

The Swift (*Apus apus*) Lecture by **Peter Cush**, 14th November 2017

This was an enthralling evening in the Ulster Museum lecture theatre where Peter Cush gave an in depth talk on the remarkable life cycle of the iconic Swift. He promised and delivered a passionate “full Monty” bird’s eye view on the fascinating life-cycle of this near relative of hummingbirds and nightjars.

Around for over 50 million years, they spend their lives in the air, living on insects caught in flight; they drink, feed, and sleep on the wing - apparently unihemispheric slow-wave sleep (USWS), where one half of the brain sleeps while the other half remains alert. Their boluses or food balls have revealed over 500 types of insects and spiders.

Non-passerine, these “aerial plankton-feeders” can dive at around 220 km/h which is all down to a remarkable type 1 muscle fibre. 50g in weight, they can induce a state of torpor in poor weather and they maintain a highly ritualised social behaviour. Who cannot be mesmerised by the sight and sound of Summer’s screaming parties and aerobatics around our cityscapes?

Of key importance, and one that was emphasized repeatedly, is how critical it is to provide suitable nesting sites. It takes 4 years of long migrations all the way to Mozambique before our native Northern Irish Swifts begin to breed successfully. As Peter related, even the great naturalist Gilbert White (1720 –1793) observed the importance of suitable sites for these birds. With diminishing locations for nesting, these fascinating birds need our help today.

Peter’s excellent talk was illustrated with top-flight slides and poetry.

Extract from “Swifts” by Ted Hughes

*...and here they are, here they are again
Erupting across yard stones
Shrapnel-scatter terror. Frog-gapers,
Speedway goggles, international mobsters –*

*A bolas of three or four wire screams
Jockeying across each other
On their switchback wheel of death.
They swat past, hard-fledged*

*Veer on the hard air, toss up over the roof,
And are gone again. Their mole-dark labouring,
Their lunatic limber scrambling frenzy
And their whirling blades Shrapnel-scatter terror. Frog-gapers,
Speedway goggles, international mobsters –*

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On their switchback wheel of death.
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