

## The Swift are returning!

*Watch out for this amazing iconic bird now gracing our skies. Michael Krause of the Great Ouse Valley Trust explains why it is so special and how we can help it.*

Imagine a bird which spends ten months of the year in flight, eating, sleeping, even mating in the air; and a bird the weight of a crème egg, which travels over 3,000 miles *twice a year* to winter in southern Africa, and which pairs for life.

At this time of year, we don't need to imagine. We'll see Swifts arriving - dark birds with scythe-shaped wings and short forked tail, racing through the air above us, often in small groups and feeding on insects - and we'll hear the high-pitched screech as they pass by. Watching Swifts high above us, or listening to them screaming just overhead at around 25 miles an hour, is a source of joy, not just on a country walk or nature reserve, but also from our gardens and as we walk around town.



A dark bird with swept-backed wings screaming overhead? It's a Swift!

Photograph by Nigel Spowell

Birds need food and nest sites. Insect numbers in Britain fell by 64% between 2004 and 2022, according to a citizen science survey carried out by Buglife, counting insects splattered on vehicle number plates. Scientists have linked this to pesticide use. There is now less food for Swallows, House Martins and Swifts, and so their populations fall. But there are simple things we can do in our gardens. We can avoid using pesticides for a start, and bring native wildflowers into our lawns – they then look great, support so many insects and also need mowing less often!

Evolved over time to nest in cavities in cliffs or large trees, Swifts have adapted to nest in our buildings, so decisions we make have a direct impact. Swifts return to the same nest each year. If, during a repair to a building, a Swift nest-hole becomes blocked, the birds can fail to rear any young in that and subsequent years. Swift boxes are now being installed in new developments and we can add them to our houses as well, just below the roof. Swifts like company. Installing several boxes can create a colony, and playing the sound of Swifts through a speaker will help them find their new nest site.

Swifts are with us for just three or four months each year. That's their breeding season, vital for the future of the species. Despite their decline, a few small steps by us can give them a hand and help keep alive the thrill of seeing and hearing them each spring for our children to enjoy.

**The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit [www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk](http://www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk)**

