

The Swifts at Garbally Castle



Garbally Castle, from May to August each year, is home to nesting pairs of swifts, which are medium-sized aerial birds and are superb flyers. While predominantly considered to be an urban bird they are somewhat less obvious in rural settings as they use high buildings as their nesting sites for breeding purposes. The swifts are a red-listed bird of conservation concern and with this background we are delighted that they have chosen this rural location here at Garbally as a nesting site where they can lay their eggs and rear their young.

Swifts sleep, eat, bath, preen and even mate while flying and thus rarely if ever touch the ground. They are also the fastest birds in level flight, with an impressive top speed of 70mph. Swifts are plain sooty brown in colour with a small white patch on the throat, curved wings and a forked tail but when in flight against the sky they appear totally black in colour. Swifts are summer visitors, breeding across the country between May and August of each year. They spend the rest of the year in Africa, but they do not breed there, they breed here which makes this their 'home'. Because they lead such an aerial existence and fly 24/7 when away from the breeding site, they need to feed constantly to keep up their energy levels. They feed on airborne insects such as midges and airborne spiders. On average they fly about 500 miles per day and during an average lifespan they fly upwards of two million miles, the equivalent of four trips to the moon and back.

The common swift, or *Apus apus*, is a medium-sized bird, superficially similar to the barn swallow or house martin but somewhat larger. Swallows however have a longer tail and a lighter colouration and while house martins can also appear similar to swifts both swallows and housemartins have white undersides, while the swift is universally dark except for its small throat patch. The resemblances between the groups are due to convergent evolution, reflecting similar contextual development. The swifts' nearest relatives are the New World hummingbirds and the Southeast Asian treeswifts.

Its scientific *Apus* is Latin for a swift, thought by the ancients to be a type of swallow with no feet derived from Ancient Greek α, a, "without", and ποῦς, pous, "foot". Swifts have very short legs which they use primarily for clinging to vertical surfaces. They never settle voluntarily on the ground where they would be vulnerable to accidents and predation.

A Life on The Wing!

At night the non-breeding birds sleep while flying as high as 3,000 metres. They approach their nest site at more than 65 km per hour and come to a stop without slowing down. They will not normally land on the ground because it is very difficult for them to take off again and also they do not perch on wires or branches. They are one of the very best breeds of fliers. They have extremely rapid wind-beats of eight such beats per second, followed by gliding and zooming about at very high speeds, usually screaming as they go. Swift screaming parties are a familiar sound here at Garbally in the summer months.

Family Life

Swifts usually stay with the same partner for the duration of their entire life, which can be up to twenty one years, and they conduct a shared workload from May to August to rear their chicks. It is a widely held observation that they do not remain together on migration.

Nest and Eggs

To make their nests they collect items floating in the air such as feathers, leaves, dandelion clocks and dry grass. They bind these together with their saliva to form a cosy nest for their white eggs which are usually two or three in number. Both partners share the time spent incubating the eggs for around eighteen days until they hatch.

Swift Chicks

When the chicks hatch they are blind and featherless. Their parents bring the chicks balls of food that consist of between 300-500 insects, called a 'bolus', which is held in a large pouch in their throat. Chicks open their eyes after six days, feathers start to grow and they become quite fat. They have an area of white around their beaks and a white line along the edge of their feathers so that their parents can see them in darkness.

Growing Up and Maturing

They stop eating and lose weight before they leave the nest and in addition do push-ups on their wings and tails to make them strong enough to fly. Once they can hold a push-up for about 10 seconds and weigh 40 grams, normally 6-8 weeks after hatching, they are ready to fly the nest. They can be as many as 200 miles south only two days after fledging. They will continue to fly non stop for up to three years before they are ready to find a nest and a partner, so that they can raise a family. The year immediately before they breed they investigate a possible nest site by flying very close to make an observation. These prospecting birds are called 'bangers' as they bang against the nest site.

This is just some of the story and facts associated with the swift family. Much of their life story happens right here at Garbally Castle. To find out more about the swifts you can visit www.swiftconservation.ie.

Text & Images: www.swiftconservation.ie.



The McDermott Family



Located close by is a commemorative plaque recalling the death of Ellen McDermott (née Mannion) who died here having taken refuge with her husband, Michael and their two children, following the family eviction from their tenancy and home in the Monivea area. This eviction occurred in 1850 in the midst of the Great Hunger of the late 1840s and early 1850s.

Following this tragic event the family was given a tenancy in the nearby townland of Pollacrossaun as documented in Griffiths Valuation of Tenements where it records Michael McDermott as the occupier from the immediate lessor and landowner, Robert French of Monivea Demesne. The full tenancy consisting of 42 acres, 3 roods and 2 perches was held equally as commonage, along with two neighbours, John McGrath and Patrick McGrath, while all three families resided in individual houses.

Michael McDermott died, aged 65 years, in 1884 and was succeeded by his son, also Michael, who married Honoria Jordan from nearby Kilbeg in 1885. Together they raised a family of five children – Michael, Bridget, Ellen, Patrick and Mary and when the eldest son, Michael, died in 1910 the property at Pollacrossaun passed to their only surviving son Patrick, better known locally as Pakie. Pakie married Margaret Fleming from Brierfield and they would raise a family of seven children at Pollacrossaun, all of whom attended Garbally National School, prior to their relocation to the townland of Somerset, Clontuskert, in 1947, as part of a Land Commission transfer. The family remained in Somerset until 1970.

A project to rejuvenate this area, adjacent to the iconic Garbally Castle, is an initiative by the Skehana & District Heritage Group. Enhancements include reasearching history relating to the castle and making it available for all, providing a nature area, signage, lighting and the placement of a picnic table and seating.



One of their children, Séamus, a graduate Engineer from UCD in 1958, has had a life-long passion for supporting and encouraging entrepreneurs and, to promote these objectives, he founded the Liffey Trust in 1984. The Trust's primary were to incubate, mentor and support entrepreneurs and community enterprises including the provision of a large enterprise centre incorporating a Performing Arts and incubator units and office space for "start-ups". Séamus was awarded an Honorary Doctorate for his work in entrepreneurial development in 2022 from UCD. The Trust made a conscious management decision to finance all its activities through its own efforts and without support from the State and it has done this with great success.

Séamus however has never forgotten his Skehana roots and in 2024 made a significant, and unsolicited, financial contribution towards the costs associated with the improvements now visible for us all to enjoy here at Garbally Castle - the location of the death of his great grandmother, Ellen, in 1850. The Skehana & District Heritage Group wishes to acknowledge this most generous contribution in addition to his continued moral support for our group.

In Memory Of
ELLEN Mc DERMOTT
(Nee Mannion), Who Died Here
In 1850. With Husband **MICHAEL**
And Their Two Children They
Took Refuge Here After They
Were Evicted

Text: Séamus McDermott and Skehana & District Heritage Group.

We wish to acknowledge our own individual group members, volunteers, contributors to these information boards, our sponsors, our community, suppliers and contractors and all who gave of their time, talents, moral and financial supports to make these enhancements possible. We extend our gratitude to all concerned.

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