

UP IN THE SKY

Enhanted by Swallows, Swifts and martins

WORDS BY ALICE ELGIE



THE HOUSE MARTINS and Swallows are restless; I sense it in their movements. Or perhaps it is me that is restless? I'm not sure.

But somehow their swooping and circling is different and their flighty instincts call to me in such a way that I feel their urgency for wanderings deep within my breathless lungs. It is September of last year and I am standing in a field in north Wales, surrounded by velvet green hills, holding my head up to the wide breezy sky. My heart feels stopped in time as I marvel at these birds dancing around my head and I

feel a sense of excitement and joy in their spirit for adventure and wonder if I will see them again as I too begin my own journey south for the winter. As I stand, I consider that I haven't seen Swifts for some time, that the skies have been empty of their screeching acrobatics for a while, but I know standing here in September, that they have already begun their great journey, and somehow I feel a stab of envy. To hang on to the final weeks of the Swallows and martins is all I can do to feed my own longing and each day I find myself looking skyward just to catch a glimpse; just to know that they have not yet deserted me. ➤➤

Swallows are perhaps the quintessential bird of the British summer

imageBROKER (Alamy)

At the beginning of last year, like most beginner birdwatchers, I was unable to tell the difference between House Martins, Swifts and Swallows; everything was a Swallow to me, which having now observed them for some time seems somewhat unfair; that Swallows should always steal the thunder.

It was on a spring trip to Spain with my father and young daughter that these migratory birds first really began to demand my attention. I became aware of them swooping and screeching with joy outside the window of our Marbella apartment, the first stop on our month-long adventure, and I felt excited knowing that their delight no doubt stemmed from having made it safely across from North Africa.

One Swallow

Back in England and back on my narrowboat, the farmer shouts to me, “the Swallows have arrived!” and inside I sigh, relieved at the thought of a long English summer stretched out ahead of me. I know they say that “one Swallow does not make a summer” but for me, that first sighting starts the journey. As they slowly arrived I began to read more about them, to notice their differences, such as the long tail streamers and red throat of the Swallow, and I felt proud when someone said “Oh look at the Swallows!” and I could reply, with

complete confidence that no, the shorter forked tail and white rump make it a House Martin. In fact, the lesser-appreciated House Martins are the ones I saw more of last year and so with them somehow I feel a stronger kinship, perhaps I found them friendlier, not so elusive. Sitting on a village green in the Yorkshire Wolds, a whole afternoon was spent watching House Martins as they swooped over the water and into their incredible nests, painstakingly and lovingly built under the eaves of the surrounding houses, although sadly I never saw a Sand Martin during my year, identified by their all-brown upper parts and brown chest band seen from below. And on those long summer evenings I soon realised that Swifts, with their dark underparts and scythe-like wings are very easily distinguishable from Swallows and martins, not to mention their desire to congregate in screaming groups high in the dusky sky in order to spend the night on the wing, which is hard to miss. But, how to encourage these graceful, quick-moving birds with their beautiful song into our home environments? How to entice them so that we can be privy to their aerobatics from the comfort of our garden chairs? For me it is a little less difficult, living as I do on water. Many an evening has been spent on the front deck of my boat as the sun

Swifts are larger and uniformly brown



FLPA (Alamy)



David Chapman (Alamy)

Sand Martins have brown upperparts and a distinctive brown chest band

goes down, watching these birds skim the surface to drink, or feeding on low-flying insects. If you don’t live near a lake or pond, you may try tempting them to large bird baths with fountains or by setting up a sprinkler system so they have water to fly through. As insectivorous birds, you will need to invest time in creating natural food-sources, which means no insecticides and the creation of more grassy areas, which should then be left to grow a little longer to encourage the insect population. Of course, the main thing to remember with Swallows, martins and Swifts is that, unlike many garden birds, who love the shelter and warmth of plentiful trees, these aerial birds will seek out open space where they won’t feel trapped and these locations will need to have plenty of places to rest, such as telephone lines or highly-placed washing lines. Artificial nests are available, but to encourage House Martins to nest under your eaves you might want to ensure there is a muddy puddle left to form under a guttering downspout, or perhaps create a garden pond, which will provide perfect nesting material and encourage these birds to stay. Swifts may also be attracted to nestboxes on the walls of buildings as well as gaps in stonework under roofs. While, undoubtedly Swifts, Swallows and martins are not the easiest of bird species to encourage to our gardens, once you have them around you will be glad of the time invested because they are truly magical birds and great companions over our warmer months. EW



Alice Elgie lives on a narrowboat in the English countryside, but enjoys migrating in her campervan when she can. She is an amateur but passionate birdwatcher and hopes to impart her love of nature onto her young daughter.

Bill Coster (Alamy)



Sharpen your ID skills with these tips

	Swift	Swallow	House Martin	Sand Martin	
HABIT	Never lands or perches, except at nest, which is usually under the eaves of a building.	Perches on wires, and sometimes treetops. Typically nests inside buildings such as barns.	Perches on wires, trees. Seen on ground gathering mud for nests, attached to underside of eaves.	Often perches on wires – nests in colonies in sandy river and quarry banks, or in artificial banks.	HABIT
COLOUR	Sooty, dark brown body andwings, with pale chin (not always visible), but no white on the underside.	Red-brown face, white underparts, iridescent blue-black upperparts and chest band.	Blue-black above, white rump, white underneath with no chest band. Compact and plumper than Swallow.	Smaller than Swallow, slimmer than House Martin, brown above, white below, brown chest band.	COLOUR
TAIL	Tail is forked, but short, and very narrow.	Deeply forked tail, with long ‘streamers’.	Tail forked, but no streamers, and wider than Swift’s.	Tail only slightly notched, rather than genuinely forked.	TAIL
WINGS	Wings are long, narrow, sickle-shaped, and set well forward on body, giving a small-headed look.	Long, pointed wings and strong, agile flight, with lots of twists and turns.	Wings wider than Swallow’s, with more fluttery action – flight is fast and more direct than Swallow’s.	Pointed wings usually look narrower than a House Martin’s.	WINGS
FLIGHT	Usually flies high, with rapid, flickering wingbeats and long glides, occasionally making low-level dashes.	Usually flies low, sometimes almost touching the ground or water, and can snatch food from surface of water.	Flies higher than Swallow, though rarely quite as high as Swift. Agile, but generally less dramatic than Swallow or Swift.	Low to medium height over open country. Flight weaker and more fluttery than Swallow’s, with less glides.	FLIGHT
CALL	Call is harsh scream, heard best when flying lower.	Loud ‘tswit’ alarm call, and song is a fast, trilling twitter.	Song is a soft twittering, with call a hard ‘prrit’.	Song is a harsh, rattling twitter, given in flight and when perched.	CALL