

Swifts Are In Trouble

Swifts mate for life, returning each year to use the same building and the same nest location they have used in previous years. These locations are nearly always in buildings built before 1944 and about a half of all nest sites are in private dwelling houses. Nests are a rudimentary cup of material the bird has caught on the wing, located on a ledge usually just inside the roof space. Adult birds remove the droppings of young birds which means that swifts are clean, un messy birds and unobtrusive neighbours.

Unfortunately over the last few years their numbers have showed a marked decline, for reasons not fully understood. Lack of insects and the poor run of summer weather will have contributed to this, but a more significant impact is likely to be the loss of their traditional nesting sites.

Changes to buildings, re-roofing, repairs and replacement of soffit boards which may have previously allowed swifts an entry into the roof space may be a major cause of their decline. Swifts are very faithful to their previous nesting locations and are reluctant to move quickly to an alternative, so preserving the facility for birds to use their traditional nest sites is probably the single most important aspect of their conservation.

Swifts Need Your Help

As a builder or roofer you may be in a position where you have been asked to do work on a building which might have swifts nesting within it. Where the owner has not needed to apply for planning permission you may be the first to be aware of any potential impact on these birds. Not all property owners may be aware they have nesting swifts in their building and they may be unclear where their nests are located.

Where changes are planned to existing buildings, particularly buildings built before the 1950s, we would encourage you to check with the project co-ordinator (see front page) to establish if we have any swift nesting records for the building. If we have records, the information we hold should indicate which part of the building is being used. This can be specific sections of the roof space, usually under the eaves, but it may also include holes in the walls of the building. Where swifts may be affected the key thing is to ensure they have access to their previous nest locations.

We are more than happy to come and talk to the property owner to discuss the options which might help ensure the swifts continue to breed within the building. The Swift Conservation web site (see front page) has lots of information about making swift friendly changes to buildings.

One last word of caution. Whilst it is not against the law to make changes to a building which might affect nesting swifts, it is illegal to do so during the breeding season (typically May to August), so please bear this in mind when asked to do work on a property where swifts are nesting.

Swifts In The Community



A project based in North Lancashire and South Cumbria to preserve and enhance the traditional nesting sites of swifts in our towns and villages.

Supported by:



www.rspb.org.uk

Swift Conservation Group
www.swift-conservation.org



Sustainable
Development
Fund

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Above: Swift in flight; copyright David Moreton

The Magic of Swifts

Swifts are one of the iconic birds of summer. Over wintering in Africa they arrive here in early May to spend three months gracing the skies of our country side, and in particular our towns and villages where many of them have their traditional nesting sites. Parties of screaming birds racing over our roof tops and above our streets are one of the delights of warm sunny summer evenings.

Here are some of facts about this remarkable bird, their full life history only becoming fully understood within the last 100 years.

- The swift is the fastest flying bird, in level flight, recorded in the UK, capable of speeds in excess of 60 mph and covering over 500 miles a day.
 - For its size, it is also a relatively long-lived bird with an average life span of over 5 years. In its lifetime, a swift may fly well over a million miles.
 - Unlike swallows and martins, similar summer visitors, swifts do not perch, but spend almost all of their life on the wing where they catch airborne insects, their main food source.
 - Birds will only land to nest. The rest of the year and even for some birds during the breeding season, they will sleep on the wing flying to heights of up to 10,000ft to drift around during the hours of darkness.
 - Young birds, once they have left the nest, will not return to the nest and are completely independent of their parents.
 - They will spend the next 3 to 4 years entirely on the wing before returning to breed in the town or village where they were born.
 - Young birds in the nest are fed sporadically with a large ball of insects which the adult has caught and accumulated on the wing. This may contain several hundred insects which the adult may have caught many tens of miles away from its nest site.
- Adults will fly long distances to avoid bad weather and when the adults are away from the nest for significant periods of time, sometimes days at a time, the young have the ability to revert to a state of semi-hibernation to conserve energy.
 - Swifts lay their eggs by the end of May or early June and they take 2-3 week to hatch. The young birds will remain in the nest for up to 6 weeks before fledging and immediately become independent from their parents in flight and for food.

Below: Two Swift chicks in their nest;
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