



Spotter's Guide to Swifts, Swallows and House Martins

We'd love to know if you have nesting swifts, swallows or house martins on your local church or chapel. Perhaps under the eaves, in the porch or even in the lychgate. All three birds are summer visitors to the UK, spending the winter in Africa. Swallows and martins return to the UK from March or April, leaving in the autumn. Swifts are only with us between May and August.

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Photo of swift by TheOtherKev on Pixabay



Photo of swifts nest by Bristol Swifts

SWIFTS

Swifts are dark brown all over with a torpedo-shaped body with long, scythe-shaped wings and forked tail. Swifts spend their whole lives on the wing except when nesting and have a distinctive shrill call or 'scream'. They are often seen and heard circling in groups, particularly in the evening. Swifts usually nest high up, under eaves or in holes in rooves or walls. Their nests are completely out of sight and have very little structure, often composed of just a few feathers. There may be no mess beneath them, so they are easy to overlook. Swifts leave their young for many hours, whilst they fly high, catching tiny insects and spiders. Whilst its easy to see and hear swifts circling, it is difficult to actually spot a nesting pair.

For further support and information on Swifts, visit our friends at Swift Conservation:
<https://swift-conservation.org/>



Photo of swallow by TheOtherKev on Pixabay



SWALLOWS

Swallows have long, forked tails. They are a glossy blue-black colour with a cream underbody and red throat. They have a chattering call and are agile flyers who spend most of their time in the air. Unlike swifts they can land on the ground and congregate on telephone wires prior to migrating. Swallows nest within barns and open buildings such as church porches or lychgates. Historically they used caves. Swallows build a shallow cup-shaped nest on a ledge or beam, and a growing pile of droppings will be visible beneath the nest as summer progresses. Swallows visit their young regularly and can be watched darting in to feed noisy young.



HOUSE MARTINS

The smallest of the three, house martins have shorter tails and wings. They have a small fork in the tail, a white underbody and also a distinctive white rump and white chin. House martins have a chattering call, similar to swallows and are also agile flyers, catching insects on the wing. Historically house martins nested on cliffs and now use walls in a similar way, making a dome-shaped mud nest which is stuck to a wall, often under the eaves. Like swallows, their nests are visible, and a growing pile of droppings gathers below them. House martins visit their young regularly and can be watched darting in to feed noisy young.



Swifts, swallows, and house martins are all expert fliers that hunt insects mid-air, catching and eating them while in flight. These birds are social and gregarious, and they have similar sizes and shapes, making it challenging to distinguish between them. We hope this guide assists you in identifying them.

If you need help in identifying the calls of swifts, swallows and house martins, or any other type of bird then use iNaturalist to record the sound and it will suggest likely matches as well as making a biological record. Why not give it a try?