

# Moving swiftly on: why rebirding is the new rewilding

Our migratory birds are in decline - but a new campaign aims to lure them back. By Joe Shute

In a recent interview with the Poet Laureate Simon Armitage, the Prince of Wales confessed his love for a certain bird. "There is something irresistible about a swift," Prince Charles told Armitage, describing how he had seen them mid-migration at sea while serving with the Royal Navy, and delights each summer in their swooping over the battlements of Windsor Castle - with their shrill cry that led to them being nicknamed the "Evil's Bird".

Should swifts and their migratory cousins, swallows and house martins, one year not return to Britain from their epic 6,000-mile sub-Saharan migration, the Prince admitted, his "world would come to an end".

Last December, a few months after he had given that interview, came news which would have alarmed not just Prince Charles, but anyone interested in the fate of the birds, which are a symbol of the British summer. Both swifts and house martins were being added to the red list of Britain's most endangered birds following a catastrophic decline in their numbers. Swifts have declined by 58 per cent since 1995, while house martin populations have similarly suffered.

The poet Ted Hughes famously wrote that the return of swifts to Britain in May is a sure sign that "the globe's still working". So their increasing absence, is evidence of something seriously amiss.

In order to halt the decline, a new call to arms is being launched this week, urging homeowners across the country to encourage the birds back before it is too late. Co-ordinated by

the Wildlife Trusts and Royal Horticultural Society, the campaign called "Wild About Highflyers" urges people to install swift nesting boxes and bricks on their properties, to plant specific flowers, dig ponds and let patches of garden grow long and unruly. Forget rewilding, this is hoped to be the beginning of a vital rebirding of the nation's back gardens.

"These are birds which are seriously declining, but in a way they are still here and not yet at the desperate fragmentary population stage," explains Ben Stammers, people and wildlife officer at the North Wales Wildlife Trust. "They are still present in most towns, villages and cities. It is the perfect time to try to help them, and they are a species we can help."

Our homes are vital to the fortunes of swifts and house martins. The birds build their nests in the faultlines: tiny cracks in brickwork or gaps between roof tiles.

Britain's aged housing stock, the oldest in Europe owing to the high prevalence of Victorian and Edwardian homes, has long provided a safe haven for the birds. But increasingly as we embark on DIY projects, renovate our houses and install modern insulation it removes opportunities for swifts and house martins to build their nests. A similar issue prevails in the

countryside with old barns being demolished, reducing swallow nesting habitat.

To provide space for birds, community groups are installing swift boxes and bricks in both old and new properties - something the campaign hopes to further encourage.

Since 2015 Prince Charles's Duchy of Cornwall has been installing integrated nesting

boxes in all new developments and asking residents to monitor the species moving in. Last year's survey of four developments found that of 628 nest bricks, almost half - 294 - showed signs of use, with house



Haven for birds: author Sarah Gibson lets her garden grow wild to attract house martins, left, and barn swallows, right

sparrows (another bird in steep decline), house martins and starlings the most numerous of the species moving in.

Elsewhere community groups such as the Totley Swift Group in Sheffield have erected nearly 100 nesting boxes in recent years, a quarter of which have been used by the birds to nest. Ideally, any nesting spot for swifts needs to be north-facing, sheltered, and at least five metres off the ground (the higher the better for the fledglings' first vertiginous flight).

Another Cambridge-based swift enthusiast, retired salesman John Stimpson, celebrated his 80th birthday in January by completing his goal of building 30,000 swift boxes in his garage in Ely, which he sells to people wanting to assist.

In North Wales, Stammers, 51, has worked with communities over the past seven years to install 400 swift boxes and a monitoring system which has amassed 1,500 recorded sightings of the birds. He is also campaigning for the Government to insist local authorities and developers incorporate swift bricks and boxes into every new development as part of a shake-up of planning rules.

"It would literally be built into our future homes and could be a big game changer," Stammers says. "I would like to see it as part of a wider and more generous vision about how we cohabit with the natural world."

Ensuring that the birds have enough insects to eat is another vital part of the campaign. Swifts alone are voracious feeders. On a good day a pair can gobble up 20,000 insects and spiders between them. Their constant energy supply means they even sleep while airborne, propelled by boomerang-

shaped wings which make them the fastest bird in-powered flight ever recorded. While the peregrine falcon achieves higher speeds, these are the result of the raptor stooping (essentially plummeting down from a great height) rather than beating its wings.

The decline in the birds has been mirrored by a similarly catastrophic collapse in insect populations in Britain, depriving them of a vital food source. Creating bog gardens with species such as marsh bedstraw and purple loosestrife is valuable for providing muddy nesting material for swallows and house martins, but also encouraging the insects (D

which the birds feed. So too is planting trees such as Hawthorne.

Even making small changes to a garden can enable the birds to return. A decade or so ago Sarah Gibson, who last year published *Swifts and Us: The Life of the Bird that Sleeps in the Sky*, moved from the Welsh Borders into an end Victorian terrace in Oswestry. The 61-year-old recalls her garden as a "sterile" space when she first moved in - and devoid of swifts - but she quickly set about transforming it into a haven for wildlife.

She has dug a small pond, sown a mini-meadow on the lawn with wildflower species including cowslips, field scabious, and knapweed, and planted honeysuckle and climbing roses which snake up her home.

She also put up swift boxes, although they were ignored by the birds. Instead, one day she clambered up to the loft and saw the remains of an old swift nesting spot, but one which had been sealed up by the previous homeowner using expanding foam. "I pulled all that out and swifts were in there the following year," she says.

Now two pairs return each year. "I just loved that intimacy of birds nesting on our houses so close to us, sharing our roof space. It is a very special feeling."

Swifts are surprisingly long-lived, surviving on average for 10 years and sometimes double that, and possess an incredibly powerful migratory instinct

which we do not yet fully understand. That means the birds that alight here from Africa each May will in all likelihood be the very same ones that left the previous year.

The swifts remember, in other words, and that is why it is hoped that by opening up our homes and gardens we will ensure their return for decades to come. The alternative, that the screaming skies fall silent each summer, is, as the Prince of Wales says, simply too much to bear.

