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Swifts and swallows bring summer to northern Europe. They are sparks of energy, animated by the African sun. As the earth wobbles on its axis and spring arrives, they surge north in a migration of some 6,000 miles.

Their arrival is a joy. One swallow does not make a summer, supposedly. But you know winter has been banished when you see either bird. I spotted swifts screaming over my house in London for the first time on May 3.

A few days later, I saw a pair return to their nest hole in a weathered gable. The swifts scythed past my ear at head height as I stood on the pavement. The first bird swung up through 45 degrees and popped straight through the aperture. The second followed minutes later. Their agility was breathtaking.

I wish this had been on my street. But swifts have stopped nesting next door. New neighbours repaired the roof and blocked the nest hole. My fancy swift nesting box was evidently no substitute.

The nesting pair were in Lewes, a picturesque town in East Sussex. Here I met conservationists [Audrey and Nick Jarvis](#), who monitor local swifts. They were so excited at seeing these two birds, they almost dropped their clipboards. Audrey explained it was the first sighting of 2023.

“What’s so great about swifts?” I asked.

Audrey said, “There is something mysterious about them: when they leave the nest, they do not touch down again until the next breeding season.”

Nick said, “That scream is redolent of summer. They are such skilful flyers.”

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Lewes was once a nesting hotspot. Swift numbers have since slumped. It is the same story across the UK. Numbers are down by more than a half over 20 years to some 60,000 pairs.

Common swifts are therefore red-listed birds in the UK, which means they are seriously threatened. The UK’s barn swallows have also been hit by the decline in insects triggered by industrial farming. But swallows still command some 700,000 territories.

Other [dualities](#) separate these two aerial migrants. Swallows are symbols of fidelity in European folklore. Sailors wore swallow tattoos as a pledge to return home. In contrast, those dark, shrieking swifts have an unjustifiably bad rap as “devil birds”.

Swallows are part of the bird group epitomised by sparrows. Swifts are distant cousins of hummingbirds. Barn swallows usually build mud nests on rural buildings. Common swifts mostly raise young in holes in urban and suburban housing.

This is the swift’s vulnerability. It is understandable householders want rainproof roofs. But we deprive swifts of breeding sites when we replace worn wooden weatherboards and soffits with plastic ones.

A potential solution is to fit external swift nest boxes. As I have found, occupancy is not guaranteed. An alternative to new-builds are [swift “bricks”](#). These are durable nest boxes set into walls. Mike Toms of the British Trust for Ornithology is hopeful more may be fitted thanks to new, wildlife-friendly planning rules.

Parliament will ponder compulsory swift bricks for new-builds largely due to campaigner Hannah Bourne-Taylor. She launched a petition in November clad only in a thong and feathery body paint. She had a wild hunch this would attract more attention from tabloids and social media than an anorak and bobble hat.

To enjoy the company of swifts and swallows, northern Europeans need to loosen up a bit. I suspect we have become less tolerant of cohabitant wild animals. Us townies are conditioned to aseptic homes and offices.

Wild birds make a bit of a mess. An elderly Spanish lady pointed this out to me recently. I was sprawled disreputably in the plaza of a remote hill town, photographing house martins, a species of swallow.

The colony under the eaves of the town hall was so dense that pairs were glomming new mud homes to the undersides of long-occupied roosts.

“More and more every year!” said the *abuela*, pointing her stick at the birds and then at me. Was she referring to house martins? Or to middle-class Britons in search of “the real Spain”? Both perhaps.

“Indeed, madam?” I replied in my execrable Spanish, “but them birds is lovely and beautiful, no?”

“Not if they poop on your hair,” she riposted, stomping away.

Still, I cannot imagine the local mayor hiring workmen to smash the nests and fit bird spikes. This would surely happen in many of the UK’s manicured market towns.

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Rural Spaniards can be trigger-happy around wild birds. But they also put cartwheels on gable ends for storks to build nests on. Widespread low-intensity agriculture leaves rough land supporting insects and the birds that feed on them.

Brits have more to learn from Extremaduran cork oak farmers than we imagine.

The Jarvises, meanwhile, have something to teach beyond their plentiful swift knowledge. They survey the same network of streets most nights for the entire swift breeding season. As

a result, everyone knows them and says “hello”.

Swifts and swallows connect us to Africa and the succession of the seasons. Like other birds, they can connect us to our communities too.