# Swift garden at Hampton Court highlights urgent threat to summer migrants



The plight of swifts, remarkable birds that are emblematic of summer skies, will take centre stage at this year’s Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival. In a poignant display crafted by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) in collaboration with the RSPB, the urgency of protecting these aerial acrobats is highlighted. Supported by noted comedian and RHS ambassador Bill Bailey, the garden aims to raise awareness of the alarming decline in swift populations and illustrate how households can contribute to their conservation.

Swifts are fascinating creatures; they migrate an astonishing 3,400 miles from Africa to the UK, where they breed during the summer months. Intriguingly, these birds spend nearly their entire lives in flight – even eating, drinking, mating, and sleeping on the wing. However, over the past 30 years, swift populations have plummeted by an alarming 66%. This dramatic decline renders them "red-listed," reflecting serious concerns regarding their survival due to factors such as habitat loss, dwindling insect populations, and climate change affecting their breeding and migratory routes.

The festival garden will not only celebrate the birds' remarkable migrations but will also showcase habitats that swifts frequent, such as meadows, woodlands, and gardens. Representations of nesting sites, including innovative “swift bricks” that can be installed in residential buildings, aim to encourage gardeners to create environments conducive to these birds. Lilly Gomm, the landscape architect behind the design, emphasised the need for community action. “By showcasing habitats rich in biodiversity and the small changes we can all make… I hope visitors will feel inspired to take action for wildlife in their own gardens.”

In 2021, conservationists noted a significant addition to the UK's red list of endangered species, which has now expanded to encompass 70 species, including swifts and house martins. The decline, particularly among swifts, has been driven by loss of nesting sites resulting from building renovations. Recent findings also highlight that within the last decade, populations of swallows, swifts, and house martins across the UK have fallen by approximately 40%, further underlining the critical need for targeted conservation efforts.

The RSPB executive director, Emma Marsh, pointed out the opportunity the garden provides to educate visitors on the precarious situation facing swifts. “We’ve lost more than 60% of the UK’s swifts in the last 30 years,” she said. As habitat loss and declining insect numbers remain pressing issues, she reinforced that collective action from gardeners can make a substantial difference in supporting swifts and other wildlife.

Community-driven initiatives are also emerging across the UK. For example, in Lancaster, residents have committed to transforming their city into a "swift city" by creating more nesting sites. This includes planting wildflowers to attract insects and installing swift boxes in various buildings. Such efforts align with the RSPB's long-term vision for conservation, showcasing how communities can play a pivotal role in reversing declining bird populations.

As Bailey aptly stated, swifts are “majestic birds” whose presence signals the joy of summer. The innovative garden at the Hampton Court Palace Festival not only celebrates the beauty of these birds but emphasises the urgent need for conservation action. By engaging the public and promoting biodiversity-friendly gardening practices, there is hope to stem the tide of decline and ensure that these incredible migratory birds continue to grace our skies for generations to come.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swift-garden-at-hampton-court-show-highlights-at-risk-symbol-of-summer-skies-TW3IDBZJLJPZTIZFKAV4HHY364/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swift-garden-at-hampton-court-show-highlights-at-risk-symbol-of-summer-skies-TW3IDBZJLJPZTIZFKAV4HHY364/), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/01/britain-endangered-birds-red-list-rises-to-70-species), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/may/16/swallows-swifts-house-martins-decline-uk-bird-survey-aoe)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/the-most-wonderful-time-of-the-year-what-went-right-for-nature-this-year), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3gg0n6ryvlo)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-18993582), [[7]](https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/coming-together-for-migratory-birds)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swift-garden-at-hampton-court-show-highlights-at-risk-symbol-of-summer-skies-TW3IDBZJLJPZTIZFKAV4HHY364/), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3gg0n6ryvlo)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swift-garden-at-hampton-court-show-highlights-at-risk-symbol-of-summer-skies-TW3IDBZJLJPZTIZFKAV4HHY364/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/01/britain-endangered-birds-red-list-rises-to-70-species> - In December 2021, The Guardian reported that the UK's red list of endangered birds had expanded to 70 species, with swifts and house martins added due to significant population declines. Swifts' numbers had fallen by 58% since 1995, prompting conservation concerns. The decline is attributed to habitat loss, reduced insect populations, and climate change affecting both breeding grounds and migratory routes. The article highlights the urgent need for conservation efforts to address these challenges and protect these species.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/may/16/swallows-swifts-house-martins-decline-uk-bird-survey-aoe> - A May 2024 article in The Guardian highlighted a 40% decline in populations of swallows, swifts, and house martins over the past decade, according to the UK's Breeding Bird Survey. Factors contributing to this decline include reduced insect availability and loss of nesting sites due to building renovations. The article underscores the broader issue of declining insect numbers and the need for habitat conservation to support these bird species.
4. <https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/the-most-wonderful-time-of-the-year-what-went-right-for-nature-this-year> - In 2024, the RSPB celebrated the milestone of 100,000 records submitted to the 'Swift Mapper' online system, aiding in the conservation of swifts. The system helps identify and protect nesting sites across the UK. Swifts, which migrate over 7,000 miles from Africa to the UK each summer, have declined by 66% between 1995 and 2022, primarily due to loss of suitable nesting sites. The RSPB emphasizes the importance of public involvement in conservation efforts.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-18993582> - A 2012 BBC News article reported that cold and wet weather had adversely affected the breeding season for swifts in the UK. The population of these birds, which migrate annually from Africa to breed, was nearly a third lower than in the mid-1990s. The weather led to fewer flying insects, resulting in many swifts returning to Africa early, further jeopardizing their survival. The RSPB highlighted the loss of nesting sites due to building renovations as an additional threat.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3gg0n6ryvlo> - In June 2024, BBC News reported that residents in Lancaster, UK, committed to transforming their city into a 'swift city' by creating more nesting sites for swifts, whose numbers have declined by 60% over the past 25 years. The initiative includes planting wildflowers to attract insects and installing swift boxes in buildings. The RSPB recognized the effort, emphasizing the importance of community involvement in providing suitable habitats for these migratory birds.
7. <https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/coming-together-for-migratory-birds> - The RSPB's 2024 World Migratory Bird Day article highlighted the challenges faced by swifts and house martins, both on the UK's Red List of highest conservation concern. Between 1995 and 2022, swift populations declined by 66%, and house martins by 44%. The decline is attributed to loss of nesting sites due to building renovations and a possible lack of insects for food. The RSPB calls for increased research and conservation efforts to protect these species.