

The Swift

Scientific Name: *Apus apus*
Irish Name: Gabhlán gaoithe



Courtesy of Falciot #2 CC SA 2.0

By Julian Wyllie

The word 'swift' means "Moving fast, or able to move quickly". The bird called the Swift is very well named - it is certainly able to move quickly. In normal flight, they average around 50 miles per hour and can quite easily put on a little burst to 60-ish if needed. That maybe doesn't sound that fast if you're travelling in a car, but when you're less than 20 cm long with no 'engine' as such, it's quite a feat. They quite literally live in the air - when it comes to bedtime, they simply spiral up a few thousand feet, switch off and grab a couple of hours sleep.

FACT FILE:

Colour: Blackish-brown with a pale throat.

Length: 16-17 cm.

Diet: Insects, which they catch while in flight.

Habitat: Nests in roofs and old buildings. A summer visitor to Ireland from May to August.

A Summer Visitor

Swifts are summer visitors to Ireland, spending their winter somewhere south of the equator, though exactly where, no-one really knows. Being highly mobile, they go where their food goes, and as they feed on flies, that can cover a very large area indeed. The first Irish Swifts begin to arrive in late April and at a glance can easily be mistaken for an all black Swallow.

Unlike Swallows, however, they have swept back wings which give them a boomerang appearance. Another difference is their preference for towns and built up areas, whereas as Swallows tend to prefer a more rural environment, nesting in old barns and outhouses.



Courtesy of Robbie Murphy

The body of the swallow (above) is lighter in colour and it has a longer forked tail.

Saving the Swifts

Swifts have tiny feet and if one happens to land on the ground, it will stay there, helpless, unless someone finds it and re-launches it in the air. The only time they come to land is to nest and because of this essential part of life, Swifts are now facing big trouble. Put simply, modern buildings and the demolition of old, unused warehouses and factories is leaving them with fewer and fewer choices when it comes to finding a place to build a nest. All that is needed is a three inch crack in a wall or a gap underneath a roofing tile, but these are becoming harder and harder to find. However, not all is lost and it is not too late to help Swifts rebuild their populations. In The Low Countries (Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg), it is now illegal to build a new house without providing a small cavity or hollowed out brick, just large enough for a Swift family to be raised. Although Ireland is somewhat behind in these forward thinking ways, the situation here is slowly improving and there are two websites dedicated to helping Swifts in their plight on www.swiftconservation.org and www.saveourswifts.co.uk Both give advice on all ways of helping Swifts and give information on help available to those wanting to help. In return for our efforts, we could see the return of screaming parties of Swifts to our towns and villages (they make the most incredible screaming sounds in June and early August). And, perhaps best of all, they eat flies, including mosquitoes (but not bees). That sounds like a fair deal doesn't it?

