



Swift

Photo:

Ben Andrew / rspb-images.com

Saving Swifts



New appointment

We are pleased to announce that Tara Adcock has been appointed BirdWatch Ireland's new Urban Birds Project Officer. She takes over the role from Ricky Whelan, who recently moved to Offaly County Council to work as their Biodiversity Officer.

Tara has worked for BirdWatch Ireland since 2018, principally focusing on waterbirds and terns within an urban context, and is fascinated by the interface between urban spaces and wildlife.

There is much that local communities and individuals can do to help protect Swifts in towns and villages across Ireland. **Tara Adcock** reports

Summer is upon us, and with summer come **Swifts** – one of the most startling and enigmatic birds to grace our skies during the summer months.

Weighing all of ~40 grammes, this sickle-shaped bird boomerangs its way from sub-Saharan Africa, where it overwinters, to breed here in Ireland. Arriving from late April to early May, Swifts start to head south again in mid-August.

Ireland may be the westerly extent of the Swift's breeding range, but it is not its most northerly. Swifts breed as far north as the Arctic Circle and as far east as northern China.



Swift at wall with internal nest boxes (known as Swift bricks) in the Netherlands

Photo:

XJochemx.nl (Wikimedia Commons)

However, the distance this bird travels is far from the most remarkable thing about it. Scientists have proven that these birds spend the vast majority of their lives on the wing – feeding, sleeping, even mating in the air, and typically only come to ground when nesting!

These birds are built for life on the wing. Their long, thinly-shaped wings and streamlined bodies make them perfectly aerodynamic.

Swifts are intrinsically linked with our built environment. Long ago, they would have nested in tree cavities, sea caves and cliff faces, like their cousin the **Alpine Swift**. However, as we began building houses, churches, etc, the Swift moved in alongside us, nesting in crevices in the stone and brickwork and under eaves. It can be argued that, more than any other species in Ireland bar **Feral Pigeons**, the Swift is a truly urban bird.

While urban spaces have provided homes for Swifts for centuries, recent innovations in building technology have made their reliance on these built spaces problematic. In the last decade or so, we have become increasingly good at sealing our buildings, making them more energy efficient, but squeezing out the Swift in the process. This means that many new or recently renovated buildings have no space for nesting Swifts. This is thought to be one of several factors leading to the drastic decline of the Swift in Ireland.

We're not trading in hyperbole when we say, 'drastic decline.' Data collected for the **Countryside Bird Survey** (CBS) by volunteers, **National Parks and Wildlife Service** rangers and **BirdWatch Ireland** staff, showed a whopping 58% decline between 1998 and 2016. That means we lost 58% of our Swift population in just 18 years! This decline landed the Swift on the **Birds of Conservation Concern** in

Ireland red list, meaning that it is in danger of extinction here if we don't act fast.

However, there is hope. There are several organisations across the island of Ireland working tirelessly to try to reverse these declines.

Swift Conservation Ireland, Dublin Swift Conservation Group, Northern Ireland Swift Group, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Northern Ireland, and **BirdWatch Ireland** are all putting their shoulder to the wheel, alongside fantastic local community organisations and residents, to try to save the Swift.

The principal focus currently is on finding existing Swift nest sites. In BirdWatch Ireland, **County Swift Surveys** have been carried out since 2017, with 14 counties as well as Dublin city and South Dublin surveyed so far; and with Monaghan, Offaly and Carlow to be surveyed this year.

Finding and protecting **Swift nest sites** is one of the most crucial steps in halting the decline of the Swift. The reason for this is that Swifts are extremely faithful to their nest site. If a nest site is lost, its Swifts won't find another to breed in that season. They simply will not breed.

Given the rapid rate of decline of this species and the inelasticity of its nesting behaviour; the loss of each breeding pair and nest site has dire consequences for the Irish Swift population.

The second thing which BirdWatch Ireland and other Swift conservation groups do is engage with **local communities**. We share ways in which individuals and communities can help existing Swift populations and bolster the number of Swifts breeding in their area. This is crucial to conserving this species.

And this is where you come in. There are loads of practical things that we can all do in our own homes and our local communities to help the Swift. Below is a breakdown of practical steps we can all take to help save this species (but for more information, see the *Saving Swifts* guide on the BirdWatch Ireland website):

- 1 Record any Swift nest sites you find on the **National Biodiversity Data Centre Swift portal** at www.bit.ly/swift-records. This can be done by individuals or through local community surveys.
- 2 Carry out renovations or construction work on houses or public buildings with nesting Swifts *outside* the breeding season, i.e., between September and April.
- 3 Ensure existing nest sites remain accessible, i.e., don't plaster over them or block them if replacing fascia, soffits or guttering.
- 4 Put up Swift nest boxes or Swift bricks in your home or local area.



Swift
Photo: Piotr Rak



Swift
Photo:
Artur Tabor

These should be:

- north-facing, but can be oriented east or west if shaded
 - placed under eaves to protect the nest from the elements
 - at least five metres off the ground
 - free of obstacles below or in front of them
 - inaccessible to cats. Make sure there is no way for cats to climb near to nest sites.
- 5 When installing nest boxes or nest bricks, use a tape lure (essentially a speaker that plays the calls of Swifts) to attract Swifts looking for nest sites to your building. A licence from the National Parks and Wildlife Services is required and can easily be applied for on their website.
 - 6 Contact your local Heritage or Biodiversity Officer and/or BirdWatch Ireland about buildings in your area with nesting Swifts that may be at risk due to dilapidation or renovation.
 - 7 Undertake a Swift nest box project, installing Swift nest boxes or Swift bricks at suitable locations on buildings in your community.
 - 8 Petition your local authority through the County Development Plan to install Swift nest boxes or bricks in new building developments such as schools, libraries and public offices.
 - 9 Garden for nature. Swifts are insectivores, i.e., they eat insects. Dig a pond, even a small one, and avoid using pesticides. Let nature be messy, and plant native plants in your garden or on your balcony or public space, to give insects and thus Swifts a fighting chance. Insect declines are undoubtedly a factor in the decline of the Swift population, and we need to fight this decline on all fronts – both in terms of housing and food.

The plight of the Swift in Ireland is unusual. The fact that it lives not only in urban spaces but in our buildings means that it is one of the few rapidly declining Irish species that we can all pitch in and help save. With government and community buy-in and individual actions, there is still very much hope for this incredible bird. ■