



Your guide to

Helping Swifts



From the savannas and forests of Africa, to the towns and cities of the UK – and back again – Swifts make one of nature's most incredible journeys. But they're in trouble. The RSPB is working hard to protect them and there are lots of ways that you can help them too. This guide provides lots of tips and advice.




What's so special about Swifts?

Swifts are summer visitors to the UK, flying more than 6,000 miles from south-east Africa to reach our shores by late April or early May. They only stay for a few months – just long enough to raise a family – before heading back again. In its lifetime, a Swift can fly around four million miles – that's like flying to the moon and back eight times!

Swifts are supreme flyers and hold the title of the fastest bird in level flight, reaching speeds of almost 70 miles per hour. They spend most of their life in the air – feeding, drinking, sleeping and even mating on the wing – and only land in order to nest.

Swifts begin breeding when they are two or three years old and pair for life. They nest high up in the eaves of buildings, squeezing into small gaps in walls and under roof tiles, and will return to the same nest each spring.

They eat a wide variety of small flying insects like mosquitoes, midges and also airborne spiders, catching up to 1,000 in one feeding trip. They drink by taking sips as they glide over water or by catching raindrops in the air. When necessary, Swifts will fly long distances each day to try to find food, avoiding storms and wet weather. If their parents struggle to find enough insects to feed to them, Swift chicks can go into a hibernation-like state called torpor for several days, allowing them



Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

Swifts (*Apus apus*)

UK conservation status Red

Length	16-17cm
Wingspan	42-48cm
Weight	36-50g

to ride out lean times. As they get ready to fledge the chicks do press-ups in the nest to prepare their muscles for the coming months of non-stop flight.

In summer, you might hear the loud screaming calls of groups of Swifts as they whizz around rooftops – these groups are known as ‘screaming parties’. Young birds are called ‘bangers’ because they bang their wings against the outside of a prospective nest site to see if it is occupied. This prompts any resident birds to come to the entrance and give their screaming call.

You can find out more about Swifts and their amazing lives on the [RSPB website](#).

click here to find out more



A loss of nest sites is likely to be a factor in the decline of Swifts.

Why are Swifts in trouble?

Between 1995 and 2020 Swift numbers plummeted by 60% in the UK and there are now thought to be around 59,000 breeding pairs left here. As a result of their decline, Swifts have joined the UK's Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern and the IUCN European Red List, indicating that the species is threatened and officially at risk of extinction.

We don't fully understand the reasons for this dramatic decline, but a major factor is likely to be the loss of traditional nesting sites in older buildings. Swifts will return to the same nest site each year and so when older buildings are renovated they can find themselves shut

out of their homes, or even find that they have been demolished completely. Without access to nooks and crannies in our buildings Swifts have nowhere to raise their young – they are completely dependent on our hospitality for their survival.

Although it is illegal to destroy active Swift nests, since they are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act, Swifts are sometimes killed when buildings they are nesting in are demolished or are blocked from returning to their nest site when they have eggs or young. Often, developers are unaware of their responsibilities or the simple, low-cost steps they can take to preserve nest sites.

60%
decline since 1995


At risk
of extinction

Nesting sites
are being lost



What can I do to support Swifts?

There are lots of practical ways that you can help Swifts in your neighbourhood, whether you're looking for quick and easy actions or you'd like to get involved in a bigger project. The following pages contain lots of ideas to help you make a difference to these amazing birds.

Small-scale action

Survey Swifts

Together with our partners [Action for Swifts](#), [Natural Aptitude](#), [Swift Conservation](#) and the [Swifts Local Network](#) we've developed [Swift Mapper](#); a web-based mapping system and mobile app that allows you to report your Swift sightings. Please keep your eyes peeled for Swifts disappearing into holes in buildings and groups of screaming Swifts whizzing around at roof height – this behaviour suggests that they are breeding nearby. By submitting your sightings you'll help to build a picture of where Swift nest sites need to be protected and where it would be best to provide new nest sites, allowing us to focus our conservation action in the right places.



Provide nest boxes

It's quite simple to fit nest boxes to buildings. Since Swifts arrive in the UK around the beginning of May, early spring is a great time to prepare and install new nesting sites. There are many ready-made nest boxes and Swift bricks to choose from, including a solid wood box available from the [RSPB shop](#).

The [Swift Conservation](#) website also provides links to a range of other options.

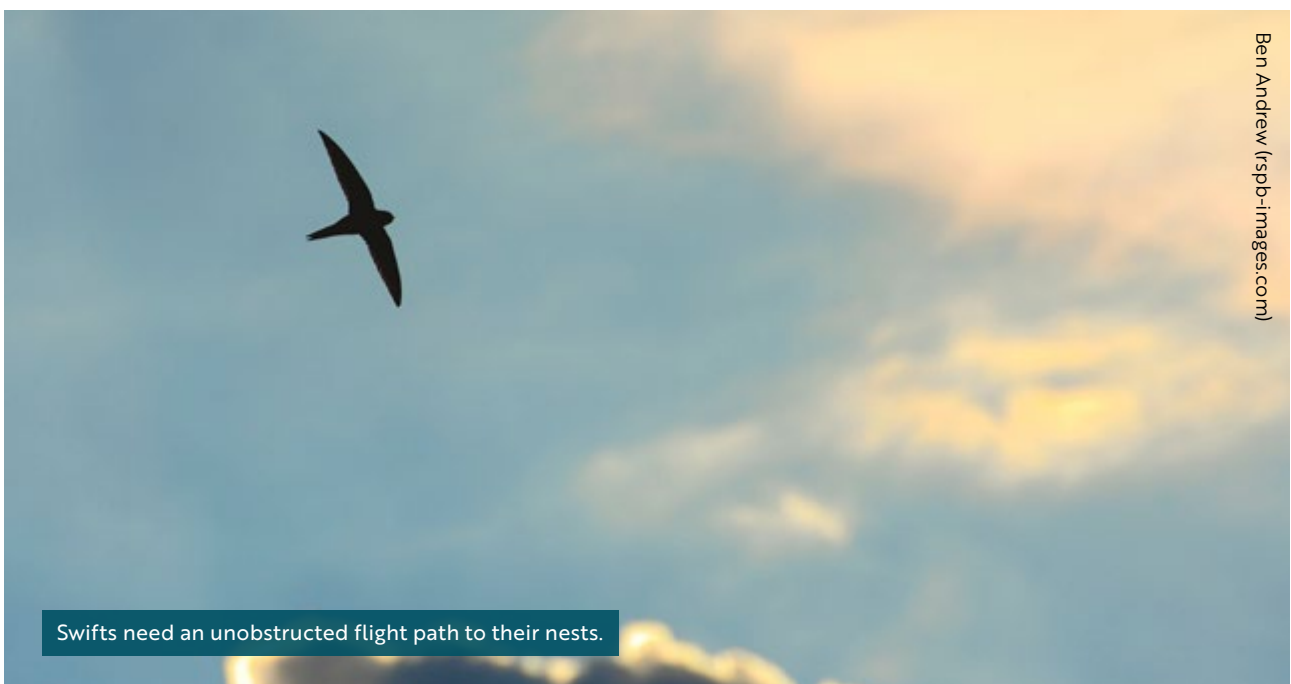
If you want to build your own nest box, several designs are available from [Swift Conservation](#), [Action for Swifts](#) and the [RSPB](#). Remember to observe all safety guidance when using tools.

Location, location, location

Whether you make your own nest boxes or buy them, it's important to site the box correctly so that Swifts can approach and access the nest easily. Here are the key factors to consider:

- The box should be positioned at least 4m, ideally 5m, above the ground on the vertical wall of a building. Below 4m, success rates decline.
- Flat-roofed nest boxes should go directly under eaves, so they don't gather water and develop damp patches. Boxes with pitched roofs can go anywhere suitable on walls, as they are designed to shed water.
- Ensure an unobstructed flight path to the nest site with no trees in the way.
- Position the box so that it faces between north and east, if possible, to avoid hot sun, rain and the prevailing wind. Sunnier sites are possible if boxes are insulated and painted white.
- Avoid fixing nest boxes near doors and windows, which may disturb the Swifts or provide perches for predators.
- Ideally, site multiple nest boxes 0.5–1m apart to support a small colony of Swifts.
- Nest boxes should be fitted with nest cups for the eggs to sit in. There is more information on these [here](#).

Always take care when installing Swift boxes, particularly when working at height and using ladders. Ensure that the work is carried out by someone with experience and carry out a risk assessment in advance. If possible, get help from a professional who will do paid work or, ideally, volunteer their services.



Play attraction calls

Once a nest box is in place, Swifts need a bit of help and encouragement to find it and set up home. You can do this by playing recordings of Swift calls from the nest area, which will draw in the Swifts to investigate a potential new nesting site. The [Swift Conservation online shop](#) sells an automatic Swift call MP3 player, powered by a phone charger, as well as downloadable MP3s of Swift calls. Other Swift calling devices can be found online.



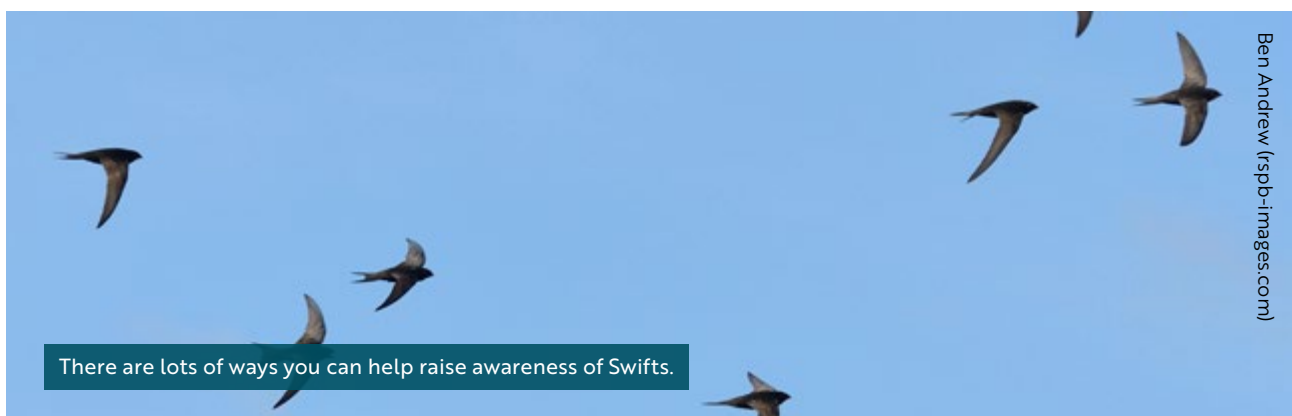
Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Raise awareness of Swifts

There are lots of ways you can help to raise awareness of Swifts. Here are just a few:

- Many people are unaware that they have Swifts living alongside them, so if you notice that Swifts are nesting in a building, let the occupiers know they are there and reassure them that Swifts are very clean and quiet tenants. It's also helpful to tell them that Swift nest sites need to be protected and that any building, roofing and other work requiring scaffolding should only be conducted outside the breeding season (May to August) and access to nests should be maintained.
- Give people information on what to do with [injured or grounded Swifts](#).
- Organise Swift talks for your community. Why not bring in a local expert to give a talk or arrange a Swift walk during [Swift Awareness Week](#) (normally held each July) taking people to see Swift 'hotspots' and telling them about the birds? Or perhaps you could set up a stall to promote Swifts.

Take a look at the [Swifts Over Macclesfield](#) Facebook page for some inspiration. This group involves RSPB adult and youth groups who spread the word about Swifts at various events and run a Swift nest box scheme.



Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Medium-scale action

Organise a Swift survey where you live

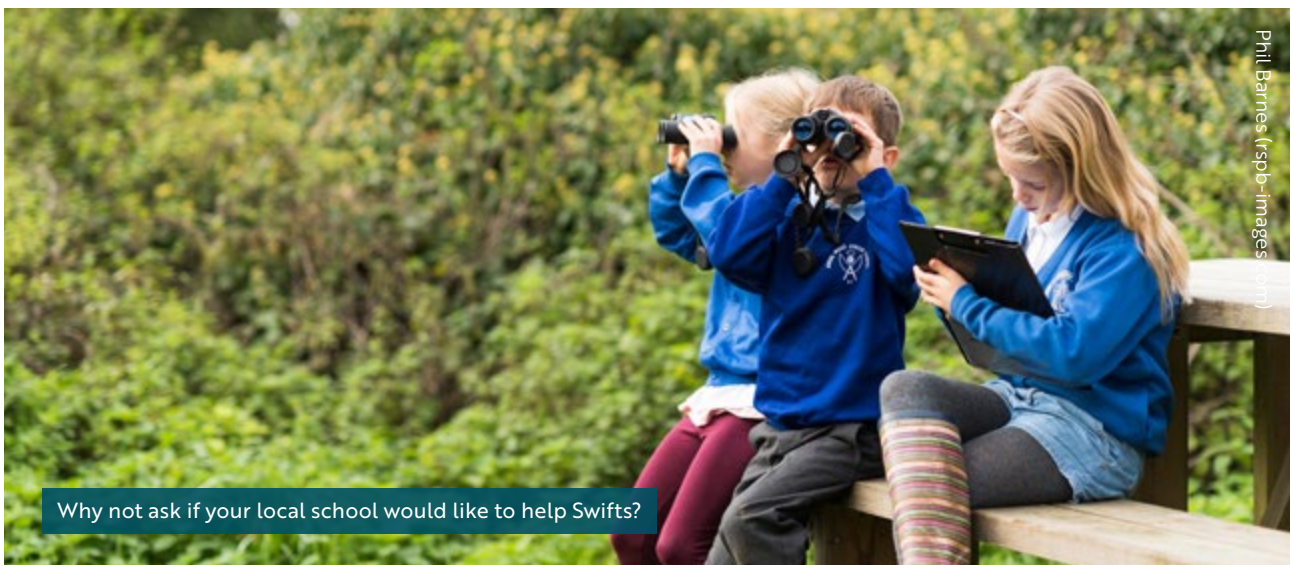
Recruit and help train volunteer surveyors to carry out a systematic survey of your area. Swift surveys take place in an allocated 500m x 500m square and should be conducted in the evenings from May to July, when Swifts are most likely to be flying low.

Swift Conservation have produced a [helpful leaflet](#) explaining how to conduct a Swift survey, and you'll also find lots of helpful advice in videos from [Oxford Swift City](#) and [Edinburgh Swift City](#). You can report your survey data on [Swift Mapper](#).

Engage your community

Traditional churches are the sort of high buildings where Swifts like to nest, so try approaching church groups in your area. In Lancashire, RSPB volunteers worked with the Diocese of Salford on a pilot scheme to install Swift boxes in one church. This resulted in multiple nests and the scheme is now being rolled out to more parishes. [Action for Swifts](#) have produced some helpful guidance specifically for churches.

You could also try to engage with local schools. They might help to build nest boxes and callers, and the children might enjoy following the progress of Swift chicks on nest cams. If their school buildings are suitable, they could also host their own Swift nest boxes. After being approached by volunteers, [Royal Lancaster Grammar School](#) undertook some amazing work for Swifts and the [RSPB South East Herts](#) local group engaged with their local water company to provide Swift boxes on their buildings.



Why not ask if your local school would like to help Swifts?



Nest boxes are easy to make – or you could buy ready-made versions.

Start a community nest box scheme

You could set up a **'Swift Street'** by installing lots of Swift nest boxes along one road. If there is a street with lots of Swift activity (**Swift Mapper** could help you locate suitable areas), try leafletting to find people who would like to take part. Some Swift Streets have been organised via street WhatsApp groups or social media pages.

Once you've decided on a location and have a team of willing volunteers, you'll need to buy or build enough nest boxes. Perhaps one of your team is good at DIY? If not, you could try engaging with community groups, such as **Men's Sheds**, who might be interested in supporting a good cause.

Or you could nominate a **Community Payback project** where offenders can work on projects, such as building nest boxes, to pay back the community for their crime.

To build support for your project, try to involve people on the Swift Street in activities.

If you need to raise funds for your project it's worth contacting your local authority or a charity to see if they can provide a grant. You could also try crowdfunding on JustGiving or getting sponsorship from local businesses or individuals.

Be patient

It can take a little while for Swifts to move in to new nest boxes and nest sites, so don't be discouraged – it will be worth the wait! Playing Swift calls can make a big difference, but it can still take time.

Swift boxes and bricks can be popular with other birds, like House Martins and House Sparrows. These species are struggling and need nests too, so don't worry if your nests aren't used by the 'intended' species – you'll still be helping nature.

Plant flowers for Swifts

Swifts don't just need places to nest, they need insects to feed on too. Sadly, insect numbers are declining, which means it's harder for Swifts to find enough to eat. Although we can't put out food for Swifts in our gardens like we do for many garden birds, we can grow plants to support the insects they rely on. As well as [growing wildlife-friendly plants](#) in your own patch, why not encourage your friends, family and neighbours to do the same? You could even ask your local authority to create more places for wildlife by planting wildflowers in parks, leaving grass verges uncut as part of [No Mow May](#), and encouraging people to let their own [lawns support more wildlife](#).



Growing wildlife-friendly flowers will help support the insects that Swifts feed on.

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Large-scale action

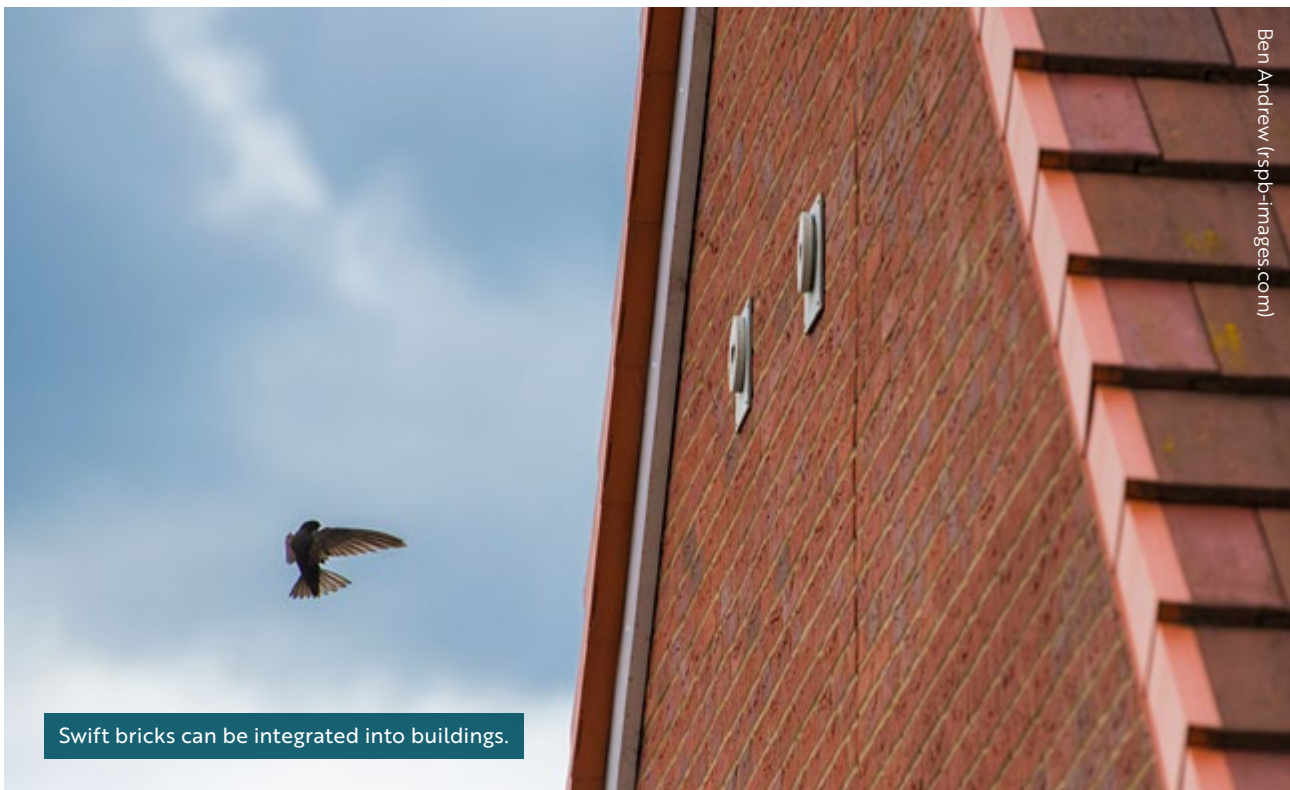
Think big!

Set up a Swift City or Town and encourage your local authority to support Swifts. You could even create a Swift trail for your town/city/street, [like this one in Edinburgh](#).

Encourage the use of Swift bricks

As well as fitting nest boxes to the exterior of buildings, it's also possible to include integrated Swift bricks within the walls themselves – something that can be done while buildings are being built or extended. These Swift bricks have lots of advantages – they're zero-maintenance and provide a permanent nesting place. They can be used in blockwork or brickwork walls, high in gables and at the end of terraces, and can be faced with a selection of hard materials or render to blend in seamlessly with the building. [Action for Swifts](#) has further information on the different types of Swift bricks available and how they can be integrated into new and restored buildings.

[RSPB Chester Local Group](#) persuaded the local council and developers to include Swift bricks in a major building project in the city. Many other councils, including Brighton & Hove, are now including Swift bricks in their local planning guidance.





Housing developers could make a huge difference for Swifts by adding Swift bricks to all new build homes.

Engage with planners

To help save Swifts in local urban environments, it's vital to engage with local councils and their planning departments and encourage them to make provision for Swifts. Here are some practical actions you can take:

- Contact your local council biodiversity or conservation officer to ask whether there are any policies or action plans in place specifically for Swifts; they are obligated to protect and promote biodiversity in the built environment.
- Check local planning applications on your local authority's website – do they threaten any Swift colonies?
- Liaise with local planning authorities to ensure that, where there are new-build projects and major renovations taking place locally, Swift bricks are used as part of the process.
- Ask contractors to avoid scheduling roofing and renovation work in the nesting season between May and August.
- Produce leaflets for council planning departments to be sent out in response to planning applications.

RSPB Bromley Local Group has Swift Champions in each ward of their borough and they have had great success in influencing local planning for Swifts, which you can [read about here](#).

Find out more

- Information about creating homes for Swifts from [Swift Conservation](#)
- Swift news and helpful information from [Action for Swifts](#)
- Advice on how to take action for Swifts from the [RSPB](#)
- Find local Swift projects via the [Swifts Local Network](#)

With thanks for the work, support and contributions of:



Stay connected

Keep up to date with the latest thinking, news, events, and information from the RSPB in your local community.



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