



ripple effect

Swifts are arguably the most aerial of birds. The family name, Apodidae, means literally 'without feet', alluding to their greatly reduced legs. They catch all their food on the wing

and construct their nests from aerial debris. Swifts breed on rock faces or in tree crevices where they can land and take off directly from the nest. Common Swifts are renowned for spending

their entire non-breeding season aloft, taking cat-naps while soaring high in the sky at night.

The one time swifts have to come close to the ground is to drink, when

they scoop up a beakful of water by skimming just above the water surface. It requires not dipping too deeply while maintaining sufficient airspeed not to stall. Drinking is easiest on calm days, when swifts can skim smoothly over the water. As the wind increases, they bounce off successive wavelets. The one advantage of stronger winds is they can fly into the wind and so drink with a slower ground speed.

Drinking probably takes some practice for young birds to perfect; even experienced birds often make multiple passes of the wetland before finally taking the plunge. Other aerial insectivores such as swallows and nightjars also drink on the wing.

PETER RYAN

Canon R6 with 100–500 zoom at 500mm; f7.1 at 1/6400 sec

Two series of images taken at 20 frames per second showing Bradfield's Swifts drinking from a small pond near the Fish River Canyon, southern Namibia. Under calm conditions, they skim smoothly over the water (above), but as the wind increases they bounce off successive wavelets (below). They start to climb immediately after drinking, fanning their tails to maximise lift.

