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Big Spring Watch: Swallow

Swallows are a summer visitor to the UK returning to breed after wintering in South Africa.

They are small birds with shiny blue backs and dark red throats and foreheads. The underside of the body is cream. Watch their swooping graceful flight and look out for their forked tails with long streamers.

The call is a cheerful 'vit vit' in flight and a rapid twittering song.

Where to record

Swallows can be seen in open countryside, usually near to water and quiet buildings.

They often build their nests on ledges, beams and joists in sheds and outbuildings, particularly in areas where there is a good supply of small insects on which they feed.

What to record

First sighting of a swallow: Keep a look out for the flashes of blue and red of this speedy little bird and record the first date you see one in spring.

When to record

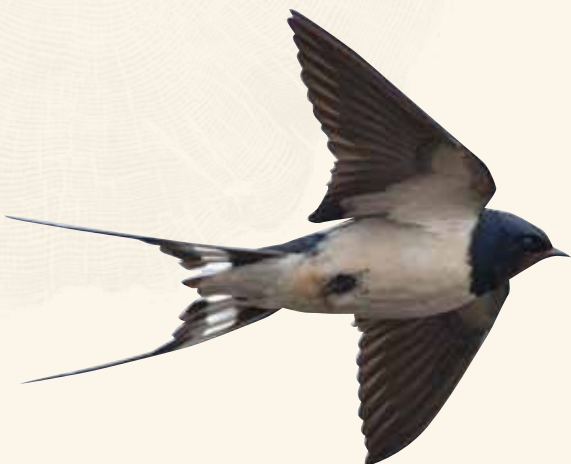
The first sighting of a swallow can vary; it may be as early as the end of March, often through April and May.

Why swallow?

Volunteers have been recording the first sighting of the swallow since at least Victorian times and more recently as part of the Nature's Calendar project since the year 2000. It will be interesting to see for 2015 how fast spring moves for the swallow and how this compares with previous years, including the Victorian era.

Our climate is changing; climate change will produce some winners who are well adapted to change and some 'losers' who cannot adapt quickly enough. Migratory species such as swallows face the pressures of climate change in both their summer and winter homes.

Long-term monitoring of species like swallow will help scientists to gain a greater understanding of this issue and provide policymakers with hard evidence.





Sand martin

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Not to be confused with...

Swifts, house martins and sand martins are other summer visitors which can be easily confused with swallows.

Unlike the swallow the swift is dark brown all over, although look closely and you might see that it has a pale throat.

House martins have the same glossy blue back as the swallow, but look out for the white rump which the swallow doesn't have.

Like swallows, swifts and house martins have forked tail, but the swallow's tail is much longer. Swallows also feed much closer to the ground.

Sand martins are easily identified, their backs and wings are brown, and they have a brown breast-band across an otherwise white underside.



Swift

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Fabulous facts

Until the late 19th century, swallows were thought to hibernate under water.

The swallow's common name has changed throughout history reflecting changes in architecture, house swallow and chimney swallow, they are now also known as barn swallow.

They drink by skimming low over lakes or rivers and scooping up water with their open beaks, and feed on flying insects, especially flies and aphids.

One swallow was recorded as having flown 12,000 kilometres from Johannesburg to Russia in just 34 days.

Studies have shown that female swallows will choose to mate with males with the most symmetric tails, as these are the healthier birds.

Despite being very similar to swifts in appearance swallows are not closely related to them at all.

Swallows undertake a massive 6,000 mile migration twice a year in between the UK and South Africa.

During their migration swallows have to cross the Sahara desert, fuelling up for several days to ensure they have enough fat to make it across.



House martin

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How fast does spring move?

Nature's Calendar has teamed up with BBC Springwatch to seek your help in answering the question **'how fast does spring move?'**

Recording tips

Once you have seen a sign of spring, please record it! Remember that you need to register on the Nature's Calendar website first.

Registration naturescalendar.org.uk/bswregister

Recording naturescalendar.org.uk/survey/login

Please choose somewhere you visit regularly (at least weekly) to make your record, to help ensure that you spot when something happens for the **first** time.