Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

SWIFT
(Apus apus)

Z58

Description



The fast, high-flying swift is most often seen as a scythe-like (crescent) silhouette against the sky. Swooping, screaming parties of swifts can be seen chasing one another all day long.

The swift is almost uniformly sooty-brown apart from a whitish throat. The beak is small but the gape is very wide and perfectly adapted for catching flying insects. They have a forked tail, but it is not as long as the swallow's. The bill and legs are black.

The swift is a summer visitor, breeding across the UK, but most numerously in the south and east. It winters in Africa. The swift's stay here is short, extending from early May to early August the period coinciding with high insect populations and long hours of daylight. Once their young can fly swifts have no reason to linger here.

The swift's capacity for long-distance flight is staggering. One researcher suggests that they may travel an average of 500 miles each day. They eat, drink and sleep on the wing. Juvenile birds, which may not nest until their fourth year, may remain airborne for the whole of their early life. Swifts find it impossible to find insect food when it is wet. The birds get round the problem by flying round depressions to the unstable air at their rear, where insects can be present in huge numbers. English birds have been found feeding over Germany as they move round low-pressure systems a journey of 600-1,000 miles. While the weather is wet young nestlings go into a torpid state, reducing their need for food until the weather changes and normal service can be restored.



For their size they are long-lived and individuals known to be 19 and even 21 years are on record.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

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Breeding
Swifts use the same nest year after year, merely adding fresh material. This must be caught in the air. As a result, building is erratic, relying on there being sufficient wind to sweep suitable material into the air. Dry grasses, straw, dead and green leaves, flower petals, winged seeds, feathers and scraps of paper have all been found in nests. Fresh poppy petals are sometimes used. The material is stuck to the nest with saliva. The eggs are white, smooth and non-glossy, and measure about 25mm by 16mm. The male and female take turns incubating the eggs, and both adults feed the young.



Above: A young bird, not yet able to fly.

What does it sound like?
The call is a loud scream in two different tone pitches, of which the higher one is from the female and the lower one from the male. They often form 'screaming parties' during summer evenings when about 10-15 birds gather and fly around in circles, all calling out to each other.

What does it eat?
They feed exclusively on spiders and insects caught on the wing. Parent swifts returning with food for their young reveal a large bulge below the beak due to a mass of insects packed into the throat pouch glued together in saliva. Detailed observations have shown that a swift may bring 40 meals a day to the young.

Did you know ...
The scientific name comes from the Greek *απους, apous,* meaning 'without feet'. These birds have very short legs which they use only for clinging to vertical surfaces (hence the German name Mauersegler, literally meaning 'wall-glider'). They never settle voluntarily on the ground.

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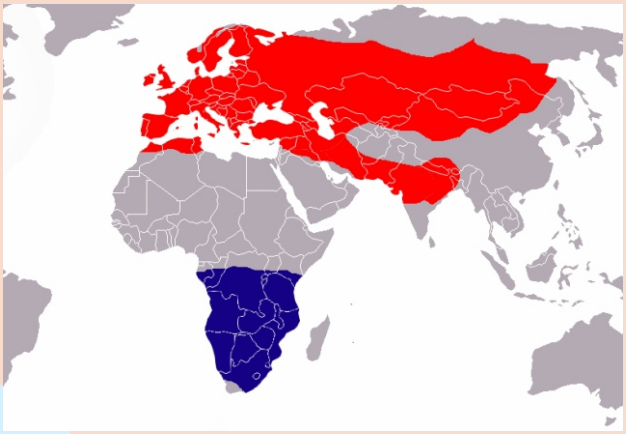
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Vital Statistics

Eggs: 2-3
Incubation: 18-25 days
Fledging: 37-56 days
Maximum recorded lifespan: 21 years
Length: 16-17cm
Wingspan: 42-48cm
Weight: 36-50g
UK breeding population: 85,000 pairs



Above: The area marked in red shows the summer range of the swift, the blue area shows where they travel to in winter.



UK Distribution



Above: Young swifts crawling with the insect parasite Crataerina pallida.

Did you know ...

Most swifts are infested by a nasty looking species of louse fly, *Crataerina pallida*. The size of these lice, in proportion to the body size of the host bird, is such that, in the words of one expert, 'a small bird with one or two of these insects creeping about in its feathers can be compared to a man with a couple of large shore crabs scuttling about in his underclothes.' Their nests are also often found to be crawling with these parasites.