

Time to take off, second chance given.

At the end of August, the summer of swifts in the UK is coming to an end. In rehabilitation centres, this is the period when the number of swifts released into the wild is greater than the number admitted. Swifts are special patients as they quickly become very accepting of people. Caring for them is both a challenge and a pleasure for many bird carers. Allowing the swift to return to nature is the most important and eagerly awaited moment. The sight of a swift soaring into the air, which was in a box just a moment ago, is a very moving and gives the feeling of a job properly done. It's a wonderful and odd feeling at the same time. You spent weeks looking after the swift you had brought in, feeding it, worrying about its physical and mental health, and then that bird flies away forever in a matter of seconds, taking flight confidently and in the direction of its choice.

Spotting signals of being ready for the first flight

During the hand rearing of a young swift, it is important to monitor its body weight. At the end of the period (40-45 days) of intensive growth, swifts may weigh 45-55 grams. After this, their weight begins to drop, they start refusing to eat, and it becomes increasingly difficult to feed them. This is the first sign of these birds preparing to leave the nest. So when a swift does not want to eat as much as before, we know that this is normal, so we should not get upset and force the bird to eat. Young swifts also show this behaviour when they are with their parents in the nest. Such weight regression is characteristic of nesting aerial insectivores or seabirds. These species have to be fully capable of perfect flight when leaving the nest. On the day of release, a human-fed swift should weigh no less than 38-40 grams. During this time, thanks to the conversion of fat tissue into muscle mass, the swifts become less rounded. Their body is more slender with a narrower head and a stronger appearance. Surprisingly, they can instinctively work out the ideal weight needed for flight based on the ratio of wingspan to body weight. It is generally believed that young swifts are ready to fly when they reach a wing length of 160 mm and their primaries about 125 mm.

Note: There are both very small and very large common swifts. Therefore, all weight guidelines are relative. A small, petite swift may be well fed at 35

grams and have a well-rounded chest, while a very large bird of the same weight will be severely underweight.

Important signals of flight readiness are certain behavioural signs of swifts. The birds become very restless (especially in the evening), and muscle and wings training become much more intense. They practise rapid wing flapping and hopping. Starting at around four weeks of age, young individuals perform a 'press-up'. This involves the swifts spreading their wings wide, which are partially pressed against the floor, and then repeatedly raising and lowering their entire bodies. It is fascinating to note that after several days of such training (usually just before departure), a young swift can hold this position for more than 10 seconds. This phenomenon is a form of isometric exercise that helps prepare the muscles for flight.

An important indicator of readiness for release is the state of the swift's plumage. Young swifts start feather cleaning at around three weeks of age and then the frequency of this behaviour increases. Before release, it is important to ensure that all of our bird's feathers are properly developed. As long as the sheaths of the flight feathers are visible, the young swift is not capable of flight. (Picture 1 and 2)

When, where and how we release swifts

Even though under natural conditions young swifts leave the nest at various times of the day even late in the evening after sunset we should not follow nature and rather release the swifts before midday to give them more time during the day to begin their migration.

If all parameters related to the young swift's ability to fly on its own is met, it is important to estimate the optimum release day based on weather data.

It is recommended to check the weather three days ahead, but this seems unlikely with today's climatic changes. We do not release in the dark, in the rain, in strong winds or before the forecast of severe weather. The release should take place in a location where the swift can be easily rescued in the event of an accident. For the release, we choose an area with good visibility, such as various sports fields where grass is maintained, or a little-used wide street, a place where the swift can be easily rescued in case of an accident.

Vast open spaces with high vegetation such as fields and meadows are not necessarily advisable, as our swifts may feel lost without a reference point such as buildings for swifts in their natural nests. Furthermore, isolated and taking off in large spaces, swifts can easily become prey for predators (e.g. falcons). The rule is not to release from high places, e.g. from an upstairs window, because if a swift lands or falls on the ground it could be seriously injured.

Once the acceptable area and day of release have been chosen, it is always advisable to have two or three assistants, so that they can help to observe the bird's departure. There is unfortunately still a misconception that a swift should be thrown high into the air to fly because a swift cannot take off on its own. Nothing could be more wrong and we should never do this. Any healthy and strong swift can take off from the ground, as long as it has a flat, clear 'runway' of 2-3 metres in front of it.

Position yourself against the wind, place the swift on your open palm, and hold it up (the freedom statue position). The bird should fly off by itself from our hand. If it does not, you can repeat the attempt the next day.

It is a breathtakingly, heart-stopping moment when a young bird first flies low, a little uncertainly, but then catches the wind in its wings to gain height speed and immediately in flight begins to hunt for insects as if it had done nothing else all its short life (Picture 3).

Finally, we must admit that the stories of the first flight of a reared swift are sometimes difficult and suspenseful. The swift can suddenly fly off into the trees and bushes or buildings and disappear from our field of observation. It is hard to believe how quickly you can lose sight of the bird against the dark background of the trees. Anyone who has released swifts knows well the feeling of extreme anxiety when you don't see it high in the sky and begins a nervous search nearby to make sure all is well. In such situation, you have to particularly believe that this most agile flight artist of all birds manages to avoid visible obstacles turn around in time and get back into the air.

Likely most of the times after a short low and sometimes a tad unsteady flights the swift shoots into the sky gaining altitude so quickly that the moment of joy is only short lived before the bird disappearing in the blue sky. The most

joyful albeit rare releases are of course when the rookie swift makes a nice circle above your head before heading off.



Picture 1

The swift wing with visible sheaths of the flight feathers clearly visible



Picture 2

Released swift with beautifully feathered wings



Picture 3

Taking off swifts with initial low flight

Kasia Szczypa, Swift Protection Association Reigate (SPARE)