THE COMMON SWIFT (Apus apus)

Architects of the Sky – A Guide to Conservation in North Wiltshire

Photographic Credit: Neil Parker

1. Ecology & Extraordinary Life Habits

The Common Swift (Apus apus) is a marvel of evolutionary adaptation. Its scientific name, derived from the Ancient Greek apous, means "footless"—a nod to its incredibly short legs used only for clinging to vertical surfaces rather than perching.

- **Life in the Air:** Swifts spend nearly their entire lives on the wing. They eat, sleep, mate, and gather nesting materials mid-air. A young swift leaving its nest will remain airborne continuously for up to two to three years until it is old enough to breed.
- **The Diet:** As highly specialized aerial insectivores, they survive entirely on a "flying soup" of airborne invertebrates. They vacuum up thousands of spiders, aphids, gnats, beetles, and midges daily, pouching them into a ball (or bolus) to feed their chicks.

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- **Weather Dodging:** If prolonged heavy rain or a cold snap clears the insects from local skies, swifts can fly hundreds of miles around weather fronts to find food, leaving their highly adapted chicks to drop into a state of temporary semi-hibernation (torpor) to survive.

2. Breeding Habits & Nesting Loyalty

Swifts are intensely loyal to both their partners and their homes, making them vulnerable to environmental changes.

- **Century-Old Colonies:** They pair for life and return to the exact same nesting cavity year after year. Because they nest socially, colonies inside historical architectures can span centuries.
- **Urban Dependents:** In the UK, swifts are almost entirely synanthropic—meaning they depend on human-built structures. They do not build exposed nests; instead, they slide into tiny micro-cavities beneath roof tiles, behind fascia boards, or inside open soffit joints.
- **The Nest:** Materials like feathers, dry grass, and blowing seeds are caught mid-air and glued together inside the cavity using the bird's sticky saliva to form a tiny shallow cup.

3. The Phenomenal Migration

The swift's time in the UK is brief but intense, lasting roughly three months out of the year.

Late April / May	June / July	Early August
Arrive to breed in the UK. Track seasonal explosion of airborne insects.	Raise chicks. Extreme foraging duties and screaming parties begin.	Migrate South. Colonies vanish overnight, flying over 6,000 miles to equatorial Africa.

- **The Journey:** Swifts travel over 6,000 miles twice a year. They winter in the skies over equatorial and southern Africa, flying completely across the Sahara Desert and southern Europe without landing.

4. Threats: Why the Screaming is Quieting

The iconic summer sound of "screaming parties"—groups of swifts swooping low over roofs in vocal social bonds—is rapidly fading. Swifts are now firmly on the UK Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern due to a severe long-term population crash.

- **Loss of Nest Sites:** This is the single biggest driver of their decline. Modern building regulations require airtight insulation, and older properties are constantly being renovated.

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Re-roofing projects, plastic uPVC soffit retrofits, and building demolitions unintentionally seal up ancient entry holes, locking returning birds out of their lifelong homes permanently.
- **The Insect Decline:** Widespread pesticide use and landscape-level habitat loss have significantly reduced the biomass of flying insects across Europe, directly diminishing the food supply available to nesting pairs.

5. Local Focus: North Wiltshire Swifts

North Wiltshire provides an ideal blend of historical architecture and pristine feeding grounds, but localized grassroots action is essential to maintain existing colonies.

- **Target Areas:** Towns like Malmesbury, Calne and Cricklade and many of the surrounding villages possess an abundance of Victorian, Edwardian, and older Cotswold stone-built properties that host critical historical colonies.
- **Feeding Grounds:** The vast open wetlands of the Cotswold Water Park on the northern Wiltshire border provide vital regional foraging grounds where swifts feast on massive midge hatches during early spring or periods of poor local weather.
- **The Goal:** Community initiatives like Malmesbury and District Natural History Society's Swift Project is working directly with local residents to map urban nesting zones before renovations occur. In the future this will be expanded to include the villages in North Wiltshire too. This will require coordination with local Parish Councils.
  There is also interest in investigating Wiltshire's aerial corridors used by Swifts – a possible project for collaboration with other Swift organisations and birding charities across Wiltshire.

6. Citizen Science: Tracking with Swift Mapper

Data is a conservationist's best weapon. The RSPB, BTO, and Swift Conservation host Swift Mapper, a free mobile app and web platform used to identify and protect local colonies.

Step 1: Download & Locate
Install the free Swift Mapper app or visit swiftmapper.org when you spot swift activity in your local town or village.

Step 2: Identify a Nesting Site
Watch old buildings at dusk or dawn in June and July. Look for birds sliding cleanly under a roof tile, into a gap in the mortar, or behind an old soffit board.

Step 3: Log a Screaming Party
If you don't see the exact nest entry but observe low-flying, screaming groups tracking aggressively around rooftops, log this as a "screaming party"—a clear indicator of a breeding colony nearby.

Step 4: Submit Data to Protect
Pin the exact property on the map interface. This database is regularly consulted by local authority

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ecologists, architects, and Wiltshire planning officers to mandate nest protection before building works are approved.

7. How the Public Can Help

You don't need to be an ecologist to save Wiltshire's swifts. Everyday localized actions make a massive difference:

Featured Action: Install Swift Bricks or Boxes
If you are building an extension or developing a new property, ask your architect for integrated Swift Bricks. They are inexpensive, maintenance-free, flush with the brickwork, and last the lifetime of the building. For existing homes, external wooden or wood-concrete boxes can be mounted high on a north or east-facing wall under the eaves.

- **Play Attraction Calls:** Swifts are highly social but slow to explore new options. Playing recorded swift calls via a small loudspeaker near your new box during morning and evening hours in May and June drastically accelerates how quickly prospecting birds find and occupy the site.
- **Check Before You Repair:** If re-roofing or repairing your fascia boards, try to schedule the work between September and March when the birds are away. Ask your builder to preserve existing entry gaps or install a "swift-friendly" soffit board.
- **Gardening for Insects:** Stop using chemical garden pesticides. Plant native wildflowers, maintain log piles, or install a small garden pond to boost the local flying insect populations that sustain nesting families.

Key Contacts & Resources

- **Swift Mapper:** www.swiftmapper.org.uk (National reporting app)
- **Swift Conservation:** www.swift-conservation.org (Technical guidance)
- **RSPB Advice:** www.rspb.org.uk/helpSwifts (Advice & nest box shop)
- **Bristol Swifts:** www.bristolswifts.co.uk (Advanced box designs & call systems)
- **Local Action:** Search for North Wiltshire Swifts or check the Wiltshire Ornithological Society (WOS) for localized town surveys and box donation schemes.

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