceding page.

This should be done by a trained person. You can use the contact information overleaf to get assistance.

Alternatively, swift nest boxes can be installed underneath the existing nest as shown in the photograph below.

It is important to note that under the Wildlife Act it is an offence to disturb a nest during the breeding season, so any such work must be done outside of the breeding season.

