

Private Study Version

**Arbroath Swift Conference
Helping Swifts – Helping Us!**

**16 May 2025
30 Minute Talk**

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Helping Swifts – Helping Us!

Swifts are Vanishing

Why and What We Must Do About It

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Edward Mayer



SWIFTCONSERVATION

KEEPING THE SKIES ALIVE

www.swift-conservation.org

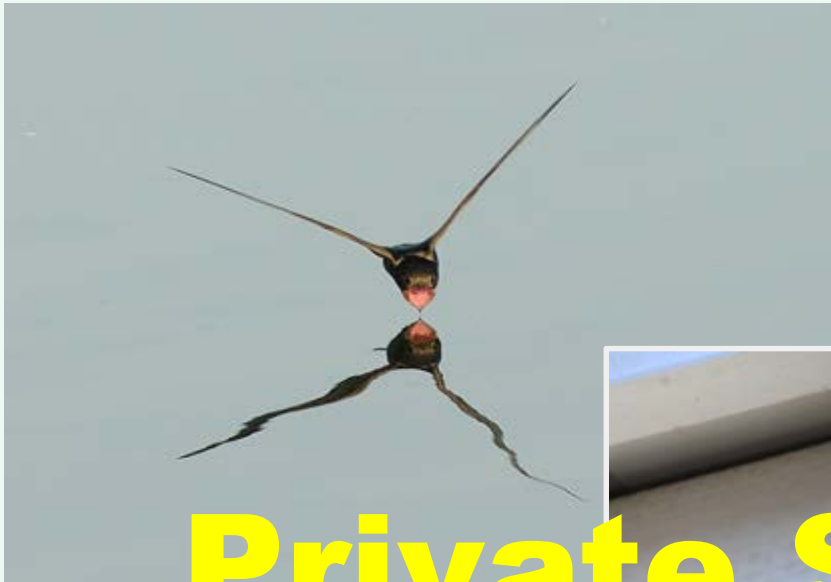
Our Swifts!



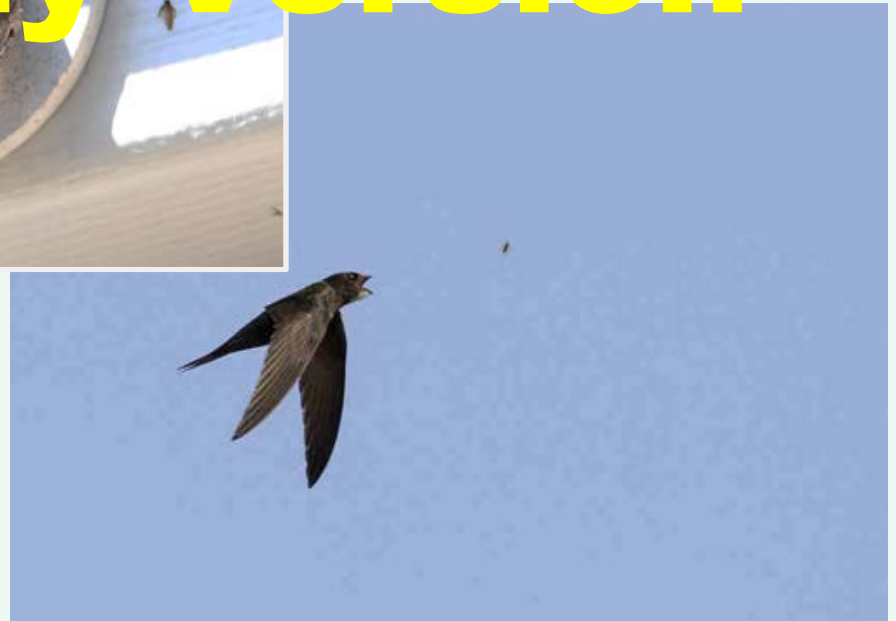
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Spectacular Birds!



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Superbly skilful flyers, Swifts drink, feed and mate in flight

Worldwide there are about 120 Swift species, most of them in the tropics



Short-tailed Swift – Brazil - Photo courtesy of Hector Bottai and Wikipedia



Pacific Swift - Japan - Photo courtesy of Stuart Price and Wikipedia

Most Swifts are dark & have a very similar “design” ideal for catching agile insects in high speed flight

But we have only one Swift species here in the UK – the unique “Common Swift”



Common Swift – UK – Photo Abby Eaton



Ruby Throated
Hummingbird - USA
Photo jeffeyw /Wikipedia



Fiery Necked Nightjar – South Africa
Photo Dave Maguire/Wikipedia

A very surprising bird – it's closest relatives are the Hummingbirds of the Americas, and the Nightjars

Our Swifts live incredible lives

Always flying, except when nesting

Travel 14,000 + miles each year
Spend winter in Africa
Spend summer in Europe & Asia

Faithful to mates and nests
Slow breeders – have few young
lives

Suffer little predation but in brutal decline

Famous for their “screaming parties”

Respond to other Swifts’ calls



Thanks to a very successful “design”

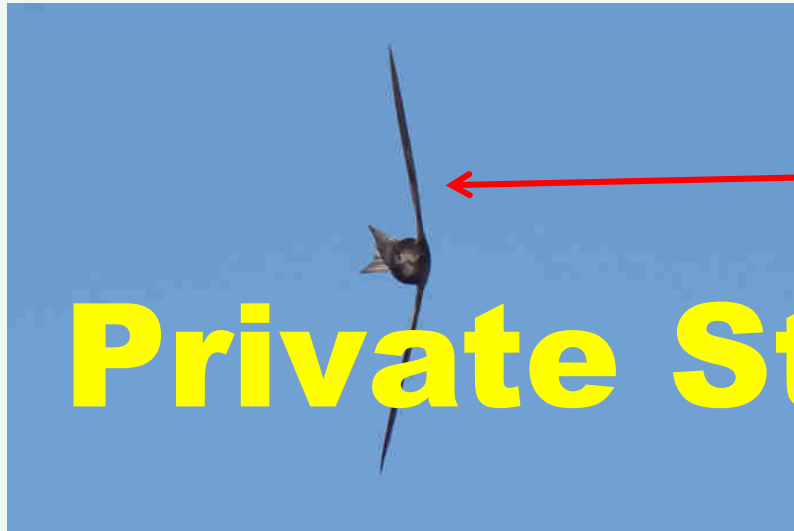
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**Swifts were flying over Europe, 49 Million years ago
Humans have been around for maybe 150,000 years**

With amazingly sophisticated aerodynamics

Leading Edge Vortexes and High Aspect Ratio Wings – Swifts had them first!



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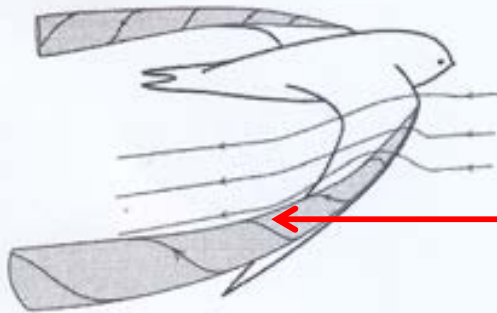


Fig. 4. Artist's impression of the conical LEVs on the wings of a swift in gliding flight. The oncoming flow is deflected downward by the attached LEV system, showing the lift-generating downwash. LEV separation starts at the wrists. From there the LEVs are attached over most of the wing length but start to go upward and inward approaching the wing tip and behind it.



Animating our Skies

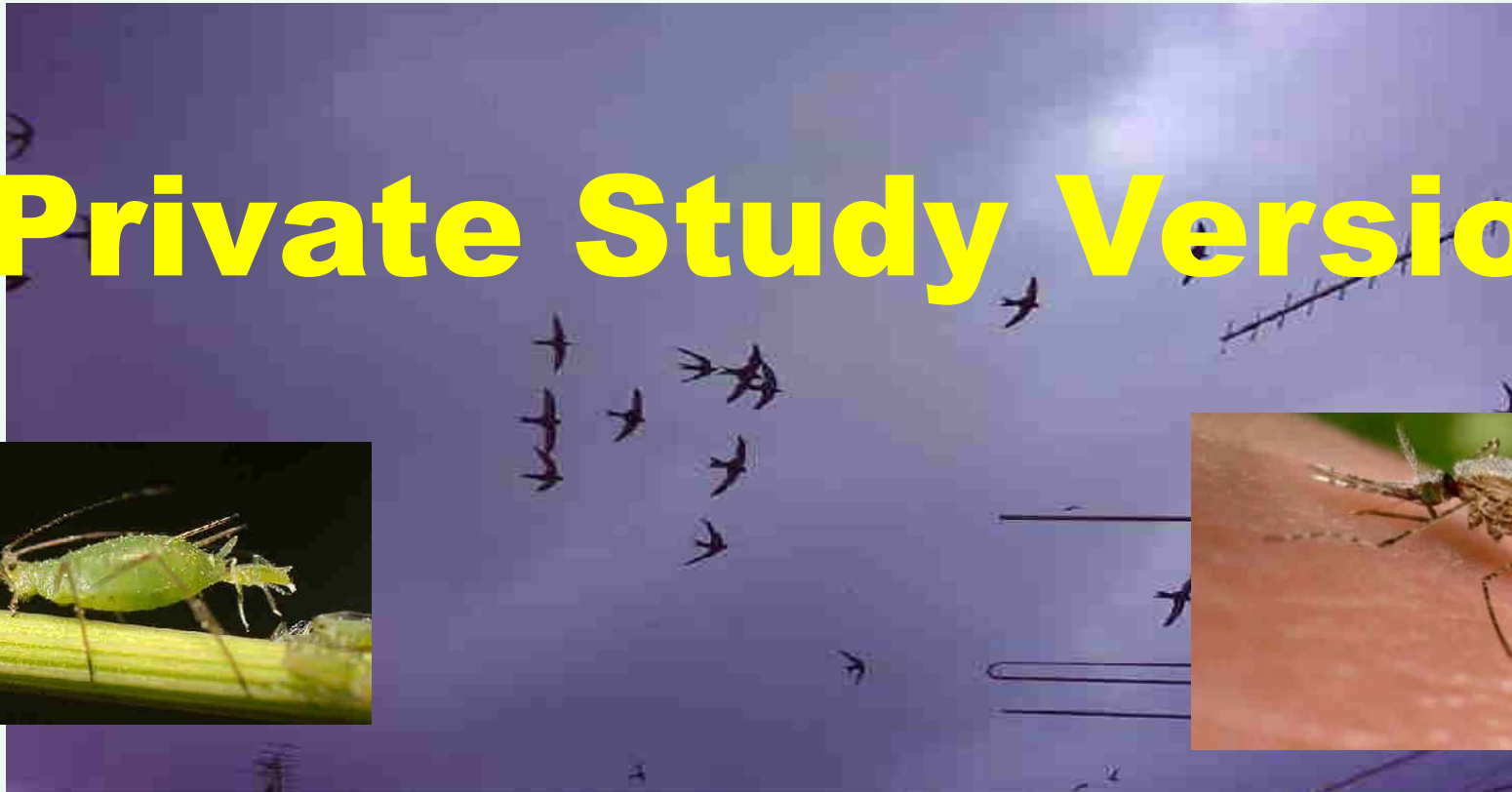
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Swifts fly over Barcelona

They bring us massive benefits

**Swifts bring the Sound of Summer -
brightening even the grimmest places**

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**Every Swift eats thousands of mosquitoes & aphids
every day - natural disease & pest control!**

They used to nest in old woodpecker holes in ancient trees - a very few still do



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**Poland, Scotland, Sweden –
where a few Swifts still nest in
holes in very old trees in
specially preserved ancient
forests**



But when we deforested they had to move into our buildings

In prehistoric times the UK was mountain, marshland and dunes, but mostly covered by vast forests
Since then we have deforested almost the entire planet of ancient primeval forests

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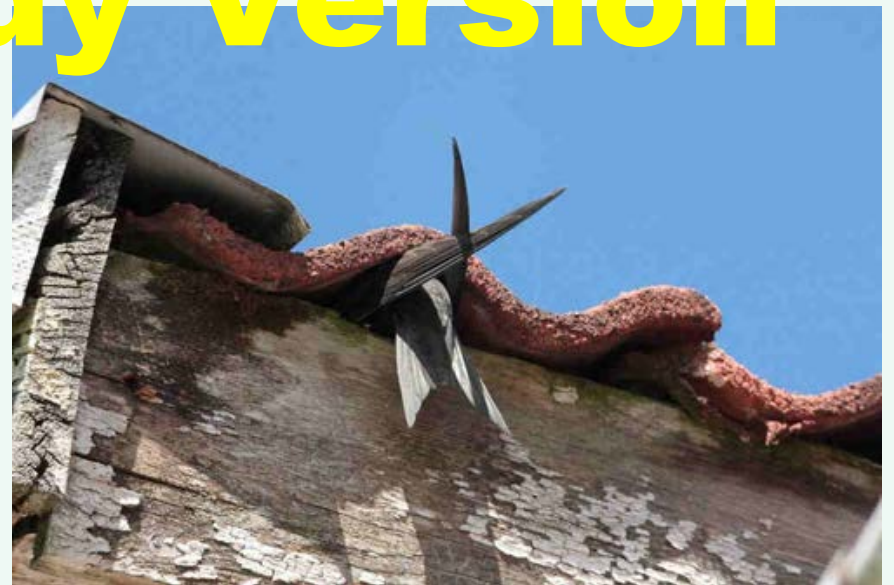


Becoming Secret Nesters

Breeding in holes and gaps in buildings

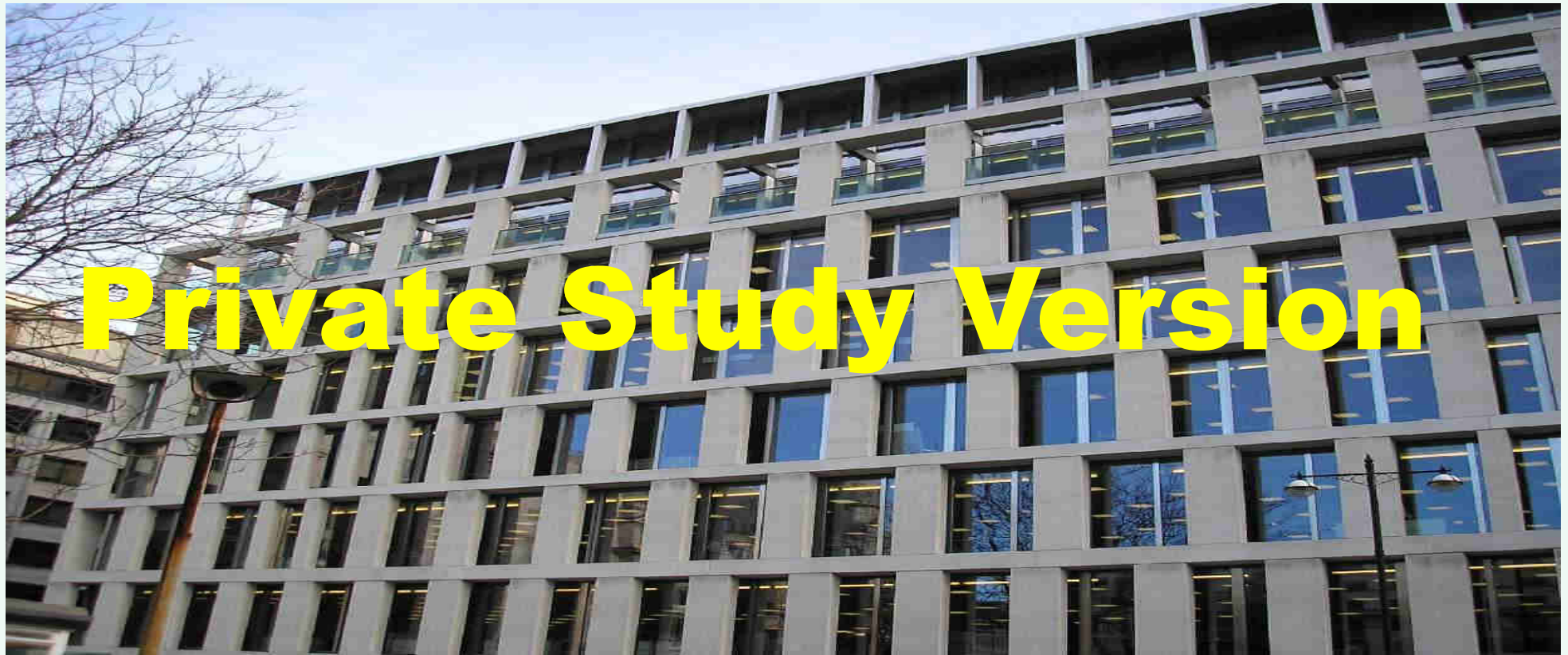


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Secret nests are safe from predators, but highly vulnerable to maintenance work or demolition which often destroy them

But now Swifts are being excluded



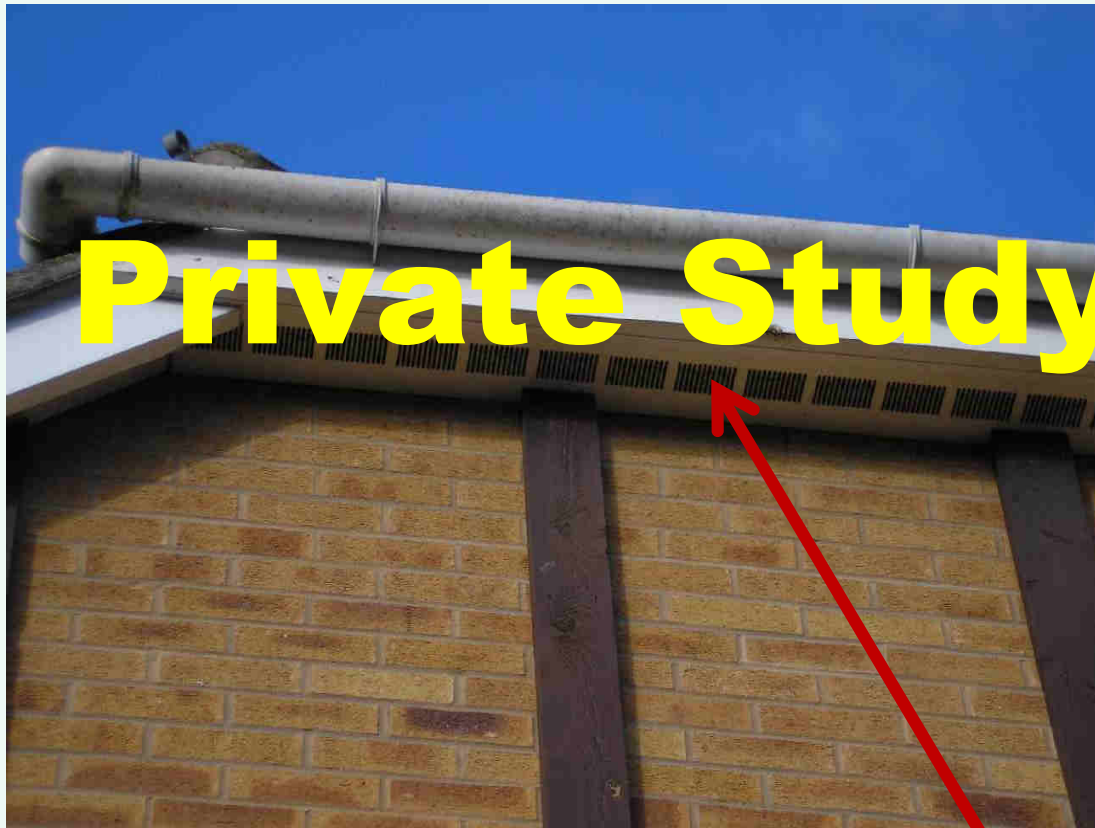
Post-War Housing Standards = no roof or gable apertures to nest in
Re-roofing & Demolition = destruction of nests
Insulation = obstruction of access to nests
Modern Architecture, Buildings & Materials = no holes
All eliminate the ability to nest and breed

We know how it's happening

10% of pre-1919 houses can provide nesting space

1.4% of post-1944 houses can provide nesting space

0.0% of post-2000 houses can provide nesting space?

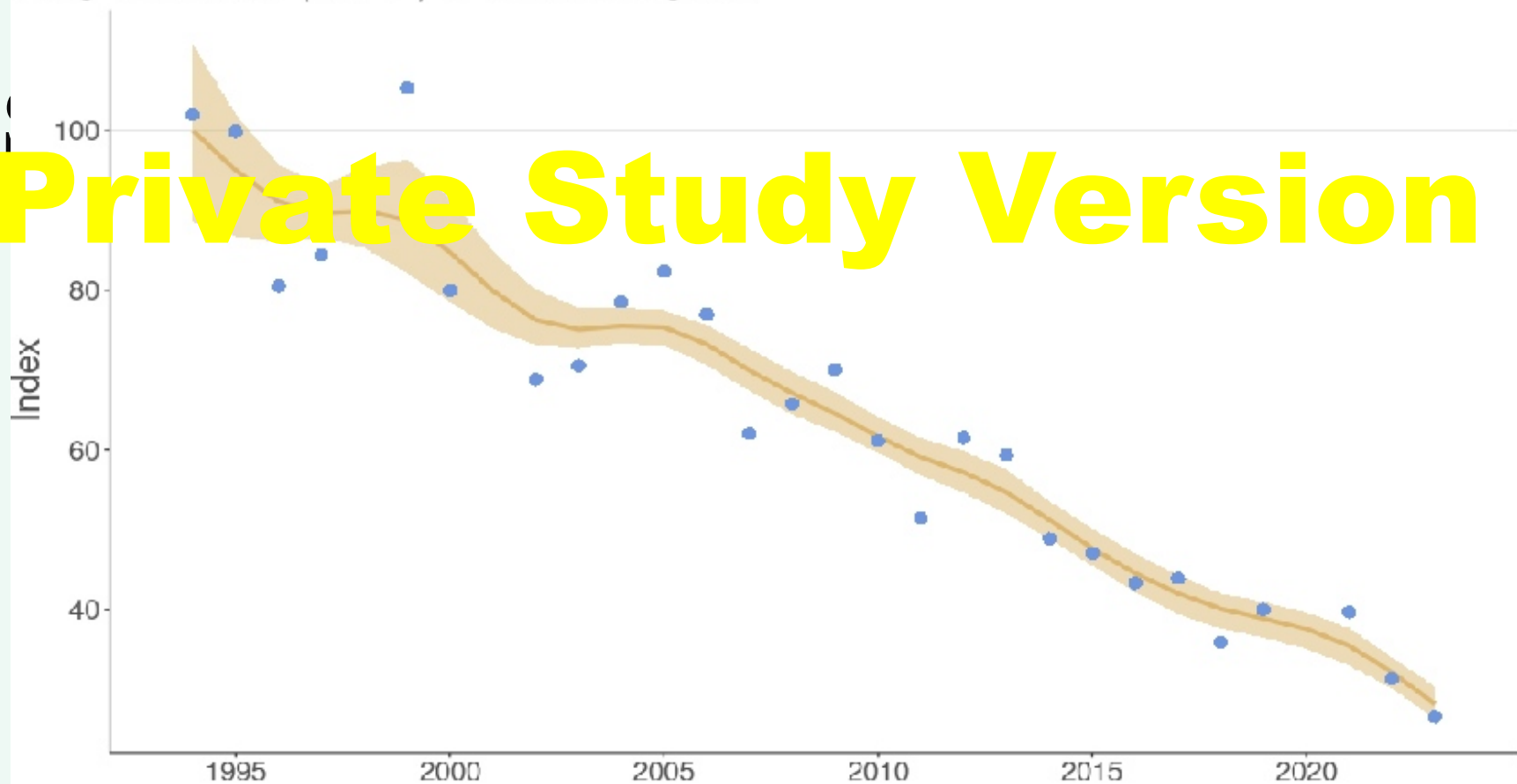


Grilles cover the eaves of this modern house, and anti-bird spikes await fitting to a Grade 1 Listed Building – This is the end for Swifts and Bats

Swift Decline as a Chart – 1994 -2023

Extinction by 2050? What can we do about it?

Swift population abundance
Long-term trend (1994–) in United Kingdom



Source: British Trust for Ornithology

In the USA very similar Purple Martins were saved from extinction by setting up nest boxes & gourds



If our Swifts are to be saved, it can only be by us making homes for them too everywhere that we can

Swifts will use nest boxes & “nest bricks”



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Where to put nest boxes

Assess every site individually - there is NO standard answer!

**Perfect successful
placing under
deep sheltering
eaves with no
perches for
pigeons or hawks**



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Swifts like it cosy!

Not too hot - Not too cold - Not too windy - Not wet

Not in constant full sun unless insulated or shaded

Not in prevailing winds and rain

Not in windy locations

Under deep eaves is perfect! Any direction can be OK!

Do not place flat topped boxes on open walls where they may cause a damp patch from snow and rain accumulation or offer perches to predators and feral pigeons



Where to put nest bricks

Assess every site & look for more sheltered locations



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Why help wildlife?

Very briefly - Our survival depends on it



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“Our civilisation depends utterly on the plants, animals, and microorganisms of Earth that supply it with essential ecosystem services ranging from crop pollination and protection to supplying food from the sea and maintaining a liveable climate”

Prof Paul Ehrlich Stanford University



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“The War on Nature”

Our Governments most successful policy ever?

The latest State of Nature report, finds no let-up in the decline of our wildlife, with one in six species at risk of being lost from Great Britain

State of Nature, the most comprehensive report on UK wildlife, also shows that the species studied have, on average, declined by 19% in the UK since monitoring began in 1970

Most of the important habitats for the UK's nature are in poor condition, but restoration projects can and do have clear benefits for nature and people, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation

As a result, the UK is now one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth



How “Nature” can help us even more

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UK Government figures show that between 2017 and 2018 26% of the adult population were prescribed psycho-active drugs used for treating sleeplessness, depression and anxiety

“Spending time in the natural environment – whether as a resident or a visitor – improves our mental health and feelings of wellbeing. It can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity, and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as asthma. It can combat loneliness and bind communities together.”

UK Government: “A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (2018)”

Why urban areas really matter for Wildlife

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Research by the University of Sheffield shows that urban areas in the UK *now hold more species than the countryside*

Our urban areas have become nature reserves – *the last safe places for many species*

Why is this? One example – Trees



Our towns and cities *have far more trees per acre than our rural areas*

Left – Camden, London
Below – Lincolnshire
a.k.a. “The Chemical Desert”



Camden & Croydon have about 30% tree cover
– amongst the best in the UK

Essential Swift support = Food = Flying Insects

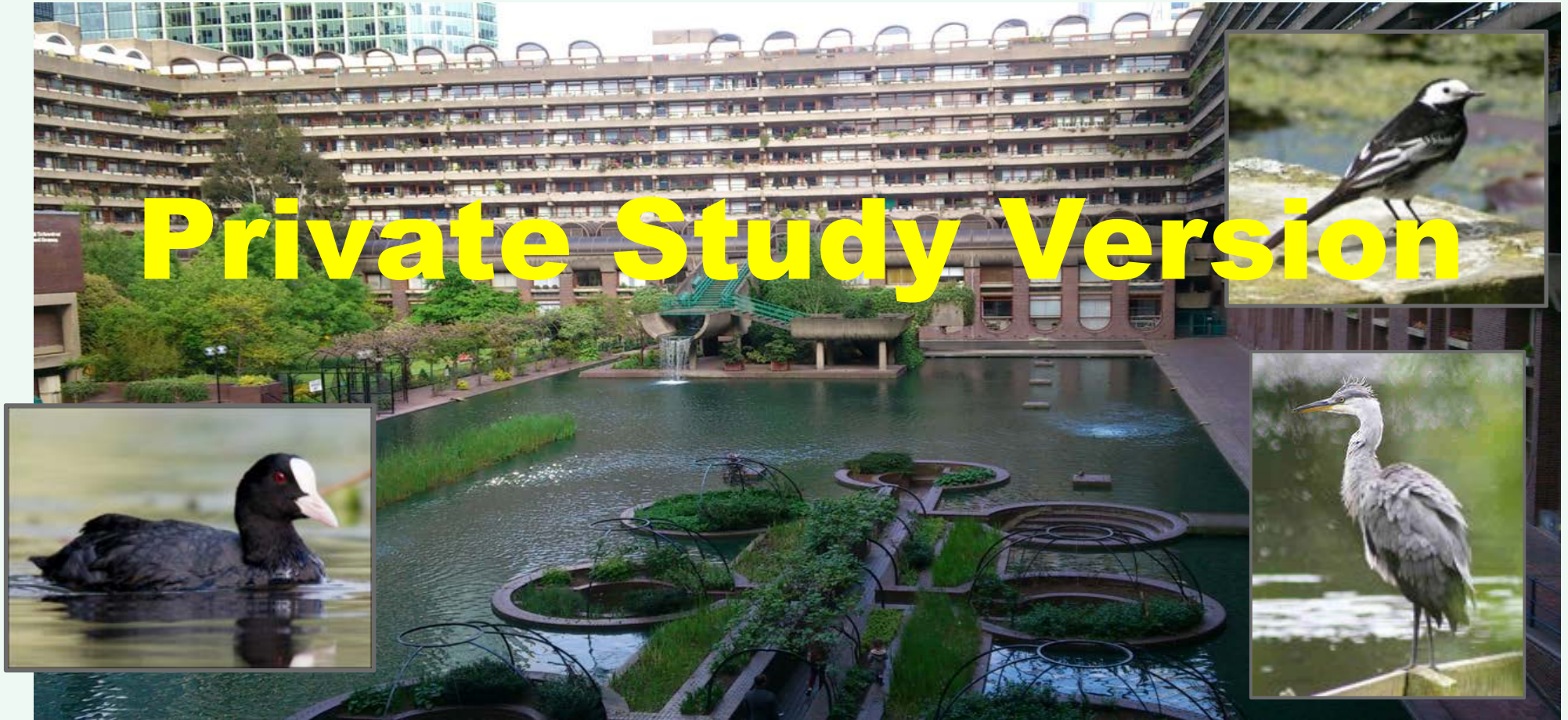
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To support Swifts you need fertile soil, clean water, plants, flowers and flying insects



And we can build in Biodiversity

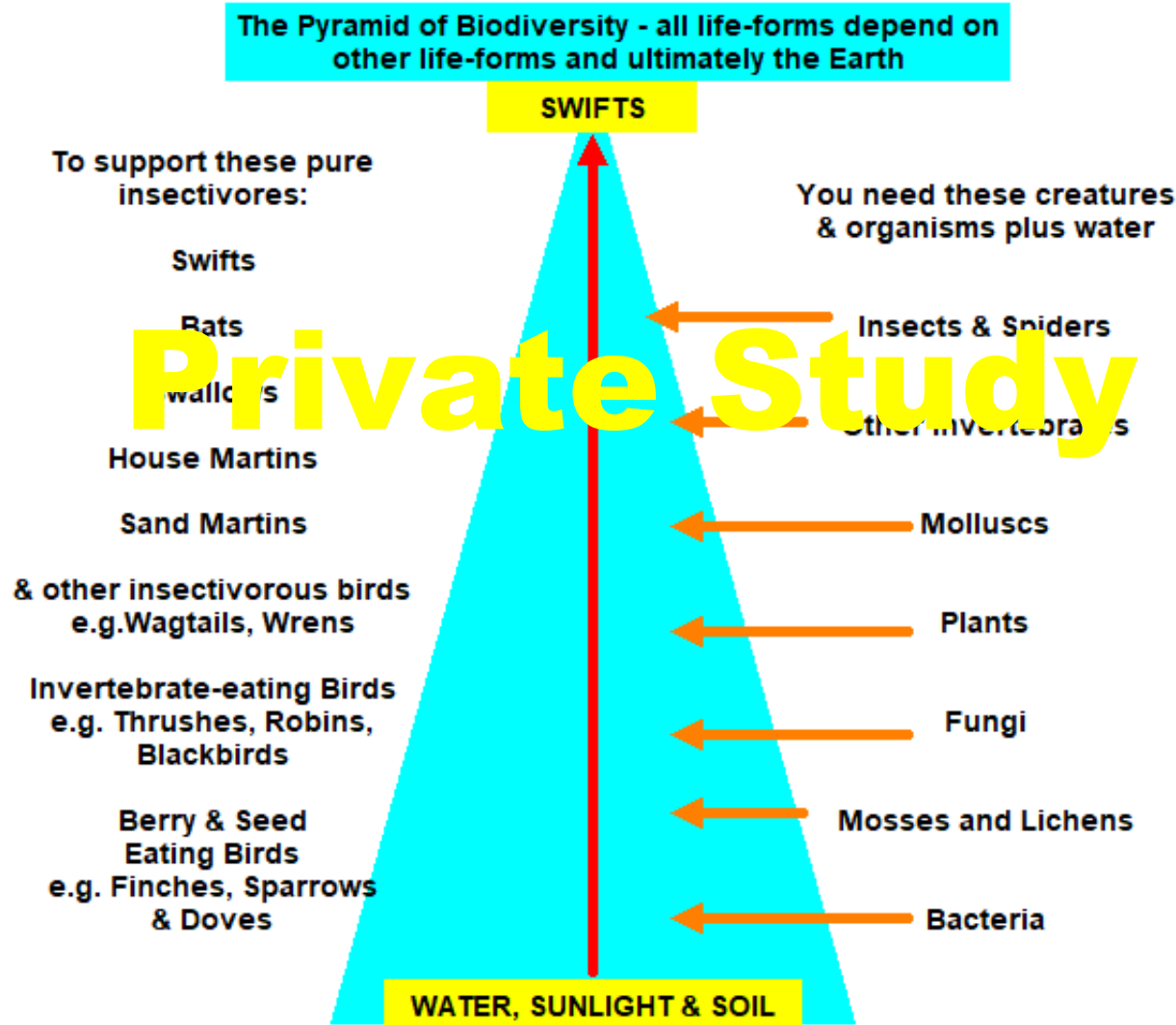
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By 2030 over 90% of the UK population will live in towns. We know that living in urban areas devoid of trees, green places and wildlife is bad for our physical and mental health

Application of Urban Biodiversity concepts can reverse this by creating new environments for wildlife like here at the inner-city Barbican

The Biodiversity Pyramid



You start off with soil, you end up with Swifts, and us too!



But stop your Council's Biocide use!

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France has banned the use of pesticides in all towns, villages, cities and gardens

We must do it too in every village, town and city

**And stop them cutting the verges!
*We need the wildflowers and the pollinating insects***

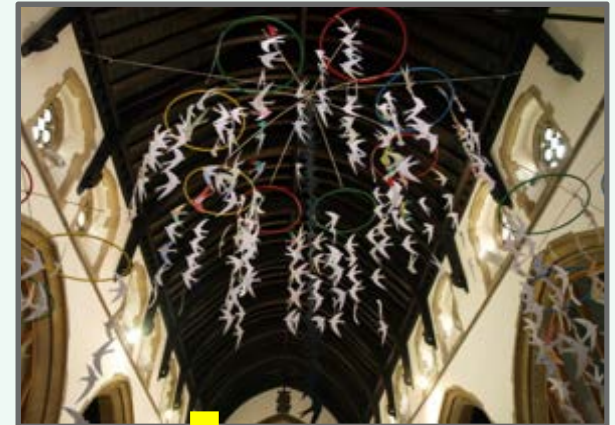


Reviving a town with Swifts!



Harleston Norfolk

**Economic Benefits
Social Mixing
Educational Assets
Biodiversity Indicators
Unique Selling Points
Activity Generators
A busy High Street**



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Please help Swifts to help us too!

**Or else they will vanish, life will be
miserable & we'll all die of Malaria**

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**For free advice, information, designs & suppliers - see
www.swift-conservation.org**

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