



I AM A SWIFT

I AM IN TROUBLE

# Swift not to be confused with:



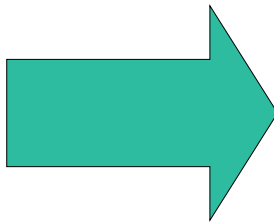
**Swallow**



**House Martin**

Both have large areas of pale colour. Swifts do not.  
Unlike Swallows and Martins, Swifts do not perch on wires.

# Since you were born



The number of swifts visiting England has almost halved

# WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

They are

- ancient
- amazing
- mysterious
- very very fast
- threatened by us



# SOME FACTS ABOUT SWIFTS

- They eat, drink, preen, sleep and mate while flying
- Their scientific name is *Apus apus*.
- That means “no foot no foot”.
- Actually, they have small feet with sharp claws which they only use at their nest site



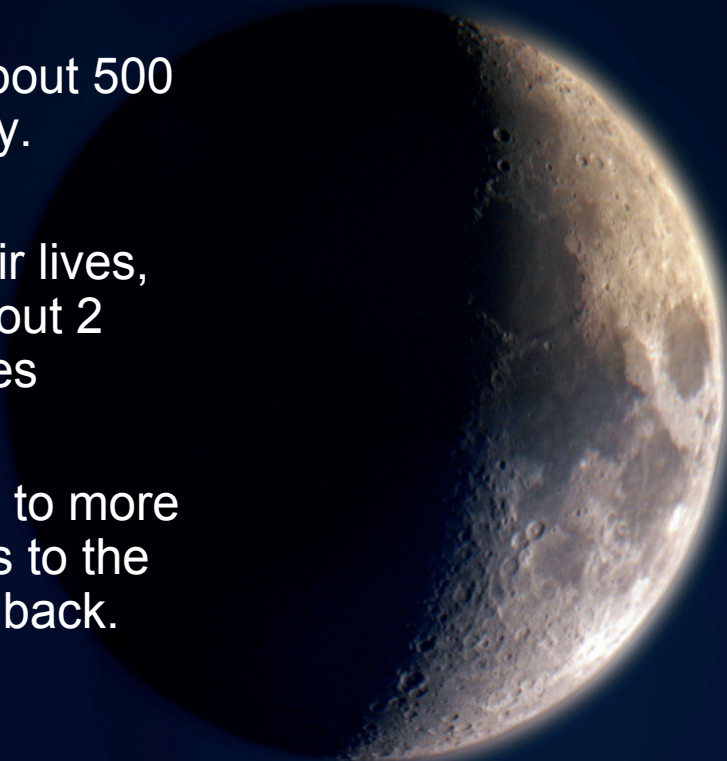
Photo © Marc Guyt / [www.agami.nl](http://www.agami.nl)

- Swifts have been around a long time
- One of their ancestors who died 49 million years ago was found in Germany. They haven't changed very much in all that time.



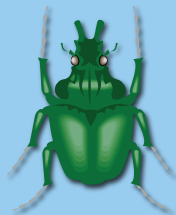
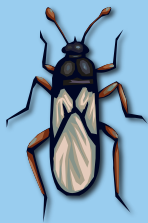
Photo © Ulrich Tigges

- They fly about 500 miles a day.
- During their lives, they fly about 2 million miles
- Equivalent to more than 4 trips to the moon and back.





They eat flying insects like flies, mosquitoes, greenflies and bees (drones) as well as airborne spiders.





- They come to Europe each summer
- They make their way back to Africa at the end of July
- They return to England in early May
- A round trip of 14,000 miles!

The route taken by  
a Cambridge Swift



- 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 “screaming parties” round the houses – the highest speed is 67.5 mph in a screaming party, the highest speed recorded for any bird in powered flight.



# A “screaming party”



- They can fly as high as 3,000 metres
- They approach their nests at more than 40 miles per hour, only slowing down at the very last moment.
- If they fall to the ground, they can take off again if they are fit and healthy. If not, they can take off if you hold them high in the palm of your hand.



# FAMILY LIFE

- Swifts usually stay with the same partners for their whole lives.
- They can live for at least 30 years.
- Mostly, their nests are in spaces under roofs and nooks and crannies in old buildings.



Photo © Ove Claesson

- They catch bits of stuff from the air, like feathers, leaves, petals and bits of paper, then stick them together to make a nice cosy place to lay their eggs inside their nests.



Photo © Graham Roberts

- 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, parents bring the chicks balls of 300-500 insects collected in a big pouch under the beak.
- The chicks open their eyes about 6 days after hatching.
- Their feathers grow and they get quite fat.



Photo © Graham Roberts



Photo © Ulrich Tigges

Swift chicks in their nest. Chicks have an area of white around their beaks so their parents can see them in their dark nests.





## Swift with pouch full of insects

Photo © David Moreton

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- The chicks stop eating and lose weight before they leave the nest – you can't fly if you're 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 can weigh up to 45 grams, they are ready to fly away.
- They are 6-8 weeks old when they leave.



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



# SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

- Swifts nest in old buildings
- Old buildings are being knocked down or repaired
- New buildings have no nooks and crannies for swifts
- So when swifts arrive back from Africa to raise a new family, they find their nesting places have gone – ***they are homeless!***

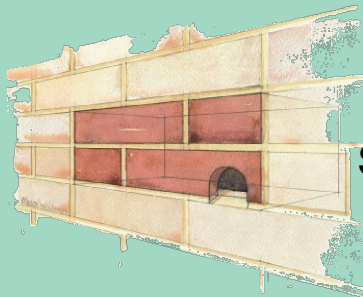
# WHAT YOU CAN DO?

- Tell everybody how wonderful Swifts are
- Tell everyone that Swifts eat huge quantities of mosquitoes and other insects
- Watch them for the short time they are here, learn about them and enjoy them

# 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
- When providing new nest sites make internal nest spaces as they last longer
- If you can't make internal spaces, put up nest boxes (see next page)
- Tell bird conservation organisations (see page 27) where you see swifts nesting

# NEST BOXES



Swift brick

Colony  
box



Internal

External



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# Amnonn's Story

Amnonn worked in a smelly noisy motorbike garage in Israel. He went paragliding in his spare time to be free, in peace and in the fresh air. He was so good that he reached the final of a national competition.



Everyone was losing height. Amnonn saw some swifts and joined them. There were swifts all around him spiralling upwards in a thermal. He went up too: he fell in love with them. And, he won the competition!



- Amnonn has, since then, devoted his life to swift conservation.
- The people of Israel are now very aware of the need to help swifts.
- They hold an annual welcoming ceremony at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem to mark the start of the breeding season.



# Cambridge City Council Swift Tower



In 2011, a swift tower was built on Logan's Meadow Nature Reserve. Andrew Merritt, the designer of the tower, said his inspiration was the African sun, which Swifts see for most of the year until they come North to nest. The tower provides nests for about 100 pairs of Swifts (and for some bats). In 2014, for the first time, Swifts were seen entering and leaving the tower.

# SOME SWIFT WEBSITES



[www.swift-conservation.org](http://www.swift-conservation.org)  
[www.rspb.org.uk/helpswifts](http://www.rspb.org.uk/helpswifts)  
[actionforswifts.blogspot.com](http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com)

*Action for Swifts*



2<sup>nd</sup> edition, September 2014  
Contact: [actionforswifts@gmail.com](mailto:actionforswifts@gmail.com)  
Coverpage photo © Tom Lindroos

*Action for Swifts*