

Kerry: Hi. My name's Kerry, and the topic of my presentation this evening is a bird called the swift. For people living in most of Europe, the swift's a familiar bird. But it only stays in the northern hemisphere for a few weeks each summer. The rest of the year it spends in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, one of the best known facts about this incredible bird is that it has one of the longest migrations of any living creature.

The other incredible fact is that a swift spends most of its life in the air, where it eats, drinks and sleeps, only landing to build a nest and raise its young. Indeed, the name of the bird in German translates to 'wall-glider' in English, whereas its Latin name means 'without feet' [7], both reflecting the fact that the bird never seems to touch the ground.

In Europe, swifts are a familiar sight, wheeling around high up on summer evenings, making a lot of noise. But swifts don't produce a song, like some birds, nor do they go tweet tweet. Instead they produce what can only be called a scream. [8] You must have heard it!

Swifts are not large birds, but they have a very characteristic shape in flight. Some people say this reminds them of a new moon, and the bird's certainly crescent shaped with a very noticeable forked tail [9]. But for me, the thing that comes to mind when I see a swift is a boomerang; you know, the thing made and thrown by traditional peoples in Australia.

So, swifts come to Europe to breed and they often make their nests in buildings, especially chimneys and for some reason, ancient monuments. Because they can't land, the swifts' nests need to be in places from which they can launch themselves into the air. Probably cliffs were their original preference, but even out of town, these days they tend to go for man-made places like quarries. [10]

As you'd expect, leaves and grasses are used to build the nests, but even here the link with humans is evident as amazingly paper is often used [11], together with less surprising things like the feathers of other birds. These materials the swift probably catches in flight.

Because they never land, swifts are very vulnerable to bad weather and, in Europe, retreat to their nest sites during periods of rain or high wind. I was once lucky enough to observe a large group of swifts travelling at great speed to get out of the way of a thunderstorm. [12] It was an awesome sight that I'll never forget.

As I said, swifts only spend a short time in Europe each year, generally June and July, with even the newborn birds making the incredibly long journey to Africa in about 48 hours.

One strange fact I discovered in my research is that once it gets back to Africa, the bird is silent [13]; people there being unaware of that characteristic call.

Swifts have always fascinated people, especially because the birds have always been attracted to towns and buildings. Traditionally in Europe, the bird was used as a symbol by the younger sons of wealthy families who, without land to inherit, were destined to wander the globe [14]. I like that.