

## **Volunteers wanted to participate in project to help Ikley's swifts**

Two local charities, Climate Action Ilkey and the Wharfedale Naturalists Society, are combining forces in a project to help Ikley's swifts. They are looking for volunteers to get involved with a range of initiatives to raise awareness of the threats faced by these birds, to conserve existing nesting sites and to create new ones across the town.

If you wander along the Grove in July, you'll almost certainly hear the *cree, cree, cree* screech of the Ilkey swifts, as they circle and swoop over the rooftops. Their arrival in May heralds the coming of Spring and is a reminder that the world still turns, as observed by Yorkshire poet Ted Hughes in this extract from his poem "Swifts"

"They've made it again,  
Which means the globe's still working, the Creation's  
Still waking refreshed, our summer's  
Still all to come –"

(From *Season Songs*, Faber, 1976).

Swifts (*Apus Apus*) pair for life and meet up at the same nest site in the UK each spring – usually in gaps under roof tiles and in the eaves of buildings. The Ilkey swifts are actually African birds. They spend just three months of the year in Ilkey. But it is here that they nest, give birth to, and rear, their young before heading back home to sub-Saharan Africa.

Their annual migration, coincidentally, takes them past our twin town Coutances in France and ends up in East Africa, in the vicinity of Matugga in Uganda that also has close ties to Ilkey (see Figure 1). On this migration they travel some 500 miles per day at speeds of up to 70 miles per hour. This makes them the fastest bird in the world on the level. They sleep and mate on the wing and seem to bathe by flying relatively slowly through falling rain.

The swift probably eats more species of animals (small insects and spiders) than any British bird. Swifts can't feed in wet weather in the UK, so fly around storms to find dry areas. Each bolus (ball of food) brought to the babies weighs just over a gram, and contains 300–1000 individual insects and spiders. Swiftlets spend some three to four weeks in the nest. Once they take to the wing, they don't return to the nest and are no longer cared for by the parents. Unlike many birds, the siblings do not necessarily leave together – each goes in its own time, when it's ready. And it may well head off to Africa almost straight away.

Since 1995, swift numbers in the UK have declined by 57%. But as more and more old buildings are demolished or renovated, many swifts are returning to discover their nest site is gone. In addition, extreme weather resulting from climate change can devastate Swift populations. Last year saw weather conditions in Europe dramatically affect numbers of their principal food source (flying insects), and prolonged wet weather can soak and even kill them. As the climate warms, swift populations are likely to move northward and increasing numbers will be looking for a suitable nest site in our town.

So how can we all help? Well there is a great deal that all of us can do to combat climate change. For details do visit Climate Action Ilkey's (CAI) web site. And now, as a result of a

project being set up by CAI and Wharfedale Naturalists Society, there is plenty you can do to help swifts directly by getting involved with the Ilkley Save Our Swifts (SOS) Project, including:

1. Mapping swift nest sites and sightings using the RSPB's swift mapping tool; <https://www.swiftmapper.org.uk/>
2. Installing a swift box on your own home;
3. Providing contributions toward the cost of swift boxes for installation at key sites around the town;
4. Getting involved with fundraising and grant application activities.

The group has a longer-term ambition to develop links with swift lovers in Coutances and Matugga. The option of having some Ilkley swifts tagged with satellite tracking devices by a professionally ornithologist, so their progress can be followed across the continents, is being explored.

Peter Riley, President of the Wharfedale Naturalists Society, has pledged their support to the project. "Wharfedale Naturalists are delighted to be asked to support this project to stem, and hopefully reverse, the decline of this charismatic migratory species'. The Otley Swift Group, that has already made good progress with their swift campaign, has provided some useful advice. Bill Thorne, who has been Ilkley's voluntary "swift advisor" for many years has told the project team "For me, your project is a dream come true!".

For more details please contact: email [swifts@climateactionilkley.org.uk](mailto:swifts@climateactionilkley.org.uk). Or visit the websites: <https://climateactionilkley.org.uk/> and <https://www.wharfedale-nats.org.uk/>.

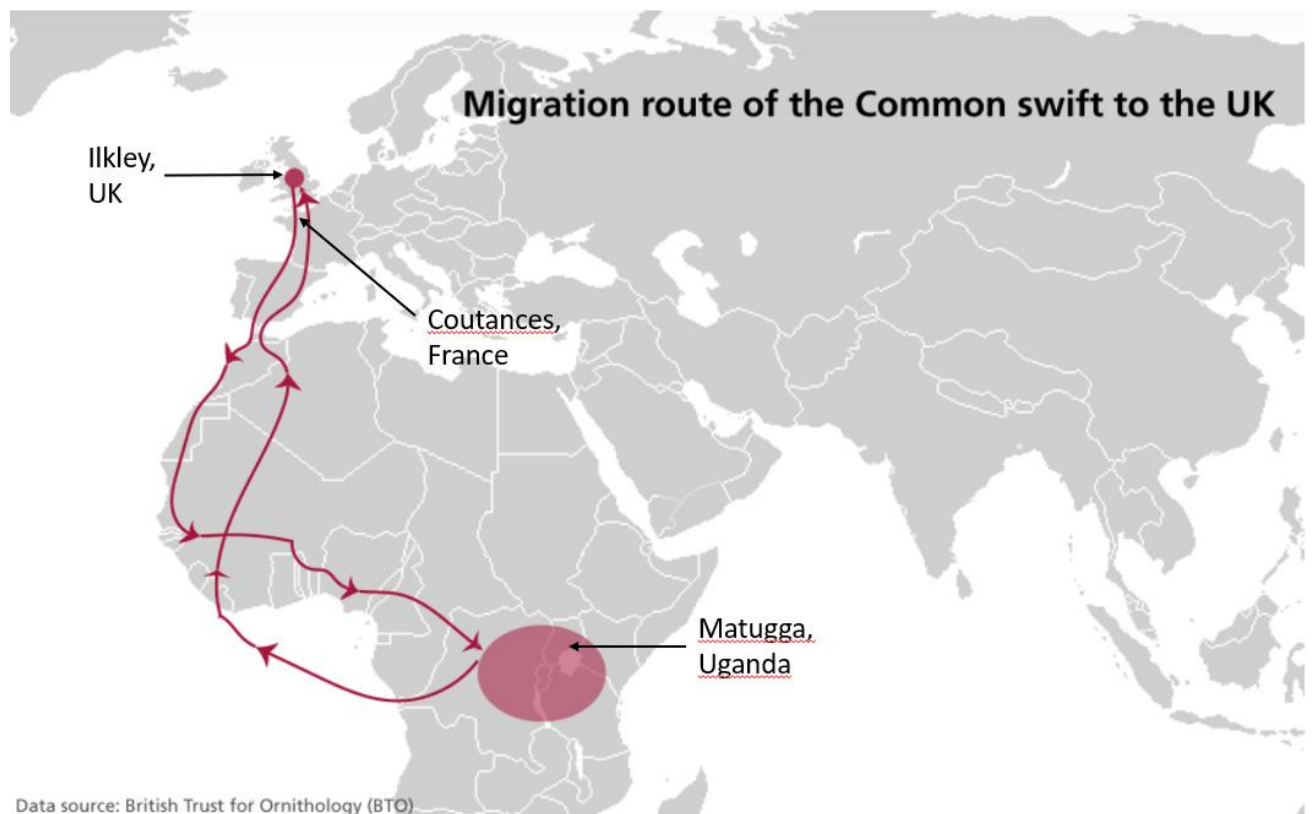


Figure 1: Swift migration showing twin towns of Coutances and Matugga. Base figure courtesy of the British Trust for Ornithology



Figures 2 and 3: Left, adult swift being fitted with a GPS device, image courtesy of BTO, and right, swift in flight, courtesy of Graham Catley (<http://pewit.blogspot.com/>).