

SWIFTS

A Wonder of Nature



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Swifts – A Wonder of Nature

Introduction

- Swifts feed, mate and sleep on the wing, and land, as far as we know, only to nest. They are one of the fastest birds in flight and can travel great distances (e.g. one young swift covered 1,300km in 3 days).¹ They can also fly great distances when hunting for food. (e.g. British breeding swifts were found hunting flies over Germany).
- After a chick makes its first flight it has to fly for about three years before landing to nest. Since most birds start breeding only in their 3rd or 4th year, they are believed to stay in the air for all that time, except when checking possible nest sites.
- Swifts visit Ireland in early May and leave in August to winter in the Congo Basin, Southern Africa and Tanzania.²
- They are long-lived birds and can live to 12 years of age.³ They lay 2-3 eggs in a single brood a year and it takes 6 weeks to rear the young (twice as long as most other birds).
- Swifts are monogamous and the same pairs breed together year after year and nest in the same place for the duration of their breeding life. They like to feed in the unstable air at the rear of a weather depression where there is often plenty of insect life. They feed higher in the sky generally than swallows or martins.
- Their closest genetic relative is the hummingbird.

Swifts in danger

Historically swifts nested in holes high up in large trees and still do in places like Scotland. Today they nest mostly in old buildings. Modern buildings have no space in the eaves for nests because of the need for close guttering, etc. Therefore, there is a need to replace this huge loss of nesting sites with nest boxes to help the species survive.

Swift nest boxes have been installed at the rear of 47 Hampton Court, Dublin 3. There is also a small speaker playing swift sounds to attract last year's young to visit and inspect the site. It takes about 3 years before these grow old enough to use the nest boxes.⁴

Installation

1. Nest boxes: 5 boxes with 3 nests each: 2 [Schwegler No. 17A](#) & 3 [Genesis](#).
2. Sound system: To help swifts find the nest boxes.
3. Infra-red camera: To be installed in the Schwegler boxes later for streaming.



Acknowledgements

Thanks to Lynda and Chris Huxley of the [Swift Conservation Ireland](#) for all their advice and for supplying the nest boxes. This is the most important organisation specialising on supporting swifts in Ireland. (See [RTE](#).)

Location of Nest boxes



Notes

¹ Some suggest that the fastest bird in level flight is the White-throated Needletail Swift, which can supposedly reach speeds of up to 105 mph. The Common Swift, which is our summer visitor, however, has a scientifically verifiable 69 mph speed leaving some to identify it as fastest bird. The Peregrine Falcon is the fastest at speeds above 186 mph but this is in speed-assisted flight when it is stooping or diving in the sky. E.g. see [here](#).

² The Southern Africa countries they return to are Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

³ The known record for the longest living swift is 21 years.

⁴ If all the nest boxes are successfully used over the next few years there will be 15 pairs of swifts. There is a lot of information available on the Common Swift. For example, see [BBC Autumnwatch](#), also [here](#) and [here](#).

