

Statement Swifts



Swift © Derek Brown

***“Dawn flowers in the great elm outside the house.
The swifts are back. They are shrieking like paper rockets.”
(Three Women by Sylvia Plath, 1962)***

Introduction

Swifts (*Apus apus*) are summer visitors to London. They arrive in early May and leave by the end of August for their wintering areas in southern Africa. Originally cliff and crag nesters, they have adapted to thrive in the built environment. They are still widely distributed in the Capital, relying on free access to spaces within roofs to build their nests.

Swifts have declined in the UK, with an estimated national loss of about 20% in the last ten years. The significance of the decline remains unknown although it is believed to be accelerating. Swifts are very difficult to census and definitive data are still unavailable. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the built-up areas of Greater London exemplify this worrying national trend.

Conservation Considerations

Small colonies of swifts occur in most parts of London, often in pre-war social housing or in Edwardian and Victorian terraces and villas, where the open eaves or soffits provide easy access to the loft space. Other favoured sites are in derelict or poorly maintained industrial buildings, where holes arising from disrepair may also provide space for a nest. Most of the Capital's post-war and modern buildings have sealed roofs that cannot house swifts, leaving only the older buildings to nest in. However, as London's pre-war building stock is renovated, re-roofed and insulated, or demolished and replaced, these existing nesting opportunities are steadily disappearing.

Although swifts, their nests and eggs are legally protected by the *Wildlife & Countryside Act*, frequent nest destruction is feared likely, as re-roofing work commonly takes place during the

swifts' nesting season. The law here is particularly difficult to enforce, and compliance is largely reliant on the goodwill of householders and the building trade in particular.

Swifts efficiently chase-down insects in flight and changes in land use may be reducing their food availability through development or pollution of important feeding habitats, such as wetlands, grasslands and brownfield sites.

Swift populations will become increasingly threatened if special measures are not taken to ensure their future well-being. However, they are only with us for part of the year and the condition of their winter environment is a further important factor over which we have very little control.

Future Action

Means of identifying and securing existing nest sites, and routinely creating new nesting opportunities are both urgently required. Retention, creation and management of key insect habitats will also be valuable in order to maintain and boost food availability.

1. Survey London swift populations and assess trends

Colony surveys will help to better understand the status of swifts in London and assess future trends. The results will highlight priorities for future conservation action and inform the planning system.

- Existing swift data to be collected and collated by the local biological recording project (Greenspace Information for Greater London).
- Assess feasibility of London-wide surveys to be undertaken by *London's Swifts* (see below) and other partners.

2. Building renovation and repair work

If survey data is able to provide borough planning authorities with regularly updated information on local swift nesting colonies, these may be taken account of during normal development control procedures.

- Works that might imperil swifts should not be permitted during the May-August breeding season.
- Continuity of use by swifts should be ensured by good design, including the incorporation of features to allow access to roof spaces or externally positioned nest boxes.

3. Pro-active swift conservation

Swift nesting opportunities are easy to design or retrofit into new and existing buildings; a wide range of dedicated nest boxes are available. Architects should be actively encouraged to think about such design opportunities wherever and whenever appropriate.

- Various generic actions contained in the Built Environment Habitat Action Plan (http://www.lbp.org.uk/03action_pages/ac02_genaction8.html) will benefit swift conservation in Greater London.
- A specific advice-note will be prepared on behalf of the London Biodiversity Partnership, and disseminated via partners.

Further reading

London's Swifts (website - www.londons-swifts.org.uk)

Hewlett J (Ed.), (2002). *The Breeding Birds of the London Area*. LNHS

Wotton S R, et al. (2002). *Homes for birds: the use of houses for nesting by birds in the UK*, in *British Birds*, Vol. 95 (11), pp. 586-592

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RSPB (2002) *Swifts*. Information leaflet

RSPB (2004) *Concern for Swifts*. Information leaflet

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