

Swallow and Swift

- Our Good Old Friends

House Swift

Photo credit : WONG Hok Sze

Barn Swallow

Barn Swallow, a member of the Hirundinidae family, is the one of the most abundant and widely distributed bird species in the world. It is well known for its long deeply-forked tail. With short and delicate legs, this species has adapted to perching on electrical wires and railings or standing, instead of walking on the ground.

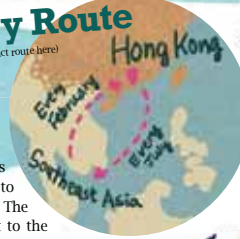
In spring, **Barn Swallows** migrate from their southern wintering areas to Hong Kong for breeding. Their breeding season runs from March to July, during which they breed and raise their chicks in Hong Kong. They then start to migrate back southwards in July. They are often observed in great numbers, as many as over a thousand, along their migratory routes in spring and autumn.

Photo credit : Owen CHIANG

Home is very important!

Migratory Route

(not showing the exact route here)



Barn Swallows usually nest under the eaves of buildings. They will look for wet mud in nearby places and collect it in their bills. They will then stick the mud under the eaves and mix it with grass stems. It takes roughly a week to build the nest, environment and weather permitting. The clutch size ranges from two to seven eggs, subject to the influence of the environment and the availability of insect food. New born chicks have to be fed and attended to by their parents for two to three weeks until they are of more or less the same size as adults. Fledglings will leave the nest with their parents and learn how to fly. About a week later, they will leave their parents and live an independent life.

Photo credit : WONG Hok Sze

Need to take off from nest

Like **Barn Swallows**, **House Swifts** nest under sheltered overhangs, usually in older buildings. As they cannot land on the ground, they can only collect feathers, grass stems and other nesting materials that are carried in the air or in water and mix them with saliva for sticking onto walls. It usually takes swifts a much longer time to build a nest than other birds. They need at least one month to build a nest but the average time is four to six months.

They are so efficient! As House Swifts, it takes us four to six months!

Swallow mom and dad, how long does it take you to build a nest?

1 week!

1 month. But my nest is bigger!

House Swift

Photo credit : Phippen HO

Acknowledgment : KFBG

House Swifts, members of the Apodidae family, are genetically more related to Hummingbirds than Barn Swallows. They can be found in Hong Kong all year round. Some of them are known to reside in a particular place for a long time, like the group under the eaves of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library. They are the so-called "legless birds", which is also denoted in their scientific name "*Apus*", meaning "legless".

I am the "legless birds"!

Nonetheless, **House Swifts** are by no means legless. Just that their legs are very short and fragile. While most birds will use their legs to take off from the ground or water surface, House Swifts can only make use of their strong claws to hang their body up on cliffs or walls and take off by gliding from high places. If they fall to the ground, these "legless" birds will die because they cannot take off from there.

House Swifts prefer to live in groups. It is quite common to see a colony of swift nests occurring at a particular site. As House Swifts cannot land on the ground, their nests are much more important to them compared to Barn Swallows that use their nests solely for breeding. House Swift nests are vital to their survival as nests are places for them to rest, to stay away from bad or cold weather, as well as to take off from.

Introduction

Barn Swallow and **House Swift** are two commonly seen bird species in Hong Kong. Both are slender little birds with long pointed wings that can fly at high speed and hunt insects on the wing. Although they are considered more or less the same by many and share the same Chinese character in their names, they belong to two different bird families.

Please take a look at this pamphlet to learn more about us!

If you would like to know more about us or become our member, please contact us:



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Threats faced by swifts and swallows in Hong Kong

Redevelopment and Building Renovation

Swifts and swallows prefer nesting under the eaves of village house balconies and the verandahs of tenement buildings in old districts. These are the places where most nests are found. Due to changes in social conditions as well as many uncontrollable factors, a large number of swift and swallow nests have been removed in the last ten years. This is mainly due to the demolition, reconstruction and renovation of older buildings. The most affected districts are: Sham Shui Po, Cheung Sha Wan, Tai Kok Tsui, To Kwa Wan, Kowloon City and Yau Tsim Mong in Kowloon. The future for swifts and swallows to continue nesting and breeding in urban Hong Kong is uncertain.



Photo credit: WONG Hok Size

A large number of tenement buildings of three to seven floors in Kowloon were demolished and replaced by high rise buildings with new designs.

With the closure of the Hong Kong Kai Tak International Airport in July 1998, the height restriction on urban buildings which was imposed for aviation safety was revoked. A large number of tenement buildings of three to seven floors in Kowloon were demolished and replaced by high rise buildings.

In 2009 the Government launched "Operation Building Bright" to subsidise the owners of tenement buildings to maintain their premises. This has contributed to a drastic increase in maintenance and renovation works on these old buildings.

In January 2010, a 55 year-old building in Ma Tau Wai Road, Kowloon abruptly collapsed. In April 2010, Chapter 545A of the Laws of Hong Kong which was enacted to regulate buildings aged 50 years or above was revised. The required percentage of consent from owners for compulsory sale for redevelopment was reduced from 90% to 80%, which speeded up the progress of urban redevelopment.

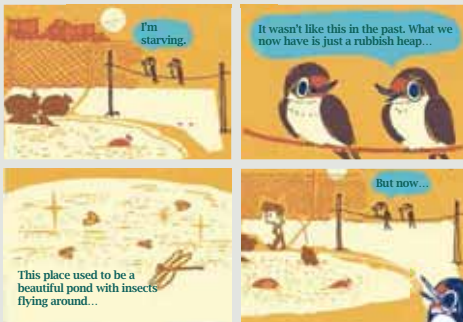
With a buoyant property market, the frequency for village houses and shops to be rented or sold to different parties has been high. Many shops are renovated a number of times within a short period. Quite a lot of village houses are also demolished and reconstructed.

The design and the outer wall material of new buildings tends not to favour the rebuilding of nests for swifts and swallows.



Reduction in Flying Insects

While the number of farmlands and fish ponds has been decreasing, illegal mud dumping occurring in some of these places has made the situation worse. Many rural areas and wetlands are being destroyed to facilitate development. Apart from this, a large amount of powerful insecticides have been used extensively in anti-mosquito exercises in both urban and rural areas. This has killed both beneficial and harmful insects, greatly reducing the number of flying insects which are the major food source of swifts and swallows. Consequently, breeding has also been greatly affected, resulting in a reduction in the number of young birds. Global warming may have also contributed to the increased occurrence of severe weather in Hong Kong and many other places all over the world. The number of insects has been affected as a result.



Public's Fear of Avian Flu

Quite a lot of people worry that the presence of bird faeces within the living environment will get them infected with Avian Flu. They also consider it unhygienic. Illegal removal of bird nests has occurred as a result. However, according to the data of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), among the 74,000 dead birds they collected between 2009 and 2014, only 41 (0.06%) of them were confirmed to carry the Avian Flu H5 virus. In the last six years, no House Swifts have been confirmed to be infected with Avian Flu, while only one Barn Swallow was confirmed to carry the virus (it was estimated by experts that the bird might have drunk polluted water). Besides, swifts and swallows are not the natural hosts of the virus. No bird watchers or people with bird nests on their homes in Hong Kong have been found to have contracted Avian Flu. Hence, the chance of being infected with Avian Flu due to nearby bird nests is considered very low.

999 Emergency Service, someone is damaging a bird nest. Please ask the Police to come!

Helping to Protect Swifts and Swallows and their Nests



Please leave them undisturbed and unharmed

If swifts and swallows come to your home to nest and breed, the best thing to do is not to disturb or harm them.

Pay attention to personal health and hygiene

Try to have an accurate understanding about the prevention of Avian Flu and inform others that the best measure is to "pay attention to personal health and hygiene" instead of removing the bird nests.

Wild Animals Protection Ordinance

All wild birds as well as their nests and eggs are protected in Hong Kong under the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance (Cap 170). The maximum penalties for any offences under this legislation are a fine of \$100,000 and imprisonment of one year. If you find any one damaging a bird nest illegally or harming wild birds, please call 999 to report the case to the police. Please try to stop the culprits and use your mobile phone to take pictures of the unlawful act as evidence, provided that it is safe to do so.



Wild Animals Protection Ordinance

When conducting maintenance work for a building...

If you are aware that a bird nest will be affected by the maintenance work of a building, please try to contact the owners' corporation and the contractors if you are one of the owners of the building. You can discuss with them whether the bird nest could be left intact and undisturbed as far as possible and whether an access could be left outside the nest so that the swifts or swallows can continue to use it. In case the work will affect the nest, please submit an application to the AFCD in advance. If you are not one of the owners of the building, please inform the Swift and Swallow Research Group of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society by email (ssrg@hkbsw.org.hk) to follow up.

Case study of damaged swift nests

2009



The House Swift colony at Yau San Street, Yuen Long - photo taken in 2009 before it was damaged.

2013



In November 2013, the House Swift colony believed to be of over 20 years old was illegally removed, rendering over 30 swifts homeless. They had to hang themselves on the wall for the night.

2014



Nine months later, only five nests were rebuilt - photo taken in August 2014.

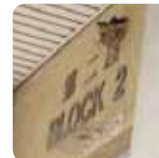
Photo credit: Raymond CHENG Wai Man



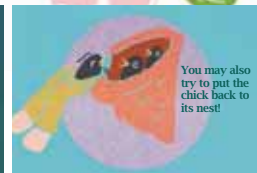
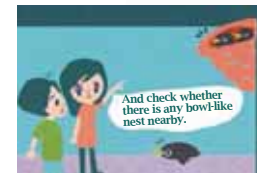
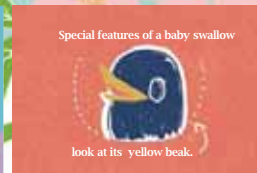
Thank you for your understanding!

Create a container to collect bird faeces

Make reference to the photographs below and create a container to collect bird faeces to mitigate the impact on domestic hygiene. Tell your friends that damaging bird nests is not the right way to solve the problem.



DIY containers for collecting bird faeces



Please don't take fallen chicks away

Spring and summer are the bird breeding season. If you come across a chick with a "yellow beak" that has fallen from the nest, please don't take it away! Please stay at a distance from the chick and see if its parents appear within an hour to take care of it. In case the chick is not safe (e.g. there are many pedestrians or vehicles, or snakes and cats are often found in that place), or the chick is covered with very few feathers, or the parent has not appeared within an hour, you may try to put it back to the nest. Being taken care of by the parents is the best option for the chicks. If you can't find the nest, please put the chick on an elevated and safe place nearby, so that the chick can stay safe while waiting for its parents.



Photo credit: LAU Yiu Kwan



Photo credit: LAU Yiu Kwan

Barn Swallows are more adaptive. In case the nest falls off, you may try to put the chicks into a shallow container and hang it up in a safe place. In most cases, the parents would continue to feed their chicks.

If you've found an injured bird...

If you find a House Swift on the ground, or a swift or swallow being trapped in a nest, or an injured bird (bleeding or obviously injured) and estimate that the bird can hold on for two hours or more for rescue, provided that the conditions allow, please borrow a carton box of suitable size from a shop nearby, make a set of holes on the box and write prominently "Injured bird pending for rescue. Please don't move the box!". Then cover the injured bird with the box to minimize disturbance from the environment. Please call the AFCD at 1823 or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals 24-hour Hotline at 2711 1000 as soon as you can to seek help.



Reduce the use of insecticides and chemicals

Reduce the use of insecticides and chemicals. Reduce the consumption of natural resources and avoid harming the natural environment.

Join us!

Join us in bird conservation work, e.g. helping in the annual survey on swift and swallow nests.

