

Common Swifts *Apus apus* and Their Three-wave Arrival

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We normally talk about the return as the arrival in our countries of the Common Swifts *Apus apus* in the spring; in fact it is a little more complicated than that. Birds belonging to the same colony return to their breeding site at different times, more precisely in three main consecutive waves: these are the findings based on 939 young swifts, ringed at the nest between 2008 and 2019, in a colony of artificial nest boxes (62 pieces in 2019) which have been designed, built and installed (Photo 4) in Féchy (VD), in the Lake Geneva Basin, Switzerland, at an altitude of 440 m (6-22'33" E / 46-28'43" N). My research method was published in 2014*: individual swifts are ringed with a different colour accordingly to the breeding season in which they are born; this way each generation is easily recognizable and identifiable in the thousands of photos taken in front of the holes of the nest boxes when the swifts return to the colony in the following years. Of course, mainly depending on the latitude and altitude of the site, the timing of arrival indicated here could differ significantly from that of colonies in other Countries.

*Bernard Genton, Marcel Jacquat, 2014. *Martinet noir entre ciel et pierre*. Editions de la Girafe, Musée d'histoire naturelle, CH 2300 La Chaux-de-Fonds. To order, email: mhnc@ne.ch



First wave

The first wave is that of the breeders who will lay eggs in the colony during the current year: this wave begins in mid-April and usually ends around the 18th of May. In this interval of time, the first to arrive are the faithful 'old' breeders, whilst the last ones are swifts who will lay eggs for the first time. It should be noticed that this wave has a period of overlap with the second wave.

Photo 1: A breeder defends his nest against an intruder. Féchy. Switzerland. Bernard Genton

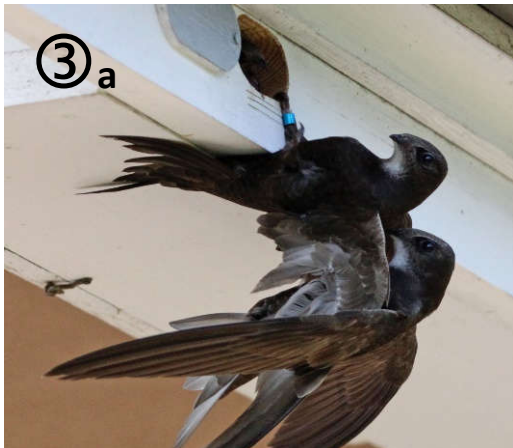


Second wave

The second wave consists of 2-year and 3-year-old individuals. The older ones (a minority in number) will become 'pre-breeders', the others 'bangers'. This wave starts on about the 10th/15th of May and continues until the 10th/15th of June.

In this time period, first to arrive (numerically fewer) are the older swifts, while the bulk of the troop comes later and it is mostly composed of 2-year-old swifts. It should be noticed that this wave partly overlaps in time with the first wave. The arrival at the nests of the 2 and 3-year-old members of the colony is recognizable by their banging and by their hesitation to enter the cavities (while the breeders enter at once).

Photo 2: A young swift, ringed in gold colour in 2010, tries to escape as it is fought back by the breeder, following his attempt to intrude into the nest. Control photo of May 12, 2 breeder 012. Féchy. Switzerland. Bernard Genton



Third wave

The third wave is made up of 1-year-olds (called 'yearlings'); they are often in groups and behave like bangers. They do not arrive until the 12th/14th of June

Photo 3a: A young swift, ringed in blue in 2009, explores a nest already occupied by breeders of the current year; another immature swift is clinging onto his back. Control photo, June 29, 2010. Féchy. Switzerland. Bernard Genton

Photo 3b: Common swifts banging at the colony's scaffold holes which have been modified for them, Civic Tower Ghirlandina, Modena. Mauro Ferri

Photo 4: Swifts banging at the artificial nests of the Jordil colony, Féchy (VD), Switzerland. Bernard Genton

