

Swift Conservation

Whilst people may be aware of commonly seen blackbirds, robins and wood pigeons in the trees and hedgerows that surround the churchyard, the presence of swifts at St Mary's has no doubt eluded many. They return each year in May to breed.

Swifts are migratory spending just three months in the UK from May to August, to breed and raise chicks. When Swifts arrive back in the UK in Spring after a marathon journey from their wintering grounds in Africa they need two things:

- *A safe place to nest

- *Plenty of invertebrates to eat.

But these essentials are becoming increasingly scarce. As houses are renovated and old buildings are demolished swifts find themselves shut out from the nooks and crannies they make their homes in. In addition, habitat loss and pesticide use have severely reduced their insect prey. Without the food and nest sites they need to successfully raise chicks, swift numbers will keep declining.

But it doesn't have to be this way, although many familiar nest sites logged by Sussex Ornithological Society in Billingshurst, have been lost, St Mary's Church continues to provide a safe nesting site for returning swifts. The transformation project will ensure the preservation of existing nests as well as the addition of more specially designed nest boxes for the church tower thus securing the swifts future in Billingshurst. Also the church grounds will be better managed to increase insect numbers; vital food for birds and vital pollinators too.



It is because of the presence of swifts at St Mary's and the location of the Church that Billingshurst is well placed to boost its local Swift population. By installing specially designed nest boxes and planting wildflowers and grasses and allowing them to set seed residents of Billingshurst could help save swifts which are now sadly red listed as a species of conservation concern.



Swifts are colonial nesters. They pair bond when they are one year old sometimes guarding a suitable nest site together until they are mature enough to breed, usually at four years old, after which they can live for a further six years. Swifts are iconic aerial birds and superb fliers living their life on the wing. They are adept at foraging for airborne insects (*carefully avoiding the stinging variety) and spiders. Swifts sleep on the wing climbing to higher altitudes by night than by day (3000 m) for safety.

Swifts are a medium sized bird with a body length of 16-17cm, a short forked tail and scythe like wings spanning 42-48cm.

The swift is a summer visitor to the UK and uses a diverse range of natural habitats including farmland, grassland, urban, suburban and wetlands. Swifts, swallows and martins often get confused for one another. Swifts are by far the larger of the three, they are pale sooty brown but in flight against the sky they appear black. Swifts have a piercing, screaming call, however they are silent (and clean) at the nest. Swifts nest in holes inside old buildings and increasingly in specially designed swift nest boxes. Unlike swallows and martins, you will not see swifts perching on telegraph wires or fences, they have tiny feet and legs.



You will see swifts flying fast and low around buildings screaming loudly or perhaps swooping fast into a little crevice in a building to their nest.

Swifts are the fastest birds in level flight. The peregrine is officially the fastest bird but only in a steep dive Called a stoop.

Could St Mary's together with the Billingshurst community come together to save our Swifts? Could this very special bird become emblematic of our village in the future?

To find out more contact Helen Toole, Billigreen (facebook).

For further advice on swift conservation in Billingshurst see [here](#).