

Swift

Apus apus

Bird · Summer migrant · May–Aug



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Few British birds live as extreme a life as the swift. After wintering in Africa, it arrives late — usually in May — and leaves early, often by August, spending barely three months here before an astonishing existence resumes: swifts eat, sleep and even mate entirely in the air, only ever landing to nest. Sooty brown all over with a pale throat and long, scythe-shaped wings, it's built purely for flight, and its screaming parties chasing each other around rooftops on warm summer evenings are one of the most thrilling sounds of the Dumfries and Galloway summer. Swifts nest in small gaps under roof tiles and in old stonework, squeezing into the same crevice year after year, but modern building repairs have closed off many traditional sites, making the birds increasingly reliant on nest boxes and dedicated swift bricks to keep breeding locally.

BEHAVIOUR

Swifts spend almost their entire life on the wing, even sleeping in flight by shutting down half the brain at a time while circling at altitude. They feed by trawling the sky for airborne insects and spiders, sometimes climbing thousands of feet to exploit a rich layer of prey. Screaming parties of birds chasing low around buildings in a tight, fast group are a familiar and much-loved midsummer display.

WHEN TO SEE IT

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QUICK FACTS

FAMILY	Swifts (Apodidae)
SIZE	16–17 cm · sparrow length, with long scythe-shaped wings
UK STATUS	Red-listed

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