Feeding Common Swifts Correctly!

Common swifts feed upon insects solely, so our method of choice, inspired by nature is to feed pure insects. We follow the expert advice, which is the from The German Association for the Protection of the Common Swift. Serious deformations, deficiencies and severely damaged plumage growth, feather deformations or loss of feathers may be the consequences if inappropriate food is applied, and also death.

House crickets without wings and field crickets from pet shops or breeding farms are optimal. The ideal size is in the range between half and three quarters of an inch (12-18 mm). We order live from https://www.livefoodsdirect.co.uk/crickets/banded-crickets and gut feed and then freeze in batches! Once frozen, we place portions in a clean Tupperware box to shake off all legs and use fresh each feed. It is dangerous to feed winged crickets. Many of those already developed an ovipositor, revealing them as pubescent females filled with packets of eggs. These packets are indigestible to common swifts, which excrete them undigested.

Never buy any two-spotted mediterranean field crickets, which are most likely offered by providers, since they are more robust than other more sensitive cricket species. Common swifts can not bear the two-spotted crickets and suffer from heavy dysentery when fed with those. Other entomophagous wild birds like swallows do not show this intolerance.

Of all practicable options, feeding house crickets and field crickets represents the closest solution to the natural nourishment of the common swift; it is well accepted by the birds and allows unproblematic breeding. Swifts raised using crickets are physically indistinguishable from those naturally bred and develop an intact, gleamy plumage. So, feeding crickets seems to be best practice according to the current state of knowledge and it represents the most convenient way for the attendant, too.

Commonly young swifts accept crickets so well that they even snatch at those by themselves, adhere to the (well disinfected) finger of the attendant and willingly let their

throats be filled with food. This makes feeding a lot easier, saving time and effort. Adolescent swifts (about 3. to 5. week) even gobble larger crickets of 18-20 mm ravenously. This appetite will decrease with increasing age, though. Then you get along with smaller crickets sized 10 to 15 mm. Swifts with problems accepting food shortly before flying out can be supported by removing legs, elytrons and front parts from the insects and feeding the soft hind quarters only.

How much does a common swift eat?

You will need approximately a pound or so (500-600 grams) of insects to pull one common swift through for 4 weeks. If you plan to purchase this amount in those small standard plastic boxes with half a handful of crickets scrambling on a piece of egg carton from the pet shop, this game will turn out to be rather expensive. It is worth ordering from the breeding farm itself.

It is difficult to state the number of crickets a common swift will devour per meal since it may vary strongly, depending on cricket size as well as on the bird's age and its stage of development. Using the average daily lot of food, adjusted for different levels of development, as a guideline will probably be the safest way. You may also notice the appearance of a swelling on the right side of the throat, which can be seen for a short period after feeding, which tells you that the fosterling obtained enough food.

Insatiable young swifts seem to activate some kind of compactor inside their gullet though, making it impossible to find even one last cricket in its bottomless throat just a few minutes after a rich meal and the little liar starts to beg again, as if it has been starving for days.

This is an approximate lead for feeding almost fledged young or adult common swifts: 12-14 crickets sized 15 mm per meal, dispensed in 2 servings with a short break. As mentioned above, younger swifts can "put away" considerably more.

Leading points for the determination of the appropriate meal size: Age of the swift (in days) Weight of the swift (in g), daily amount of crickets (in g), daily amount of crickets (in % of the body mass), amount of crickets (in g) per meal with 6 meals per day.

Age of swift (in days	Weight of swift (in g)	Daily amount of crickets (in g)	Daily amount of crickets (in % of body mass)	Amount of crickets (in g) per meal, with 6 meals a day
20	37.70	15.90	42.20	2.65
32	37.90	16.50	43.50	2.75
38	42.90	12.60	29.40	2.10
Adult	40.40	13.80	34.20	2.30

How to prepare the food insects

Delivered in larger batches, the crickets are killed in the freezer at -30Â° C (-22Â° F). Unfreeze small appropriate servings in a sieve diving in warm water, then drip down properly and feed. Please keep in mind that defrosted crickets spoil very soon (especially in summer). Put leftovers in the refrigerator right after feeding and warm up slightly before applying the next meal.

Spoiled crickets fade blackish and must not be used to feed swifts.

Attention: very important!

On freezing insects for food, essential Vitamin B is destroyed, so that it is vital to provide vitamin B complex regularly to patients.

1. This is best done by an injection administered by a vet every 10 days: 0.1 – 0.15 ml of Vitamin B complex, in the fold of the knee (not in the muscle – that is very painful!) as an alternative:
2. Every two days, prepare 3-4 crickets with Vitamin B complex (i.e. Inject in each one 0.05 ml of Vitamin B complex in the back of the body of the cricket), then feed the “vitaminised” cricket to the bird.

Normal Vitamin supplements (e.g. Korvimin) are not sufficient to avoid Vitamin B deficiency! Additional enrichment with Vitamin B complex is absolutely essential! see also: www.apusapus.net/infections.htmlm

Which food animals can be considered?

Drones

Since the male stages of the European honeybee (Apis apis) are too adipose as a main food source, they may serve well as additional food and represent a proven "space food" for eminently enfeebled nurslings during the first critical days.

Connections to local beekeepers might be useful. If you know any bird friends amongst them, you even might obtain some combs with nutritious larvae for free.

Attention: Only take drones from non-poisoned beehives! If the beekeeper treats his bees with pesticides (e. g. against Varroa mites), you must not use the drones as swift food.

Inside the combs you will find drones in any stage of development from snow-white larvae up to almost eclosing insects. We recommend you deep-freeze them. They can be peeled from the combs more easily when they are frozen. To increase their durability, they should be blanched in boiling water for about 1 or 2 minutes then and refrozen after cooling down. Now you can cull only the required serving and feed.

If not blanched, the larvae stages of the drones can not be used, because they are almost liquid and spoil immediately. Only insects from the brown-beige stages upwards to the nearly developed drone (which looks like a bee but has no sting) may be fed unblanched. Never feed female bees! They have stings and contain a highly effective venom!

Wax moth larvae

Wax moths (Pyralidae) are harmful to bees. Their soft, silky larvae, which look like short fat white worms, can be purchased alive from fishing suppliers or blanched from food animal farms. In small amounts, they are useful as a side dish for swifts. Do not feed more than one per serving to a swift. They are very adipose, and larger amounts lead to greenish excrements or even indigestion.

The soft larvae can be fed alive and at a stretch to the swift.

After blanching they harden and get rubbery and must be cut into pieces before feeding.

Meadow plankton

Enthusiasts may take a scoop and go out into nature, looking for flies, moths, butterflies and all the other winged teasers that usually give you a hard time outside on a hot summer day, therefore representing the best, healthiest and most appreciated bird food. But where are they, just when you need them? If you ever tried to catch the whole meal for a real hungry young common swift, you will be full of awe and respect for the

effort of bird parents. And, instead of returning to your nestling with 3 squashed plant louses, you will finally accept a trip to the zoo shop!

If you, contrary to expectations, prove value as an exterminator: Never feed insects with noticeable colours, stings, bristles or the like! They are poisonous to your common swift without much doubt.

What to think of 'compound feeds'

Strictly dismiss mixtures that basically contain meat (Steak tartar, minced meat, meat of hearts). Being an insectivore, the common swift is not adapted to such nourishment. Nobody would ever come to the idea of feeding meat to a herbivore - e.g. a horse -, why do we still often hear this stubborn misinformation that you should give meat to insectivores?

Be attuned to nature, take a look what the bird ingests there, then you will see that feeding of meat appears completely absurd.

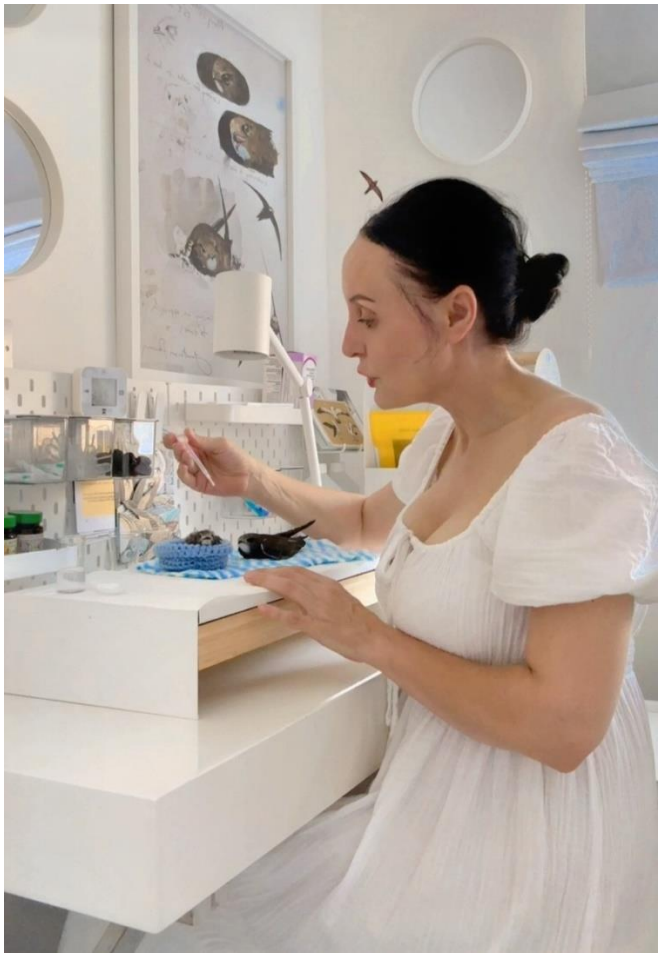
Some bird experts produce special blends that basically consist of pure and high-class insect food as well as of "Beo pearls", which only contain the amount of best, fresh, low-fat beef tartar that is needed to glue the crumbly bruised grain of insects to a ductile mass and form pea-sized balls for feeding. Besides also insect food by the producer "aleckwa" or "Type IV blau" by company "Claus" often get used. These brands contain pure insects, unlike all other traded compound feeds, which comprise pastries like broken waffles, forcing young swifts and singing birds to develop indigestions with perilous consequences!

The German Association for the Protection of the Common Swift (DGfM) and Gabo wildlife categorically dismiss compound feeds, even high-quality products!

When and how frequently to feed

Commonly, well nurtured swifts get along with 6 feeds each day; every two or two and a half hours. Start at seven or eight o'clock in the morning and finish the day of the nursling around nine or ten o'clock in the evening. Do not feed in the night, just like you the poor bird needs to rest and takes a nap sometime!

However, an extremely underfed swift needs infusions and intensive care initially. If it begins to recover, feed some small crickets every half an hour - at first the soft hind quarters are best - (or preferably blanched drones) and watch if the bird drops scat. This is very important! Half starved swifts, especially young birds, are often very ravenous and would prefer to swallow the complete finger of its caregiver, but they are too weak for digestion. We are easily tempted to give as much food as the ferociously begging animal wants.



After a short period of initial recovery, perilously overloading the stomach is often followed by death. A warning signal is a gain in weight of several grams within a few hours.

Carefully touch the bird's belly frequently to find out if its well filled but still soft and flexible. If the body appears hard and bulging out like a marble this means red alert (suspend feeding immediately and let the veterinary place another infusion with recovering compounds).

It may take several days to stabilise a vastly haggard young swift. Within that period its belly may feel hard from time to time even after feeding cautiously, but if you abide by applying small amounts of easily digestible food in short intervals you will not get into the aforementioned emergency situation.

The digestive compound "Pankreon", available as granules at pharmacies, proved to be a useful admixture while treating such nurslings: squash 1 or 2 grains 3-4 times a day, dab the produced powder on with a cricket and apply it to the patient, repeating this procedure for a period of 1-2 days.

As long as the patient isn't “out of the woods", the maximum period of the nightly feeding pause should not exceed 4-5 hours. After that you may return to conventional feeding, since you honestly deserve the sleep you are used to.

How do I feed a common swift?

Contrary to young song birds, common swift nestlings do not "unbar" in human custody, i.e. they do not beg for food with their beaks wide open. And an adult common swift that is used to hunting for its insect menu in racy flying manoeuvres in the sky, will not even think about opening its beak voluntarily. Yet it happened that swift foundlings almost died starving, because they did not help themselves from an obligingly provided food bowl, or that nestlings were not fed because they did not open their beaks wide and therefore where considered already fed while people expected them to beg when they starve.

A comparable reflex can be triggered easily though, by touching the left side of the young swift's beak with the (properly cleaned and disinfected) fingertip (also see the feeding videos). The bird will then impose its beak on your finger in a rush and keenly start to jiggle and suck, if it is not scared, shocked or weakened. It expects the food ball being delivered right at this particular moment, which the adult bird (whose head is represented by the finger!) would then choke into its throat.

You may harness this effect now and use tweezers to rapidly push a series of feeding insects aside the finger into the nestling's throat. This sounds easy but it is a very complicated procedure! The young swift does not show any patience. A pre-programmed chain of reflexes takes control over the bird: Adult bird provides food - beak over his head - take over the food ball. If this chain gets interrupted, e. g. because the finger of an unexercised caregiver slips out of the beak often or the crickets are not pushed in fast enough, the young swift gets irritated, it tries again another one or two times and then stops the routine. It will not re-open its beak voluntarily, no matter how hungry it is. The awkward human scared the swift, making it distrustful with his/her behaviour.

And now things can get difficult as the bird needs to be force-fed in a gentle and non-violent manner that does not end up as torture. The beak of a common swift is a very delicate, highly sensitive construction. Opening it takes a lot of flair if one does not want to damage, cause severe blisters on, bend or even break it. Sit comfortably on a desk covered by a clean towel and place the bird on it. Carefully retain it with one hand. Cover the animal's body with a small towel (handkerchief) to prevent fat of human skin from touching its plumage. If you do not cover the plumage, the bird will inevitably look "unctuous" after some time; negatively influencing the insulating property of the plumage, that the swift, which flies in large altitudes later on, strongly depends on to survive.

A swift should not be held longer than necessary. It will instinctively respond to sanctions with resistance. This can include the irritating behaviour of moving backwards

underneath the hand and the tissue while being fed, leaving the unexercised caregiver drenched in sweat even before placing the first cricket inside the fosterling's throat.

So hold the bird gently, yet safely, retain its head and then open the fragile beak very cautiously with your free hand by softly moving the fingernail between upper beak and lower beak without any pressure. Carefully use the forefinger of your other hand (which retains the bird) to keep the beak slightly widened.

Now the food animal has to be moved very carefully far into the rear of the throat - over and behind the tongue - using an edgeless, round-headed pair of tweezers (tweezers for stamps, anatomical tweezers), before closing the beak. Then trigger the swallowing reflex by gently stroking down along the gorge from outside. Caressing the throat eases developing friendship and is considered a confidence-building measure by the swift!

Dipping the cricket in water shortly sometimes helps sliding it.

Possibly be prepared for your fosterling to spit out its food again often and likely until you've got the hang of it! Patience, empathy, intuition and comprehension are necessary: Of course the swift is not used to this method of feeding and considers it an imposition, it will take a while to get it used to this! Impatience and blustering will scare the animal even more, and if this was followed by an accidentally broken beak and pain, the feeding will become a torture, which the swift rejects completely.

The younger a common swift fosterling is, the easier you will manage to make it "dock" to your finger; mimic the head of a feeding adult bird with slight shaking motions and move the crickets aside the finger into its throat. Sometimes this also works for severely starving adults. There are even older swifts, which learn how to pick food insects from the tweezers or from the finger after several patient exercises! Yet this is quite unusual. Almost all of the adult swifts as well as the adolescent, almost fledged younger swifts need their beaks to be opened as described to be fed.

Will I also have to provide water besides the food to the swift?

Always offer some drops of fresh water to the swift by smearing it to the edge of its beak using the tweezers before you start feeding. Then you will notice if it drinks thirstily or tosses it away. Most commonly its food covers the fosterling's need for liquid already. Crickets contain a lot of moisture, and if they have been thawed in warm water, the swift will not necessarily need any additional water.

This may vary depending on the time of the day and the current weather situation though. After the night or on very hot days swifts may get very thirsty. The mucosae of its throat should always appear moist and pink. Dry mucosae are entry points for germs that cause dangerous inflammations of the throat.

Rare, but possible: Adult common swift, eating and drinking of its own volition.

Defecation

A safe indicator for a good nutrition is the swift's excrement. It is supposed to be of half-firm texture, dark with a white top and coated by an elastic pellicle. Liquid, stinking or filiform droppings of black-greenish colour reveal malnutrition with spoiled or just wrong food.

Remove the excrements from the swift's dwelling as soon as possible, or cover the blobs with small pieces of kitchen tissue, refresh the pads if necessary to prevent the swift from polluting its own plumage. In free nature the adults remove excrement balls from the young birds, so there are no dirty feathers. If your fosterling yet has become soiled, you may wash away the dirt carefully from the plumage using tepid water.