

Updated in 2025



WE ARE SWIFTS - WE ARE IN TROUBLE

Swift not to be confused with Swallows:



Swallow



© O.Panchetto/Shutterstock

Swallows build a mud nest in outbuildings and perch on wires - Swifts do not.

They have a pale breast and long tail streamers - Swifts do not.

Swift not to be confused with House Martin:



**House
Martin**



© Erni/Shutterstock

House Martins build a mud nest under the eaves of houses and perch on wires – Swifts do not!

They have a 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 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 800kms a day.

During their lives, they fly about 3 million kms -
equivalent to more than four trips
to the Moon and back!

© Luc Viatour/www.Lucnix.be



© Amir Ben Dov



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

Here is Home!

- They come home to Europe each summer to breed
- They arrive in this country at the end of April/beginning of May
- They start to make their way to Africa in August/September
- They go to Africa during the European winter to feed on the insects but they DO NOT breed there
- The migration round trip is around 20,000 kilometres!

-  Southward migration
-  Northward migration
-  Winter range and movements



© Michéál Casey

A life on the Wing!

- At night the non-breeding birds sleep while flying as high as 3,000 metres
- The breeding birds approach their nest at more than 60km per hour
- Swifts do not usually land on the ground because it is very difficult for them to take off
- Their feet and claws have evolved so that they can cling to vertical surfaces but cannot perch on wires or branches

**A 'screaming party' of Swifts at Lough Lannagh
Leisure Centre in Castlebar, Co Mayo where there are
23 built-in Swift nest boxes**



- They are one of the very best fliers
- They have very rapid wing-beats: 10 wing-beats per second, followed by gliding and zooming about at very high speed, usually screaming as they go
- They can be seen flying around the buildings of our towns and villages in noisy social groups known as 'screaming parties'

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



Swift Chicks

- When the chicks hatch, they are blind and have no feathers
- Many times a day, their parents bring their chicks balls of 300-800 insects and spiders
- 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 thin white line along the outer edge of each feather which adult Swifts tend not to have

- 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)



© Michéál Casey

- Young birds can be 100s of kms away only a few days after they fledge (leave) the nest
- After fledging they have to keep flying for up to 2-3 years until they are ready to find their own nest site 'home', find a partner and raise a family
- The year before a Swift wants to breed it starts to check out potential nest sites by flying up to them and having a look
- These birds are referred to as 'bangers' because they fly up to the potential nest site and bang against it with their body



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

Swift entering a nest site



- 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 and habitat loss

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 pages 30-34 and visit www.swiftconservation.ie for more information
- If you can't build-in nest boxes then put up external nest boxes - see pages 28-29
- Survey your town buildings for Swift nest sites - see page 41
- 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

How to help Swifts – Nest Box Projects

Swifts nest in the same place for life and they usually live in colonies

External Nest Boxes

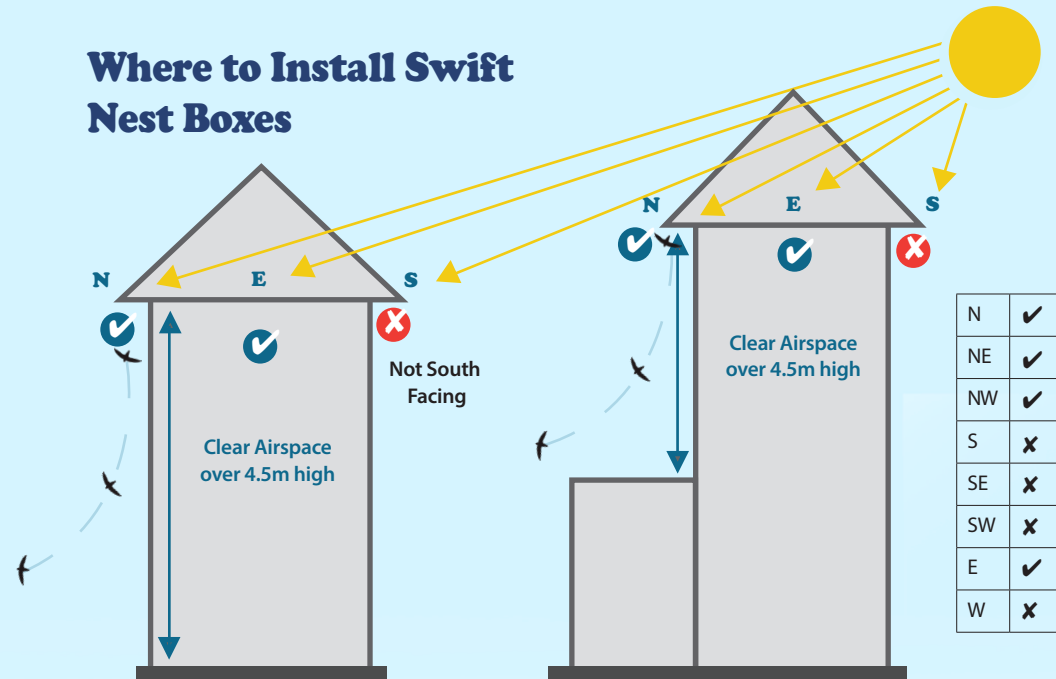
- Nest boxes can be fixed to the outside of existing buildings. These are known as 'External' nest boxes
- Because Swifts nest in the same place for life it's best to use a nest box material that will last long time e.g. at least 10 years

Built-in Nest Boxes

- Nest Boxes can be built into the walls of new buildings
- Because Swifts nest in the same place for life built-in nest boxes provide the most secure long-term solution

For detailed information on types of nest boxes available for External and Built-in boxes you can find the document "Which Box" on the Swift Conservation Ireland website www.swiftconservation.ie

Where to Install Swift Nest Boxes



DO

- ✓ Minimum 4.5 metres (ideally higher) above nearest horizontal surface e.g. ground or flat roof
- ✓ Use the best nest entrance hole size 29mm (max 30mm) by 65mm. This is to try to prevent birds such as Starlings from entering and using the nest box
- ✓ Under eaves if possible to give protection from weather and predators
- ✓ Facing North, East, North East or North West
- ✓ Installing a Swift Attraction Call system is essential to help prospecting birds find the nest boxes (see page 35)
- ✓ Provide an adequate nest compartment size that can house a family of 5 full-sized Swifts (2 adults and 3 chicks) e.g. 15.5cm wide x 15.5cm high x 32cm long. Adults will spend nearly every night in the nest with the chicks right up to fledging. Close to fledging time the chicks spread out their wings fully and do push-up exercises to strengthen their muscles ready for flight

DON'T

- ✗ No Bright spotlights near the boxes or shining onto the boxes because this can hinder visibility for birds entering nest boxes and for birds leaving boxes
- ✗ Not near large windows to avoid any chance of birds flying into the glass. Birds are unable to perceive glass as a barrier and daytime collisions are often due to birds being attracted to reflections of trees, sky etc
- ✗ Not in strong sunlight e.g. Not South Facing and only West if site is well shaded
- ✗ Not obstructed by trees or other buildings
- ✗ Not within 4 metres of waving flags and not near wall-mounted flagpoles
- ✗ Not below 4.5 metres

External Nest Boxes - Special Note

- Sloping roofed boxes give protection from predators
- Use strong, corrosion-resistant fixtures e.g. stainless steel
- The fledging chicks only have one chance to fly off successfully so ensuring nest box location has none of the Don'ts on page 27 is very important
- Swifts are colonial nesters, so it is best to install several nest boxes
- Nest boxes entrance holes that are forward facing and several cms above the box floor will not have droppings on the ground below the nest box
- Nest boxes with downwards facing entrance holes usually have droppings on the ground below the nest box and there is also the increased risk that chicks can accidentally fall out of the nest box.

External Nest Boxes – Special Note

- Swifts nest in the same nest site for life so the nest box should be of durable material that can withstand the wet, Irish weather e.g. woodstone, woodcrete, uPVC, Polymer



Action For Swifts

Waterproof moulded polymer with insulated roof



Vivara Pro GZ 10

Made from Woodstone and with sloping roof

Built-in Nest Boxes – Special Note

Building nest boxes into the walls of new buildings provides long-term secure nest sites for Swifts

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



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



Swifts exploring the Built-in Nest Boxes at Westport Town Hall, Co. Mayo

Built-in Nest Boxes



GZ 03 nest boxes installed



Wall rendered and painted

For more information visit www.swiftconservation.ie

St Mary's Secondary School, Ballina, Co. Mayo. In 2021, twenty-four Vivara Pro GZ 03 nest boxes were built-into the new school building. In 2025, twenty of these nest boxes were occupied by Swifts.



Which Box?

You can find the document “Which Box?” on www.swiftconservation.ie under the tab ‘Nest Box & Nest Site Advice’

In Ireland the woodstone/woodcrete external and build-in nest box models used by Swift Conservation Ireland can be purchased from www.quickcrop.ie

Polymer and uPVC nest boxes can be purchased from Action for Swifts in the UK www.actionforswifts.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
- Speaker should be located close to the nest boxes
- Play calls at half volume. Too loud can damage the speaker and distort the call

Where to buy attraction calls:

Peak Boxes in the UK make a good quality attraction call system. You can buy this directly from them www.peakboxes.co.uk or in Ireland from www.quickcrop.ie

For advice on an attraction call system for built-in nest box projects email swiftconservationireland@gmail.com



Myths and Legends

Aspects of Naming Traditions in Swift Culture

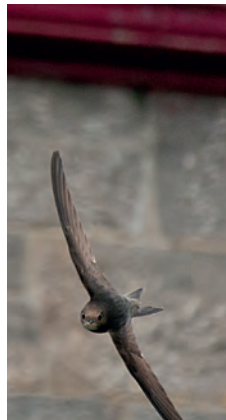
by 'The Swift Whisperer'

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	Moonbeamer	Star swimmer
Cloud skimmer	Rainbow runner	Storm wings
Cloud surfer	Sky jiver	Sun slider
Grace wings	Sky sprite	Thermal rider
Loop lover	Star guide	Wind chaser

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



We Are Swifts.

I am a swift, that's what I do
Swiftling, swooping, swerving.

Observing

Gnats, midges and bugs
Food for me, food for chicks

Chicks to feed, fatten and teach
Then off I fly, out of reach

No time for hugs or a sweet lullaby
All that matters is fly fly fly

No helping wing for my daughter or son
It's head for the clouds and on on on

For some it's the end of the swiftling dream
But for most it's the joyful swoop and scream

We are swifts, it's what we do
Swiftling, swooping, swerving

By The Swift Whisperer



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.



ATU Mayo Save our Swifts Project

ATU Mayo Green Campus installed nest boxes for Swifts in 2012.

Between May and September each year you can visit the campus to see the Swifts screaming around the courtyard where the nest boxes are located. All 18 nest boxes are fitted with tiny cameras and you can follow the 'livestream' of the breeding Swifts on the ATU website. The breeding behaviour is recorded each year for research projects.

For 2018, 2019 and 2020 a total of 32 chicks were successfully raised and fledged at this project.



© Martin Leak

Swift entering Schwegler Nestbox

Contact swiftconservationireland@gmail.com for more information on viewing the livestream

Recording Swift Nest Locations in Ireland

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

General Information:

www.swiftconservation.ie

www.swift-conservation.org

www.commonswift.org

<http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com>

<https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds/swift/>

Suppliers:

www.quickcrop.ie

www.actionforswifts.com



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:

www.swiftconservation.ie

www.kwr.ie

www.irishwildlifematters.ie

www.mauerseglar.com

<http://falciothnegre.com>

swiftconservationireland@gmail.com

Lynda Huxley 094 9032422





NPWS

An tSeirbhís Páircanna
Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra
National Parks and Wildlife
Service



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

Contact: **swiftconservationireland@gmail.com**

Lynda Huxley 094 9032422

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