



**SWIFT**CONSERVATION  
KEEPING THE SKIES ALIVE [www.swift-conservation.org](http://www.swift-conservation.org)

## Swift Survey Techniques

The best time to survey for Swifts (in the UK) is early to mid-July, when the population is at its biggest, enlarged by juvenile Swifts who fly in to Europe from Africa much later than the adults.

In other locations, where the dates of Swift presence may be earlier or later than with us, you should survey for your Swifts 4 to 2 weeks before they leave. After that numbers will diminish as they start to migrate South.

Best times - from half an hour before dawn to two hours after, and from two hours before dusk to half an hour after.

Weather - Warm to hot and dry days are best.

What to look for - Swifts flying round and round buildings and along streets at or just above roof top level and below, screaming. The photograph below shows a reasonable flight level for the Swift flocks you should be aiming to count.



These are the local Swifts, breeders and non-breeding juveniles who have attached themselves to the flock, and they are demonstrating their territory, we think, by this noisy circling flight. Beware confusing the Swifts with Swallows and Martins – see below.



Swift in flight - large - all dark – pale chin usually not visible -very fast – screaming calls



Swallow - Spotted tail - creamy under-parts - red throat – twittering song



House Martin – Chunky - Black and white – clicking call

Swifts flying at a high level, well above the buildings, may not be local, indeed could be from anywhere and for the purposes of counting local colonies, should be ignored.

Suggested technique: walk slowly round the areas where there are low-flying, screaming Swifts. Count the circling flocks until you have an accurate estimate of birds in flight.

You will need to do this several times as they are fast flyers and their criss-crossing flight-paths can be very confusing for the observer to disentangle.

Listen as the Swifts pass the buildings for the answering screams of Swifts still in their nests, they will answer the birds screaming as they pass by outside. Add those birds you can hear but cannot see to the total number.

You may detect their nests either as the Swifts enter or leave them, and just at dusk and shortly after, when the adults return to spend the night with the chicks.

Using Swift Calls: You can also (very briefly) play Swift calls (use the MP3 recording that we sell from our web site's Shopping Page) from your mobile phone; Swifts in their nearby nest holes will call back, and enable you to detect occupied nests fairly easily.

A suggested programme - conduct "Swift Walks" around the survey areas to detect the low-flying screaming flocks and then mark the locations on a map. After that you can conduct repeat visits to the marked areas to determine the actual numbers of Swifts, and the exact locations of nests.

"Swift Walks" can also be offered to the interested public as an evening's event. We have done quite a few. All were very popular and successful. Other people and Swift Groups are doing them too around the UK, and in France and Italy too as part of local "Swift Festivals".

Using the information – the survey results should be used to protect local Swift colonies from inappropriate development and disturbance. They should also be used to supply local and national ornithological groups with relevant up-to-date statistics. Three UK-wide surveys are current: the RSPB's Swift Mapper app, the BTO's Breeding Bird Survey, and BirdTrack. All are "on-line" surveys and can be easily located at:

[www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/about](http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/about)

[www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs](http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs)

Swift Mapper – the app can be downloaded free from Google Play Store