

## 4. Swifts and Other Birds



*This sheet gives information about swifts, our partnership to promote them and guidelines on how to manage a burial site to help birds.*

### THE SWIFT IS A CARING FOR GOD'S ACRE FLAGSHIP SPECIES

*Swifts need help! The number of swifts breeding in the UK is falling. Over the past 15 years numbers of this amazing and beautiful bird have dropped by about 40%.*

Renovation of buildings to make them more energy efficient and watertight has removed many nesting places and reductions in the numbers of insects may also have taken a toll. Better news is that cathedrals, churches, chapels and temples often have suitable nesting places, and the burial ground itself can make a good hunting ground.

We are working with [Swift Conservation](http://www.swift-conservation.org) to try to use burial grounds and religious buildings to support the swift population.



### KNOW YOUR SWIFT

Swifts look rather like swallows and martins, but are actually related more closely to hummingbirds. Swifts are an extremely aerodynamic group of birds, spending almost all of their lives flying. They feed, drink, mate and sleep on the wing and fly up to 3000m high, reaching speeds of about 70mph.

After leaving the nest, young swifts will not land for three or four years until they have matured and are ready to breed. The shape of a swift is so suited to flying that they are unable to land on flat ground and have tiny feet and legs. As a swift will never land on the ground, it follows that any swift found on the ground is likely to be injured or sick, and will require specialist help. It should never be thrown into the air.

Swifts are only here in the UK for about 3 months, leaving immediately after the young fly the nest. The timing of the 3 months depends on the latitude and the weather, but falls between April and August. Swifts spend the rest of the year on migration and in equatorial and eastern Africa.

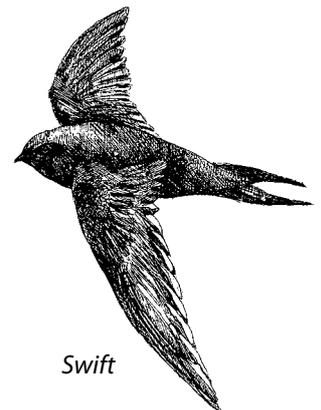
Swifts feed on tiny flying insects: aphids, flying ants, mosquitoes, hoverflies and small beetles, collecting food in a pouch at the base of the mouth. An adult swift brings a food ball or 'bolus' back to its young. This bolus is gathered over vast distances and contains thousands of insects. The young can wait a long time between meals!

Swifts pair for life and return to the same nest sites year after year. They tend to nest in colonies and have a screaming call which attracts other swifts to a nesting site. They nest within a hole in a cliff, wall or roof with the nest entirely out of sight. Tall buildings with more than one storey, such as churches and towers, make good nesting sites. Blocking of nest entrances can spell disaster for a whole colony.

Swifts tend to eat the droppings of their young and so there is usually little or no mess beneath a swift nest.

### Managing for swifts

Swifts are in urgent need of nest places. Cathedrals, churches, chapels, temples and crematoria are all suitable. 'Nest holes', nest boxes or swift bricks can be fitted into and on to buildings (including listed ones) without difficulty. Eaves are particularly suitable as are ventilation slits, louvres and hoods in church towers and spires. Provided the nesting space has no openings into the interior of the building the swift will be unable to get inside, which can be a serious hazard for the birds as well as a problem for people!



Swift

### Staying within the law

Swifts are protected by law; it is illegal to kill or harm them or to damage nests or eggs. In practice this can affect the timing of repairs to a building with swifts in it. Do not carry out renovation or re-roofing if swifts are present.

If regular nesting holes need to be blocked off by building work then look for ways to create an artificial cavity, a 'nest-holes', as close as possible to the original hole. This allows buildings to be made more weatherproof and energy efficient without affecting the swifts.

With the correct advice, building work can either

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preserve existing swift nesting holes or create artificial ones which are not visible from the outside and do not contravene listed building status. Towers and spires are particularly suitable for these artificial nest holes.

If you want to encourage swifts to start nesting on a building then playing recorded swift calls can act as a lure.

Swift Conservation has many years experience of working with different buildings and its local experts can provide free advice on the techniques for creating swift holes, including details for making nest boxes.

Contact Caring for God's Acre or Swift Conservation to find out about buildings where historical swift nest places have been preserved or where nest boxes and nest holes have been specially designed and installed. These include churches, cathedrals and synagogues.

#### OTHER BIRDS

Burial grounds can be particularly good for other birds, attracting similar birds to those found in large gardens with mature shrubs and trees.

Birds such as blackbirds, song thrushes and wrens use a burial site all year round, nesting in trees and hedges. Look for goldfinches feeding on seedheads and spotted flycatchers perching on gravestones, flying out to catch insects and then returning to their perch. If there are yew trees you may notice birds in late summer, feeding on the berries. In the winter you can see mixed flocks of small birds such as tits and finches feeding in trees and hedges, or visiting winter thrushes such as redwings and fieldfares feeding on holly and rowan berries.

Birds enhance any burial site and the types and numbers of birds present will change according to the season and time of day. This can give a great deal of interest and delight to visitors.

With pressure on our countryside and loss of large gardens, burial grounds are playing an increasingly important role in the conservation of once common birds such as starling, song thrush and house sparrow.

There has been a loss of 44 million pairs of breeding birds in the UK since 1966 (RSPB annual report).

#### Typical burial ground birds – based on a BTO survey

Blackbird	Robin	Blue tit	Greenfinch
<b>SONG THRUSH</b>	Wren	<b>STARLING</b>	<b>Dunnock</b>
<b>HOUSE SPARROW</b>	Great tit	Chaffinch	Wood pigeon
<b>SPOTTED FLYCATCHER</b>	Goldfinch	<b>Bullfinch</b>	Rook
<b>Willow warbler</b>	<b>LINNET</b>	<b>Swift</b>	Blackcap
<b>Stock dove</b>	Coal tit	Goldcrest	<b>Mistle thrush</b>
Collared dove	Tawny owl		

Bird numbers are assessed by a 'traffic light' system. Green means the national population is healthy, amber is a cause for concern with numbers declining, red is critical and numbers are declining fast or are very low.

Those birds in **bold** are on the 2012 **amber list**

Those birds in **CAPITALS** are on the **2012 RED LIST**

(State of the UK's Birds report)



Redwing

#### Helping birds

Try to provide as much natural food and cover as possible including:

- Mature and veteran trees containing holes, crevices and deadwood (see sheet A8, Helping Wildlife).
- Plants which have berries, fruit, hips and haws and which form thickets for nesting.
- Hedges with nesting sites plus berries, seeds and fruit over the autumn and winter. Do not trim hedges every year.
- Rough patches with nettle, bramble, elder and scrub. These will support insects and provide food and shelter in winter.

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*Pied Flycatcher*



*Wren*



*Goldfinch*

- Dense ivy gives shelter and fruiting ivy is rich in insects. Removal of ivy from veteran yews should be given higher priority (see sheet A5, Yews and Other Veteran Trees).
- Compost heaps and wood piles provide worms and invertebrates.
- A mosaic of grassland with short, long and tussocky grass provides food to both seed and insect eating birds.
- Undisturbed ant hills will benefit the green woodpecker which feeds mainly on ants.
- Water in a dish or bird bath. Placed on the ground it can also be used by other animals.
- Natural nesting sites and/or a range of nest boxes.

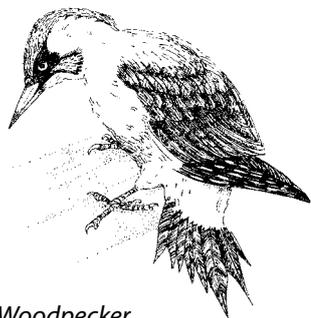
- Avoid the use of chemicals, particularly pesticides as this reduces the amount of wild food for birds.
- Put up swift nest boxes on buildings.

### ***Staying within the law***

Wild birds are protected by law:

It is illegal to take or kill any wild bird or to take, damage or destroy their nest while it is in use or being built.

Work to buildings, walls, trees or hedges should take place out of the nesting season. Avoid works between mid March and August if you suspect that there are nesting birds present.



*Green Woodpecker*



*Great Spotted Woodpecker*

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### Finding out what birds are present

Keep a diary of birds seen, and make a note of what they are doing. For example, carrying nesting material indicates nest building; carrying food indicates either a mate sitting on eggs or else young being fed. Begging young birds may have come from a nest on site or else nearby.

Autumn and winter will bring different birds: flocks of finches and tits, winter thrushes such as redwing

or fieldfare, and you may hear tawny owls calling in the autumn as the adults drive the youngsters out of territory. Male and female owls make the 'terwit' call which is answered by a low 'whoop' call from the male only. Clean out any nest boxes in the winter and see what type of nest is present.

You may choose to produce a simple recording form to encourage people to report sightings.

Join the Big Garden Birdwatch which is run by the RSPB and takes place over a weekend in late January.

Bird Survey

Date: 12<sup>th</sup> May 2012      Time: 9am to 11am

Name: Mrs. A. Egan (tel: 235678)

Weather: fine and sunny, light breeze

Species	No.	Activity noted eg: singing, feeding, nest building etc.
Blackbird	5	Singing, food to nest
Swift	3	Entering nest site in eaves of church
Chiffchaff	1	Singing
Buzzard	1	Flower

### Useful contacts

British Trust for Ornithology, [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org)

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)

Swift Conservation, [www.swift-conservation.org](http://www.swift-conservation.org)

The Hawk and Owl Trust, [www.hawkandowl.org](http://www.hawkandowl.org)

Wildlife Trust, [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)

### Useful reading

Annual Report 2012 – RSPB publication

Big Garden Birdwatch – RSPB website

Collins Bird Guide – Lars Svensson & Killian Mullarney

Owls and Owl Pellets – Field Studies Council fold-out chart

The State of the UK's Birds – RSPB publication

Top 50 Garden Birds – Field Studies Council fold-out chart