

Making Bridport a *Swift* Town

... *The swifts*

*Materialize at the tip of a long scream
Of needle. 'Look! They're back! Look!' And they're gone
On a steep
Controlled scream of skid
Round the house-end and away under the cherries. Gone.
Suddenly flickering in sky summit, three or four together,
Gnat-whisp frail, and hover-searching, and listening
from 'SWIFTS' by Ted Hughes*



Swifts are one of our most beloved birds. Their presence is a symbol of summertime, and spirits lift when screaming parties arrive in the skies above our towns and villages. We can hear them from our homes or places of work. We stop to watch the small flocks for a moment, rushing down the high street and over fields. At the church in Salway Ash, on the back door of a shed, the arrival of the swifts has been marked by someone every year for decades—a quiet celebration that expresses this strong bond between people, place and birds.

We notice swifts because they live near us. From May to August, swifts become our neighbours, nesting in buildings and feeding in landscapes nearby. Swifts, however, are in serious trouble. Between 1995 and 2020 their population saw a massive 60% decline, and in 2021 they were added to the Red List for endangered birds. In contrast, the swift population in mainland Europe has stayed largely stable, signalling that the UK needs to take urgent action to save this very special species.

Bridport Swift Town is a community response to the problems swifts face. The project is a collaboration between local residents, Common Ground, the Bridport Bird Club, Dorset National Landscape, Bridport Town Council, RSPB, West Dorset Wilding, Little Toller Books and the Dorset Wildlife Trust. Collectively, we believe that celebrating Bridport swifts is key to protecting them—by drawing attention to swifts, by expressing how they make us feel—in art, poetry, songs, stories—we can spread awareness and gather important data about nesting sites and feeding habits. We are inviting all swift lovers, swift enthusiasts and swift ambassadors to join us in turning Bridport into a Swift Town—a place that recognises and celebrates the value and hope these wonderful birds bring with them, screaming through every summer.

Bridport Swift Town is preparing a programme

of free swift walks and workshops, many of them held in the town during the national Swift Awareness Week (29 June - 7 July). These activities, run by local ornithologists, conservationists, musicians, artists, storytellers and poets, aim to deepen understanding of swifts and inspire the community to share their love and fascination for swifts through creativity—a communal response that will be performed and exhibited at a future Swift Welcome Party in May 2025. These events are also a way of engaging local residents in the wider story of Bridport's swifts and encouraging us all to become citizen scientists, collecting nesting and sighting data using the open-sourced app developed with RSPB, Swift Mapper.

This combination of community creativity and data collection will be the beginnings of an ongoing commitment to swifts in Bridport. It will help us develop a Bridport Swift Map, an annual Swift Welcome Party, and a Manifesto for Swifts that establishes a longer-term goal for the project and a 'voice' for Bridport swifts that introduces more nest boxes, campaigns to ensure local building developments always include swift bricks, and supports a wider landscape recovery plan that enhances green spaces in the town and feeding habitats in the nearby countryside.

Swifts are a quintessential part of the West Dorset summer. Their presence adds to the local distinctiveness of our towns and villages. There is something very special about the built and natural environments here—it is just right for swifts, which is why they have returned for hundreds of years. Let's get together to celebrate and better understand them. Let's make Bridport a Swift Town! You can join in simply by sharing your swift stories, poetry, art, songs and ideas with us (swiftmail@commonground.org.uk) or by supporting our campaign for free swift activities in the community this summer: www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/bridport-swift-town