

Swifts

Why they are amazing!

By Evie

Our very own Swift !!!

- Our' swifts are only 'British birds' for a quarter of their lives (three months per year)-the rest of the time they're African .They have soft beaks –but very powerful feet. Their four toes are arranged in twos, each pair pointing sideways rather than forwards, a bit like a chameleon Or a koala. The wings are long and narrow, and superbly adapted for fast flight , but don't allow slow flight or a great deal of manoeuvrability !!! A swift weighs about the same as a Cadbury's crème Egg, Crunchy (or any other 40g chocolate bar).
- For it's size, the swift has an exceptionally long life-span averaging about 5.5 years. One bird in Oxford was found dying in 1964, 16 years after it was ringed as an adult, and therefore likely to be at least 18 years old. It's reckoned that this bird flew, in it's lifetime, about 4 million miles, the same as flying to the moon and back 8 times !!!
- In swifts generally, longest primaries can be up to three times the length of the secondaries –only up to twice in hirundines (swallows and martins).
- Eyes are deep seated and have a moveable bristles in front –sunglasses for reducing glare. All birds have fleas and feather lice or similar parasites. However the swift's are so different to those of other species that it supports the fact that they separated from other bird species a very long time ago. Their parasites have evolved with them !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Eating and Drinking !!!

The swift probably eats more species of animals (small insects and spiders) than any other British bird. David Lack recorded over 312, and reckoned there were more. They usually take items 2-10mm long. They probably hunt at about 25 miles an hour!!! They drink by gliding over smooth water and taking sips!!!

Swifts can be quite selective about what they catch. One was found to have caught only sting-less drones around bee hives, and to have neatly dodged all the females, which had stings!!!

Swifts can't feed in wet weather here in the UK, so they fly around storms to find dry areas - the only UK birds that do this. On the wintering grounds in Africa it's different - there are more insects in the air on rainy days, so the swifts will head for rain.

Bringing up a baby!!!

It seems they really can mate on the wing - but they will also mate in their nest holes. No other bird is known to mate on the wing (apart from some other swift species). Swifts also use their saliva for nest building - like the edible nest swifts. Nesting material is collected on the wing (it has to be) so they can only use what they can find in the air - David Lack once recorded them using a live butterfly!

The weight of an egg is about one-twelfth the weight of the female that laid it approx 3.5 grams, even the experts agree - very young swift chicks, before they get their feathers through, are hideous!

They have a very clever adaptation. Food can be scarce in bad weather - the chicks can go cold and torpid and can survive days without food, then regain weight rapidly once supplies resume. Most baby birds can't do this and would simply die within hours. Only one other kind of bird can lose temperature control and become torpid each night - the hummingbird. This saves energy!!!