

The sand martin nesting house at  
Gailes Marsh Wildlife Reserve

© Kevin Waite

# Living the sky life

As swallows, swifts and martins make a welcome return to Scottish skies, Lindsay Quayle explores the behavioural quirks and differences between these treasured harbingers of spring

**A**s we wave goodbye to shorter days and cooler nights, colonies of swallows, swifts and martins begin their epic journey home from wintering grounds in west and sub-Saharan Africa.

The return of these much-loved species is a treat for all: there are few sights and sounds more heartening after the dark winter months than a swooping display or the distinctive call of these lively summer visitors.

One challenge, however, is to differentiate between each species, as their dark, narrow wings, turn of speed and aerial prowess look remarkably similar

when witnessed in flight. Watch and listen closely though, and the characterful markings and social behaviours that set each of these charismatic birds apart soon begin to shine through.

## House mates

The unmistakable white rump of the house martin makes it one of the easiest of all to identify. With a glossy blue-black upper, white body and throat and short, forked tail, these small, slightly dumpy birds are one of the earliest returners to Scotland, arriving around mid-March.

The ultimate socialites, house martins migrate and feed en masse. They are

also colonial nesters, with hundreds gathering in rural outbuildings or smaller numbers clustering around distinctive mud nests under the eaves of houses. Spot one pair of breeding house martins and it's almost guaranteed that there will be others nearby.

Such clustering together can make for a noisy summer for those in close proximity to nesting sites. House martins' hard, quick, chirping prrit or twittering song is relentless as they flit excitedly back and forth, depositing mouthfuls of mud for their intricately constructed nests or delivering food for their young. Although they feed entirely on the wing,

it is possible to catch a fleeting glimpse of a house martin closer to ground, gathering mud from nearby streams or puddles. Numbers are in worrying decline though – partly due to the availability of favoured insect prey – so witnessing this sprightly bird hard at work is a seasonal moment to cherish.

## Family differences

It's no surprise that swallows are commonly mistaken for house or sand martins: they all belong to the same family of passerine songbirds known as the hirundine.

The handsome swallow's blue-grey back and cream underside resembles that of the house martin but a rusty-red throat and forehead helps distinguish it – with a longer, forked tail with two extended streamers the final giveaway.

These streamers not only act as a practical aid for this family

of supreme fliers but also play a key role at the height of mating season: for females, the more symmetrical a male bird's streamers, the healthier and more viable it is as a potential mate.

Country dwellers at heart, swallows spend vast amounts of time in rural landscapes, gliding gracefully over open farmland, meadows and heath in close proximity to water.

Their flight path is generally lower than that of swifts or martins, swooping especially low to catch large flies or to sip from water bodies close to their favoured nesting sites in open-fronted barns or the eaves of old buildings.

Despite their famed aerial abilities, they are also content to take the weight off their feet when needed. A 'gulp' of swallows perched high on a telegraph wire or roosting in reedbeds is a familiar sight towards the end of summer – much-needed preparation for a 6,000-

mile migration back to their wintering grounds in Africa.

## Changing times

It's getting harder to predict when many of our migratory visitors will make their first appearance of the year. A changing climate plus other environmental factors have impacted migratory patterns, with some species, including swallows, now returning to the UK earlier and remaining here for longer.

One thing is guaranteed though: when you spot your first swift of the season, it won't be perched on a wire. Or perched anywhere, for that matter. These aerobatic wizards spend most of their year at high altitude, feeding, mating and even sleeping on the wing.

Sooty brown in colour, but often appearing black from the ground,

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“Far less soothing than the swallow’s chirruping warble or the chittering of sand or house martins, the swift’s screaming ‘parties’ are notoriously loud.

▶ the arrow-like swift is typically the last to return to breed. But while its stay may be brief, its arrival is celebrated more widely than most: “They’ve made it again/Which means the globe’s still working,” exclaimed Ted Hughes in his tribute to this revered summer visitor.

Their long, scythe-shaped wings not only give the birds their iconic silhouette but also provide them with total stability in the sky; swifts can glide through even turbulent weather conditions with apparent ease. Their lifetime spent in flight also makes them more agile and powerful than swallows or martins – and easily the quickest too.

As the UK’s fastest bird in level flight (reaching speeds close to 70mph) the chances of studying a swift’s distinguishing features up-close are near zero. But if you did get a peek beneath its strong, slender body, you would discover a pair of unsubstantial legs and two tiny feet – characteristics that it shares with its closest relative, the hummingbird.

Perhaps a better way of identifying them is to listen out for their shrill, high-pitched call. Far less soothing than the swallow’s chirruping warble, or the chittering of sand or house martins, the swift’s ‘screaming parties’ are notoriously loud.

Fast and frenzied, tightly packed swifts tumble and twist above gardens and rooftops, their piercing soundtrack an audible reminder that they still thrive on living amongst humans, just as they have done for thousands of years.

### Nesting problems

Sadly, the sound of partying swifts is one being heard less frequently across the UK. Like house martins, swifts were added to the red list in the 2021 UK Conservation Status Report, a marker that the species is in worrying decline.

Environmental changes are taking their toll. But so too are human adaptations to the urban landscape. Swifts typically nest in the rooftops and eaves of old buildings but modern house renovations and the closing up of soffits has resulted in the loss of crucial nest sites.

And they are not the only Scottish visitor facing nesting issues. The charismatic sand martin, the smallest of the hirundine family, with brown upperparts and a distinctive brown breast band across its white chest, relies on riverbanks, sandy cliff faces or quarries as a base for its nesting tunnels

– some of the most impressive being up to 90cm long.

In some areas, however, all is not well and the birds have benefited from a helping hand. “Irvine has a history of sand quarrying and rivers with sandy banks,” explains Gill Smart, Reserves Manager at the Trust’s Gales Marsh Wildlife Reserve in Ayrshire. “But river levels are up and down too much these days, flooding out and eroding the sand martin’s favoured nesting sites.”

In addition, Irvine’s sand quarries are gone now, their voids having been used for landfill. However, thanks to support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, in early 2023 Sandy Waddell, the Trust’s local Project Officer, was able to extend a specially constructed nesting house built on the reserve for displaced sand martins, increasing its capacity from 48 to 100 nesting chambers.

### Making a difference

And 2023 was a positive year. “Of the 100 chambers, 69 were occupied and 509 new birds were ringed – 34 adults and 475 chicks,” reports Gill. This increase of more than double the birds ringed at the reserve in 2021 demonstrated what a “visible and tangible” difference the nesting house has already made.

Gill is quick to commend the efforts of the Clyde Ringing Group and their dedication to ringing and monitoring these sociable visitors. As well as helping track visiting numbers, this level of constant monitoring is like an early warning system for the species worldwide. Gill stresses: “If things start going wrong for sand martins across the world, it’s important we know quickly.”

Last season, the reserve was able to support the University of Glasgow’s research into sand martin ticks. Although numbers collected at Gales Marsh were thankfully low, it is such data that “will prove invaluable to the future health of the species”.

For now, it’s a positive story for sand martins at Gales Marsh and the many people who come to see these fluttering little burrowers for themselves. It’s hoped that we will see an equally healthy return of swallows, swifts and house martins over the coming weeks – nature’s sign that the world is, indeed, still working. ■

*Lindsay Quayle is a freelance writer based in the Scottish Borders.*



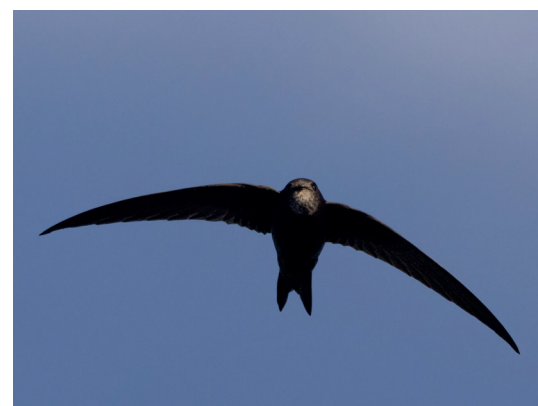
A house martin collecting mud for its nest  
© Tom Ellis Photography



Sand martins in a natural riverbank nest  
© Bob Coyle



A barn swallow alighting at a pond to collect mud  
© Mark Hamblin/2020VISION



The distinctive silhouette of a swift in flight  
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