Out and About

Old friends return

by Hannah Shaw

Summer has finally (if damply) arrived and, with it, Eynsham's swifts, swallows and house martins have returned to swoop, soar and nest among our streets. Here's an update on how these spectacular migratory birds are doing—and a reminder of why we love them so much.

Eynsham Swifts: conservation update

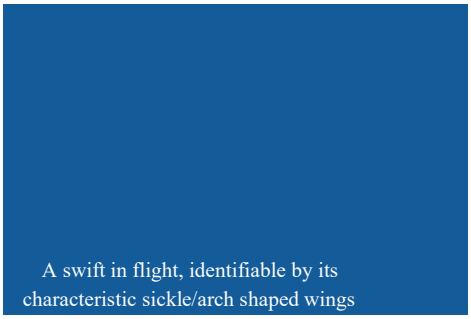
Eynsham Swifts is a group, formed by Sue Chapman and Sarah Couch in 2017, of like-minded villagers with the aim of supporting the swifts, swallows and house martins that are, sadly, seeing a nationwide decline. Since its inception, the group have been active in awareness-raising, putting up nest boxes and protecting current nest sites in the village. They have conducted yearly surveys of the population of the birds, and their hard work has led to numbers starting to rise. This year, all three species have been spotted and lots of swifts have made their home on Acre End Street. The 2024 survey results will be published in full by the Nature Recovery Network in August, so do check them out.

You may have noticed the beautiful swifts made of willow appearing around the village. These have been handcrafted by villagers, with help from Willow Coppice, and given to houses with swift nests to mark and celebrate their residence.

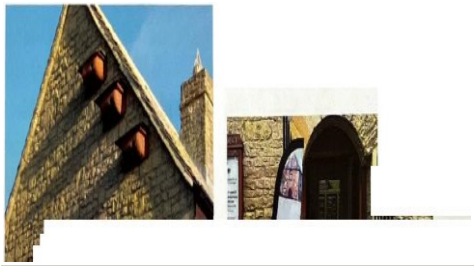
Why we love swifts

Swifts have been coming to Eynsham for centuries, and we have grown very fond of them. Their screaming calls and playful flight above the streets have gained them the nickname `devil birds'. They are the seventh-fastest bird in the world—with a maximum recorded speed of 72 miles per hour / 116 kilometres per hour —and it's not hard to believe it when they soar above you! They are very sociable and like to nest in groups, and juveniles will fly about calling to and visiting the nesting pairs all summer long. What is amazing is that they will come back to exactly the same nest spots every year, having travelled all the way from Equatorial and Southern Africa, 22,000km away. Apart from when nesting, swifts spend their entire lives on the wing, and will even sleep while drifting high up in the sky. So, if you see a swift on the ground, it is probably in trouble; consider getting expert help for it, such as from Oxfordshire Wildlife Rescue.

A house martin leaves its nest and two chicks



A swift in flight, identifiable by its characteristic sickle/arch shaped wings



—>Swift nest boxes and a willow swift on a house off Queen Street. One nest box is occupied!

One of the biggest challenges facing swifts today is the destruction of nesting sites due to building work or demolition. Since they are used to nesting under eaves, gaps in roof tiles and cracks in walls, they are very vulnerable to the refurbishment of old buildings or to being blocked by repairs and scaffolding. New-build houses rarely leave areas where swifts can make their nests, either. Tragically, if swifts are blocked from their nest sites, they can return year on year and attempt to fly back in, which often leads them to harm. This is why it is so important that if you have swifts nesting where you live or work, any building work should happen when the birds are away in Africa, and old nest sites must be maintained or restored. (For good advice on how to go about this, visit swift-conservation.org.) Swifts are incredibly tidy and hygienic nesters that cause no harm to the buildings they occupy.

As well as losing nest sites, swifts and many other summer migrant birds are faced with the decline in insects that they rely on for food, as a result of habitat loss and insecticide use. Populations of these insect-eating birds have dropped by 40% or more in the past decade. Changeable weather patterns and storms, increased by climate change, have also caused heavy losses during migration in recent years. Swifts are now on the Red List of endangered UK species—but the good news is that there is a lot we can still do to help them! Let's encourage them by installing nest boxes or, even better, nest bricks in the walls of our buildings. Then we will be able to appreciate these beautiful birds and their aerial acrobatics for many more years to come.

Many thanks to Sarah Couch, Sally Taylor and Sue Chapman, who have been a huge help in gathering information for this piece.