



Wild
About
Gardens

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wildaboutgardens.org.uk



Wild about high fliers

Welcoming swifts, swallows and martins



The
Wildlife
Trusts



Inspiring everyone to grow

Introducing our soaring superstars

No stranger to a long-haul flight, swifts, swallows and martins travel all the way from Africa to spend each summer in the UK.

Swifts and house martins were recently added the Red List, meaning they are globally threatened, have suffered severe declines over the past 25 years, and need urgent action.



Keep your eyes on the skies

These birds are serious high fliers! You can see them soaring through our skies from March to October. Swifts rarely land at all - they even sleep, eat and drink on the wing. Talk about multi-tasking! Swifts, swallows and martins are most often seen in flight and all share very similar characteristics so can be hard to tell apart. To help you, we've created a spotting guide on the next page so you know what to look for.

We love seeing and hearing these beautiful birds on their yearly visit, however their numbers are in decline. Sadly, climate change and human interference are their biggest threats.

How can we help them?

There are lots of things we can do at home to support these special birds. You might want to encourage the insects they eat, offer materials to help them nest, or build a swift box to act as their summer residence. Read on to learn more about our feathered friends and how we can be better hosts to these international visitors.

Spot the difference



First things first, let's have a look at how to tell swifts, swallows and martins apart. Remember, these beautiful birds are all visitors to the UK, so you'll only spot them from late spring to early autumn.

Swifts

- Dark brown all over, often appearing black against the sky
- Larger than swallows and martins
- Long, curving wings
- Almost never seen perching
- Spotted April to August



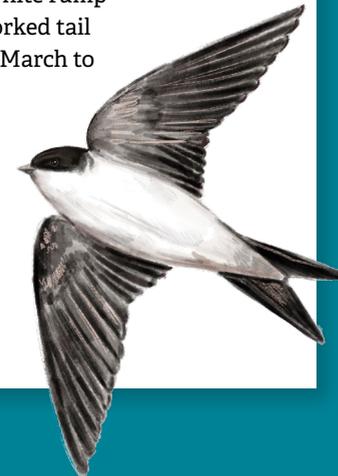
Swallows

- Glossy, dark blue-black above and creamy-white below, with a dark red forehead and throat
- Very long, deeply forked tail, with 'streamers'
- Can be seen perching on wires
- Spotted March to October



House martins

- Glossy blue-black above but with a bright white rump
- Short, forked tail
- Spotted March to October



Sand martins

- Our smallest member of the swallow family
- Brown above and white below, with a brown band across its breast
- Short, forked tail (shorter than a house martin)
- Spotted March to October



Wild about swifts

FACT FILE

Common name: Common swift
(with occasional UK visits from other swift species)

Scientific name: *Apus apus*

Family: Apodidae

Seen in the UK: April to August

UK population: estimated 59,000 breeding pairs

Swifts are the fastest bird in the UK in 'level flight' (flying horizontally, without moving up or down) - they can reach speeds of up to 70mph.

City slickers

Swifts used to nest in caves, cliffs and holes in trees, but they've since adapted to living amongst us humans. They now spend a lot of time in urban areas such as towns and cities, where they can nest in buildings.

Always on the go

If you see a bird at rest then it is unlikely to be a swift; they are ungainly on the land and are much more comfortable in flight. Amazingly, they only ever touch ground to nest. Sounds tiring!

If you find a grounded swift, it's likely in trouble. Gently move it to safety in a warm box, then contact your local wildlife rescue or find your local swift rehabilitator at swift-conservation.org



Insect buffet

Swifts form what is known as a "bolus" at the back of their throats, where they store flying insects such as moths and beetles that they catch on the wing. Stored in this bolus can be hundreds of insects bound together by the swift's saliva, which can then be fed to their chicks later - yum! Head to pages 12 and 13 to see how your garden can help provide food for swifts.

Soulmates

Swifts pair and breed for life. They share the parental duties equally, with the female laying two or three eggs in a season. This dedicated pair will re-use the same nest year-on-year.

Home sweet home

Swifts like to leave their nests by dropping into the air from the entrance. This is why they often choose to set up camp in the eaves of houses and other buildings, using materials they catch in flight to build their nests - including feathers and seeds. They'll then pack it all together using their own saliva!

Screaming parties

Swifts have a very distinctive screaming call. Groups of swifts darting through the sky around their nesting areas are known as 'screaming parties'!

Spotting a swift

Screaming parties of swifts are most often seen towards dusk. You might hear their high-pitched scream before you catch sight of them. If you do see one, be sure to map it on the SwiftMapper:

www.swiftmapper.org.uk



Scan with your phone camera to hear a swift scream.

58% of the UK swift population has disappeared in the last 25 years.

Swift group circling at dusk © Nick Upton

Wild about swallows

FACT FILE

Common name: Swallow or barn swallow

Scientific name: *Hirundo rustica*

Family: Hirundinidae

Seen in the UK: March to October

UK population: estimated 760,000 breeding pairs (however this is prone to fluctuation)

The UK will also get occasional visits from red-rumped swallows or even rarer relatives, like cliff swallows.



Migration

People used to think that UK swallows simply hibernated over winter. However, we now know that they migrate all the way to South Africa on a dangerous journey that can take up to six weeks. Before migrating, and at night when on their journey, swallows will roost in reedbeds in huge flocks of hundreds of thousands of birds.

Life in the country

Swallows are often found close to water in the countryside and can be seen in meadows and farmland. Although largely avoiding towns, they are known to use man-made structures like barns or garages to nest.

On the menu

Like swifts and martins, swallows eat flies and aphids, which they catch in flight above either shallow water or the ground. To drink, they will skim low over rivers and lakes and scoop up water.



Mud nests

Swallows and martins are amongst the few birds that build their nests from mud. In this fascinating process, swallows will collect wet mud and take it back and forth to build a nest structure of mud combined with grasses. The mud will dry and solidify to create a sturdy home that swallows will reuse year after year, carrying out maintenance with more mud.

It's all in the tail

When looking for a mate, female swallows will go for the male with the longest and most symmetrical tail as this is a sign of good genes and health. Swallows also mate for life - although they are not completely monogamous!

Spotting a swallow

You'll often see swallows gathering to perch on telegraph wires. You might also see them flying low to the ground over fields, especially near water, where they'll be feasting on insects.



Scan with your phone camera to hear a swallow's song.



Wild about house martins

FACT FILE

Common name: House martin

Scientific name: *Delichon urbicum*

Family: Hirundinidae (same as swallows!)

Seen in the UK: March to October

UK population: estimated 480,000 pairs

The UK has also had rare visits from crag martins and even a North American purple martin!

What's in a name?

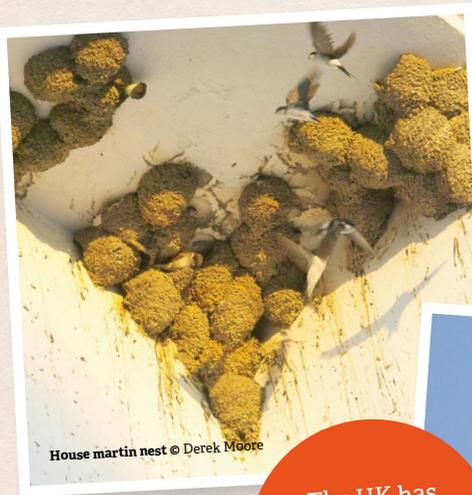
As their name suggests, and like swifts and swallows, house martins like to nest below the eaves of buildings, and are happy in built-up areas as well as the countryside. However, a small number of house martins still use natural nests on cliffs.

Amongst friends

Like swallows, house martins build mud nests. However, unlike swallows, they are a semi-colonial species, meaning they sometimes nest in groups, usually consisting of around five nests. Also unlike their more faithful cousins, house martin nests can contain chicks by multiple fathers.

Catch me if you can

House martins are notoriously difficult to track throughout their migration process. This is because they don't form roosts at ground level like swallows do, so they are more difficult to catch. In fact, there's only ever been one UK-ringed house martin recorded in Africa, back in 1984!



House martin nest © Derek Moore

The UK has lost over half its house martin population since 1969.



House martin © Andrew Howe

Under attack

House sparrows will often take over house martin nests whilst they're under construction, or even kick settled families out! This means that the sparrows sometimes attack house martin chicks and eggs. So, despite house martins rarely being predated on, they do have to protect their nests against these intruders.

A summer visitor

Sand martins are the other common martin species that visit the UK. Unlike the others, they are not associated with man-made structures or built-up areas so you're unlikely to spot them from your garden. They are found along rivers, on wetlands, and in quarries, where they nest in colonies, digging burrows in sandy cliffs.

Spotting a house martin

House martins can be seen across the whole of the UK, dashing between rooftops in towns and villages or near areas of farmland, woodland and water where insects are plentiful.



Scan with your phone camera to hear a house martin's song.



House martin © Dawn Monrose

Migration

Swallows *Hirundo rustica*
Swifts *Apus apus*

Swallows migrate during daylight, flying low and covering up to 200 miles per day at around 20 miles per hour.

In early autumn swifts can be found in the tropical forests of the Congo and Central Africa, enjoying the rainy season's insects.

Many birds migrate but swifts, swallows and house martins are perhaps the most iconic of our summer migrants. As the seasons change, they follow the food and move to areas where the flying insect populations are booming.

A continuous source of food is essential to sustain them and their young during the breeding season, and prepare them for the difficult migratory journey.

The migratory routes of **house martins** and **sand martins** are still unclear – it's not known exactly how far south they travel, or the route they follow South of the Sahara. They are relatively rarely seen in winter, possibly because they feed at high altitude, but it's hoped that improvements in tracking technology may help shed light on this mystery!

Threats

Nests at risk

During home renovations or when insulation is fitted, old nesting sites under the eaves of houses can become blocked. New buildings often don't include space for nesting, whether that be eaves or specially designed swift bricks.

Building work carried out during the nesting season (May to September) can disturb or destroy swift and house martin nests, which are protected by law under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981.

Food shortages

Swifts, swallows and martins all rely on insects to feed themselves and their chicks. With insect populations shrinking at an alarming rate, there's not much on the menu. Globally over 40% of insect species are threatened with extinction and a recent study on nature reserves in Germany found a 75% loss in flying insect biomass over 27 years.

Trials on their travels

Climate change has made weather more extreme and unpredictable all over the globe, which is bad news for migratory birds. Stormy conditions when swifts, swallows and martins are migrating endangers their passage and can leave the birds in poor condition when they arrive in the UK. Cool and wet weather during the breeding season also makes it harder to incubate eggs and hunt for insects.

Take Action for Insects with The Wildlife Trusts at wildlifetrusts.org/action-for-insects



Hoverflies © Janet Packham

An ideal garden for swifts, swallows and martins

For borders that are insect-friendly

- Eryngo/sea holly
Eryngium
- Fennel
Foeniculum vulgare
- Masterwort
Astrantia
- Mint
Mentha
- Spurge
Euphorbia
- Toothpick plant
Ammi visnaga

To encourage insects into your bog garden

- Common valerian
Valeriana officinalis
- Marsh bedstraw
Galium palustre
- Purple loosestrife
Lythrum salicaria
- Red bistort
Persicaria amplexicaulis
- Water avens
Geum rivale
- Water forget-me-not
Myosotis scorpioides

Make space for nests when building, such as incorporating swift bricks into walls

Install a swift box up high

Build a bog garden

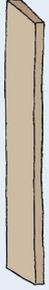
Mud left bare for swallows or house martins to use in nest building

Let a patch of grass grow long

Build a swift box

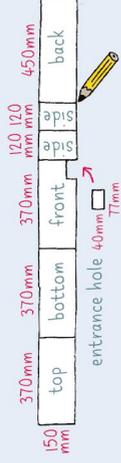
You will need

- A plank of untreated plywood (1.8m long, 150mm wide and 12mm thick)



- Pencil
- Tape measure
- Saw
- Glue or nails
- Hammer
- Drill
- 4 wall plugs and screws
- A suitable location (the eaves of a building)

- 1 Saw your plywood to these dimensions:

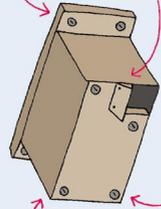


- 2 Assemble your swift box:

Faces glued or nailed together

Attach to wall with wall plugs and screws

Screw on front so it can be removed for interior cleaning between nesting periods



- 3 Position your swift box under the eaves of your building.

Ideally plan installation around building or roof work, when scaffolding or similar is already in place.

Position at least 5m above the ground.



North/north-east facing wall

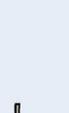
TOP TIPS

- Swifts migrate, feed and nest together so if you have the space multiple nesting boxes would be ideal, or you could encourage neighbours to put up boxes of their own!
- If you're not placing your swift box directly under eaves, the box needs to be designed with a sloping roof to prevent predators from perching.
- Increase chances of swifts finding your box by playing swift calls May-July, in the morning and the evening.
- If you are planning an extension, you can buy special 'swift bricks' that are built into walls.

Plant a bog garden

You will need

- Upcycled old plastic garden trug (ensure sides aren't split)
- Gravel or pea shingle
- Garden soil
- Leaky hose with stopper in one end
- Drill



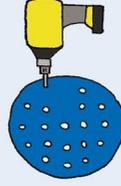
Suggested bog plants

- Common valerian
- Marsh bedstraw
- Purple loosestrife
- Marsh marigold
- Water avens
- Water forget-me-not



Bog gardens can help a huge range of wildlife. Not only can swallows and house martins use the mud to build their nests in the spring, mini bogs can also provide valuable habitat for creatures like frogs, toads and dragonflies! Bog gardens are excellent alternatives to a pond if you have very young children.

- 1 Drill holes in the bottom of your trug about 5cm apart.



- 2 Place a layer of gravel or pea shingle in the bottom.



- 3 Lay the stoppered end of your hose on top of the gravel or shingle, covering with another layer. Leave the other end of the hose poking out of the top of the trug and long enough to reach a garden hose connected to a water butt or similar.

- 4 Fill the trug to the brim with garden soil. Plant one or two bog plants to one side but leave the other side for bare mud.



- 5 If soil feels dry, connect the leaky hose to a water butt to re-wet.



- 6 Dig a hole to sink your trug into the ground, so the top is level with the surrounding soil.



Elevated 30-60cm off the ground

Position it within 5m of a water butt



You can stand the trug on a patio instead, but remember the water will leak out so can make the paving wet!

About Us

The Wildlife Trusts and the RHS created Wild About Gardens to celebrate wildlife gardening and to encourage people to act for nature. Over the past 50 years, we've seen declines in two thirds of the UK's plant and animal species. Many of our common garden visitors – including hedgehogs, house sparrows and starlings – are increasingly under threat, but collectively gardens can make an incredible difference. To discover more about wildlife gardening and for more resources, visit our website. You can also sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive updates and ideas on all things Wild About Gardens.



wildaboutgardens.org.uk



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The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts is on a mission to restore a third of the UK's land and seas for nature by 2030. We believe everyone, everywhere, should have access to nature and the joy and health benefits it brings. No matter where you are in the UK, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people about nature and standing up for wildlife and wild places. Each Wildlife Trust is an independent charity formed by people getting together to make a positive difference for wildlife, climate and future generations. Together we care for 2,300 diverse and beautiful nature reserves and work with others to manage their land for nature, too. You can help us bring wildlife back in abundance by becoming a member of your Wildlife Trust today.

Email: enquiry@wildlifetrusts.org

Website: wildlifetrusts.org

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The Royal Horticultural Society

For more than 210 years, the RHS has been the force behind gardening in the UK. Our aim is to enrich everyone's life through plants, and to make the UK a greener and more beautiful place. We believe everyone in every village, town and city should benefit from growing – for stronger, healthier and happier communities. Our work in education, science and communities is only possible thanks to the generous support of our visitors, members, partners, donors and sponsors. With your help we can harness the power of horticulture, one gardener at a time.

Email: membership@rhs.org.uk

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Pledge to help swifts, swallows and martins in your garden at

www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk