Swift in flight. Note the short forked tail, unlike the 'streamers' of the swallow, dark body feathers (with a lighter throat), scimitar-shaped wings and cigar-shaped torso. (Photo © northeastwildlife.co.uk)

By the time you read this, one of our popular (but very short-staying) birds of summer – the Swift – will be about to depart our shores to fly back to Africa. Despite appearances, Swifts are not closely related to Swallows and House Martins but are relatives of the hummingbirds. Their similarity to those other familiar aerial town dwellers is an example of 'convergent evolution', which dictates that birds with similar lifestyles will tend to be similar in body form (since that is the body form best adapted to the lifestyle). Unlike Swallows and House Martins, Swifts are dark underneath (relieved only by a lighter throat). They have long sickle-shaped wings (which seem to 'flicker' rapidly in flight), a narrow cigar-shaped body and short forked tail. They glide effectively and do not land on wires. Their feet are very small and are adapted to landing on vertical surfaces. So small are these appendages that the group's scientific name – Apodidae – literally means 'without feet' but this is a bit of Victorian scientific exaggeration! They rarely settle voluntarily on the ground and may have difficulty getting airborne if they do.

Of all Britain's birds, the Swift is the most aerial. It is a superb aeronaut and sleeps, feeds, mates and collects nest material on the wing. Its food consists of flying invertebrates and it is particularly fond of wind-borne spiders. Nest materials consist of drifting grass, straw, leaves, flower petals, winged seeds, feathers and paper scraps. They sleep at high elevation (3000 m or 10,000 ft), drifting on air currents, fly both fast and for long distances and can cruise at 110 km/h (70 mph). Annual travel totals may be 200,000 km (125,000 miles) and, because they dislike rain, Swifts have been known to fly 1000-2000 km (600-1200 miles) just to circumnavigate rain-bearing frontal depressions. They are a gregarious species and Stretton residents may be lucky enough to experience 'screaming parties', groups of Swifts careering madly at high speed over rooftops and along streets, emitting their characteristic ringing screeches.

Almost the only time Swifts become terrestrial is when they build their nests, which are glued together with saliva, on building ledges and overhangs, and raise their young. They fly long distances to gather food for their chicks, which may be fed 40 times per day with insects accumulated in the adult's throat pouch. Interestingly, the chicks can enter a state of torpor and require no food if weather conditions prevent the adults hunting. Once the young bird tumbles out of the nest for the first time, it is ignored by the adults and may then remain on the wing continuously for two to four years, until it is mature enough to breed itself.

Swift numbers in the UK have declined by about a third in the past decade. This is in part due to agricultural changes in its African winter home but undoubtedly another factor is the loss of nesting sites due to changes in building styles and renovation of old buildings. Swifts reuse old nests and about 80% of these are on houses. It is unlawful to disturb nests when they are in use and building work should not be undertaken during the breeding season. Swift nest boxes are available and birds will adapt to them if they are correctly designed and sited.

John Arnfield

Young Swifts in the nest. Clutch size varies from two to three eggs and only one brood is reared per year. (Photo: John Black, BTO Library)

The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. If you would like to receive a free copy of the wonderful Garden BirdWatch magazine, Bird Table, or are interested in joining GBW, please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu.