

Aylsham swifts need our help

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While walking by the lake in Blickling Park last spring, I was mesmerised by a flock of about 70 swifts circling low overhead. Looking up at their silhouettes, with boomerang-shaped wings and short forked tail, I wondered if these long-distance migrants were passing through or if they might nest nearby.

You can see swifts in Aylsham too. Sit on the grass in St Michael's churchyard on a summer's evening and look skywards. Listen for flocks of swifts screaming as they circle high in the sky. See them fly low over roof tops in White Hart Street and Red Lion Street – keep your eyes peeled because these birds are fast, reaching speeds of up to 69 mph.

Breeding pairs look for nest sites in old buildings. Walk down Hungate Street from the Market Square and if you're lucky, you might see a swift dart into the eaves.

A lifelong birder and founder of Action for Swifts, Dick Newell has devoted his retirement to swift conservation shared his knowledge at the Aylsham & District Wildlife Society's June meeting.

The main problem for swifts in the UK, says Dick Newell, is the loss of nest sites. In addition, the RSPB says we need to research the impact of insecticides as swifts rely on airborne insects and spiders.



1 Picture courtesy Julian Thomas

Swifts used to nest in tree holes, but over time, deforestation in the UK forced them into holes in buildings. Now, swifts look for displaced tiles, open eaves and gables, or gaps in brickwork where pointing is missing. But as more and more old buildings are repaired and renovated, these holes and crevices are disappearing.

Swifts are in urgent need of our help. Aylsham resident and ACE supporter Patricia Grocott is setting up an Aylsham group to take action for swifts. So, whether you're an individual, a family, a school, or construction company, big or small, if you want to become a swift champion, contact Pat to find out more: aylshamswifts@gmail.com.

Swifts are endurance athletes with a superpower – they feed, drink, mate and even sleep on the wing and rarely touch down. The common swift spends an incredible 10 months a year in the air and is the only swift that breeds in the UK, returning from Africa in late April.

But UK populations are declining at an alarming rate. Swifts are now a red-listed species on the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern.

Let's give swifts a permanent home in Aylsham.