



Supporting Swifts and House Martins



A Practical Guide

Supported by:





Introduction

Swifts and house martins are some of our most loved summer visitors – that swooping flight and excited chattering is part of what makes warm evenings in Cheltenham feel alive. Sadly, both species are in decline as modern buildings and renovations remove the nesting spaces they depend on.

Charlton Kings is lucky to have a local Swift & House Martin Group who are working to protect these birds and help them thrive. They can offer advice, supply swift nest boxes, and in some cases help with installation too, so you don't have to figure it all out on your own





Identifying Swifts & House Martins

Swifts

Statistics

Length: 16-17cm

Wingspan: 45cm

Weight: 44g

Average lifespan: 9 years



Classified in the UK as Red under the Birds of Conservation Concern 5: the Red List for Birds (2021).

About

Swifts spend most of their lives soaring high in the sky, only ever landing to nest. They are easy to spot as they look like an arrow whirling through the sky, and often fly in groups. Originally, they would have nested in trees or cliffs but now prefer the roofs of old buildings like churches. Swifts spend the winter in Africa but travel to Britain every year in April and May.

They feast on small flying insects by catching them in flight. Insects collect in a special pouch at the back of the swift's throat, where they are bound together by saliva until they form a kind of pellet known as a bolus, which can be regurgitated and fed to chicks. One single bolus can contain over 300 insects, with some holding over 1,000!

How to identify

The swift is black all over, with a small, pale patch on its throat. Looking a bit like a boomerang when in the air, it is very sociable and can often be spotted in groups wheeling over roofs and calling to each other with high-pitched screams. It is larger than swallows and martins (which have white undersides) and, unlike them, does not perch on wires, buildings or trees.

Distribution

A common and widespread summer visitor.

Did you know?

Swifts spend almost all of their lives on the wing, even sleeping, drinking and mating while flying; they only land to nest.



Identifying Swifts & House Martins

House Martins

Statistics

Length: 13cm

Wingspan: 28cm

Weight: 19g

Average lifespan: 2 years



Classified in the UK as Red under the Birds of Conservation Concern 5: the Red List for Birds (2021).

About

The house martin is a common summer visitor to the UK, arriving in April and leaving in October. It builds mud nests, sometimes in small colonies, under ledges, on cliffs and, as their name suggests, under the eaves of houses. Both males and females help to build the nest, collecting mud from streams and ponds and building up layers with bill-sized pellets. House martins are commonly found in towns and villages, as well as in agricultural areas. They feed on flying insects and aphids.

How to identify

The house martin is glossy black above, completely white below, and has a white rump and a short, forked tail.

Distribution

Widespread.

Did you know?

House martins will return from their African wintering grounds to the same nesting sites each year. They can reuse their old nests, saving them about ten days' work collecting mud. So don't knock down that empty nest - you never know who might turn up to use it!



7 Ways to Help Swifts & House Martins

1. Provide nesting opportunities

Installing a swift box and/or house martin cups in the right place gives these birds a safe home year after year. Local groups can advise, supply and help install boxes if needed. Boxes should be fixed high up, with a clear flight path and ideally north or east facing to avoid overheating. For house martins, installing cups directly under eaves helps nest building. Best practice is to put up boxes September - March so you don't disturb nesting birds.

2. Encourage birds to find new boxes with calls

Playing swift or house martin attraction calls at key times (early morning and evening during the breeding season) can help birds discover nest sites more quickly.

3. Make your garden insect-friendly

Swifts and house martins eat flying insects, so increasing insect numbers is crucial. Plant a wide variety of flowering plants and grasses, and avoid pesticides.

4. Create wildlife-friendly habitats

Ponds or even small water features help insects thrive. Log piles, leaf litter and wild corners provide further insect habitat, which in turn feeds birds.

5. Record sightings and contribute data

You can log swift breeding or "screaming parties" on tools like [Swift Mapper](#), helping conservationists identify where nesting sites need protection or support. If you are in Charlton Kings - you can let the local group know by posting in their [Facebook Group](#).

6. Educate and inspire others

Sharing what you know about these remarkable birds and how to help them creates community momentum. Getting friends, neighbours or local groups involved amplifies impact.

7. Get involved with local groups

Joining or supporting a local swift/house martin group connects you with like-minded people and practical action - whether that's surveys, nest box projects, guided events or awareness campaigns. If you are in Charlton Kings, email shmsgck@gmail.com to find out more.