



Setting up homes for swifts



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Congratulations! You want to help support our local swifts!

Why do swifts need our help?

Swifts arrive back in the UK from Africa in May and their exciting calls mean that summer is here. They come here to breed and rely on the small holes and cracks in eaves, gables, under gutters and high walls in our buildings to build their nests and raise their swiftlets. They fill our summer skies and evenings with their impressively fast acrobatic flight and they add immense excitement and life to any area. They have shared our buildings for over 2000 years, but demolition of older buildings and new building techniques exclude swifts. Moreover, many swift nesting sites are lost during building renovations and repair work, such as soffit replacements, roofing works, and cavity wall insulation that seals up the access holes they need. Swifts are so discreet that many people are not aware they have breeding swifts in their building. As nest sites are disappearing so are our swifts! Swift numbers in the UK have dropped by 42% over the last 20 years and numbers are continuing to fall. They are now on the amber list of birds of conservation concern.

How you can help Swifts

Installing simple nest boxes on your home or building will preserve inner-city Swift populations and enhance local biodiversity. Just like flowers and trees, swifts can make us feel happier! Creating Swift nest places is not difficult. Using simple DIY carpentry skills you can make your own low cost nest-boxes or you can buy ready-made boxes. Nest homes can also be fitted internally into brickwork using swift bricks – hollow bricks sized to hold a nest, or by cutting holes into soffits and eaves. This guidance will focus on the external fitting of swift nest boxes.



Swift in eaves. Copyright © Alan Wadsworth

Can you see swifts over your house or building?

This is important to determine how likely you will attract swifts to any boxes you may provide for them. If you can see 'screaming parties' of swifts flying at roof height as well as high up, you are near a nesting colony and you are very likely to attract swifts to a new box. Playing attractor calls will help swifts find your nesting places quickly.



SE23 Swift. Copyright © Rebecca Headd

If you only see swifts high up you should be able to attract them to your location by playing swift attractor calls.

If you don't see any swifts at all, it is still possible for them to find your location but you would need to be extra-persistent and determined to attract them, and play swift attractor calls loudly from May onwards. Swifts have been known to find new nesting sites 2-3 miles away. Be prepared to be patient – it may take a number of years.

How many nest boxes should you put up?

Swifts nest in colonies, not in isolation. Following expert advice, you should provide at least two nesting spaces. This could mean having two separate boxes or having larger boxes with multiple compartments. Some companies sell boxes with space for 2, 4, 6 and even 8 pairs of swifts. You can always add more later if you get a colony established.

Where to put them

Swifts look for nest holes high up on buildings under the eaves and behind gutters so boxes should be placed high up on a wall directly under the eaves or on a gable-end. Boxes may also be placed on exposed walls without eaves providing there is shade from the sun and the boxes used are weatherproof and long lasting. Wooden boxes are generally best avoided on exposed walls as they can rot over time.

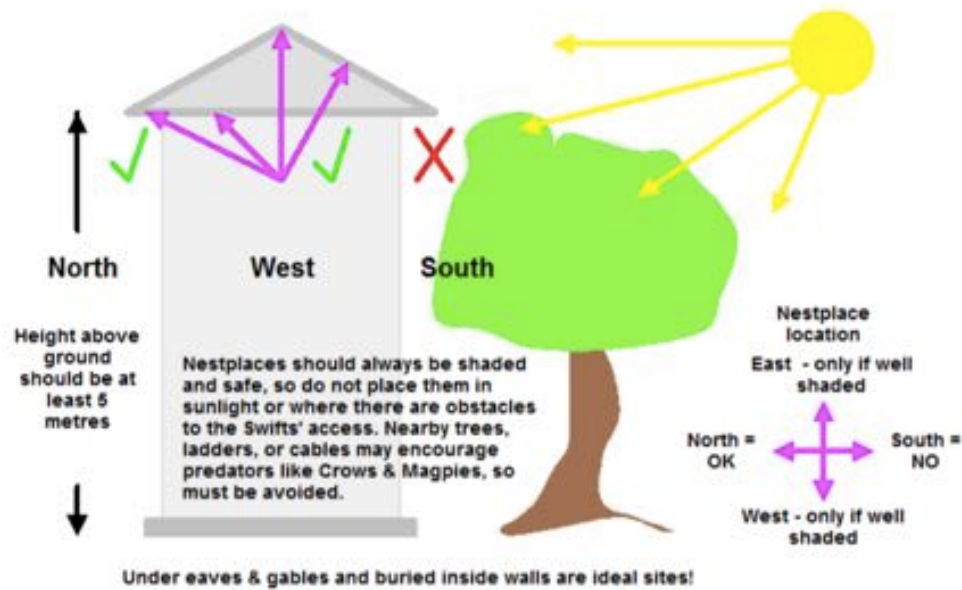
Boxes must be placed with at least a 5 metre drop below it to the ground because swifts swoop straight into the nest and dive out straight into flight when they leave. However, there are reports swifts have taken to boxes at 3.5 metres.

Experts recommend placing boxes on north, west or east-facing walls that are in a shaded or partly shaded position. Boxes may only be placed on walls exposed to full sunshine, such as south facing walls, if boxes are fully painted white and



Photo Copyright © Clarke Burnt

they are placed under eaves so that they do not get too hot inside. White paint helps to deflect the sun's rays. This is very important as swifts and their swiftlets have been known to die in boxes exposed to hot sunshine without these protective measures.



The flight path to the boxes should be clear and free of obstacles such as poles and telegraph wires. Adult swifts fly at speed into the nest. Baby swifts leaving the nest fly in an arc down and then up and away. Any obstacle is a flight hazard and can bring down an inexperienced flyer. You also need to make sure the entrance and location are not vulnerable to predators such as cats, crows, magpies, squirrels, rats and weasels (by climbing up creepers, sitting on nearby aerials, or flying in from nearby trees).

Choosing the boxes

There are many different nest boxes available on the market to buy made out of a range of materials such as wood, recycled plastic, woodcrete and fibreglass. Some are designed for placement under eaves or an overhang only and others can also be placed on an exposed wall. Most can be painted to match the exterior of your building. Please see the leaflet 'Swift boxes available to buy for exterior fitting' for the full list of recommended boxes you can buy and more detail.



Swifts peeping out of nest box. Copyright © Public Domain



DIY Boxes

There are also numerous designs available to make your own DIY nest boxes. Not only is this more cost effective, but also very gratifying. Many designs can be found here www.swift-conservation.org/Nestboxes&Attraction.htm#D.I.Y and here www.actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk/p/diy-swift-box-designs.html.



Particularly popular DIY designs include the twin compartment box designed by Mark Glanville of Bristol Swifts as seen above. See www.bristolswifts.co.uk/swift-nest-box-design/ for instructions and for his other designs.

Swift nest moulds

To encourage nesting, insert a shallow saucer-like nest platform at the end of the box farthest from the entrance. This simple device has been shown to speed take-up time by nesting swifts by a year! They are available from some companies selling boxes or you can make them yourself.



MDF Swift nest mould. Copyright © Lyndon Kearsley

Starlings and house sparrows in swift nest boxes

Starlings will try and nest in boxes provided for swifts. This is not always a problem, as starlings will often have raised their brood before the swifts arrive. However, if starlings have a second brood this can cause a major conflict between the two and starlings can fatally attack swifts trying to enter. Advice is to deter starlings from swift boxes by choosing boxes

with holes no bigger than 30mm, though a very determined starling could still squeeze through this. Only 28mm sized hole boxes will definitely prevent starlings from entering but these are not available on the market. Any box hole can be reduced to this size very easily with Isopon polyfilla and can be seen here www.actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/fulbourn-update.html. Starlings are beautiful birds that are also in decline and also need our help. Nest boxes specifically designed for them are available.



Starling. Copyright © RSPB

House sparrows are also often attracted to swift boxes to breed and this is a good thing. House sparrows are another species in rapid decline and they are also a red species, so are in desperate need of homes too. They will raise 1 or 2 broods before the swifts arrive and then the swifts will take up the boxes. Remarkably, house sparrows show swifts where nest boxes are as swifts seek out their calls for this purpose.



House Sparrow. Copyright © David Chapman

Playing swift calls to attract passing swifts

If you want to attract swifts to nest in new areas you **NEED** to play swift attraction calls. This is because young swifts breeding for the first time find potential nest sites by following swifts that are already breeding. Playing swift calls is often the difference between success and failure in attracting swifts to your boxes and is especially important if there are no swifts nesting near you. If swifts are nesting nearby, playing calls will greatly speed up the time it takes for swifts to notice your boxes. Playing calls *doesn't guarantee* swifts will nest but greatly improves your chances.



Calls CD. Copyright © Swift Conservation

You will need to buy the CD or MP3 files of swift calls available from www.swift-conservation.org and play them on a sound system. The CD is £6 and the MP3 files are £2. You could use the CD in a CD player with speakers or the MP3 files on an iPod, iPhone or an MP3 player wired up to an amplifier and speakers.

Play calls as loud as you reasonably can and for as long as possible, subject to not annoying neighbours. Most people are unaware that these are anything other than actual swifts calling.

Play the calls from the beginning of May until the end of July, ideally every day. Calls are more effective when the weather is calm as swifts do not tend to prospect for new nest sites in wet and windy weather.

Morning and evening is the best time but the more hours you play them the better. Speakers can be plugged into a timer to make it easier. It is best to position the speakers as near to the boxes as possible such as in a window, or on the ground also works.



Swift call system. Copyright © Action for Swifts

There is a wealth of advice about setting up a swift call player system using an amplifier and speakers in the form of car tweeters than can be placed directly in the nest box or under it. See <http://actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk/p/attraction-call-systems-for-swifts.html>. These have been very successful and parts for the system can be brought for under £30. Forest Hill SE23 & Lewisham Borough Swift Group may provide these as ready to buy kits in the future.

There are normally three waves of swift arrivals. The first wave is the last week of April to early May. These swifts are mainly breeding adults returning to traditional nesting sites. The second wave is the end of May into the first half of June. These are the swifts you are hoping to attract with the swift calls. They are 2-3 year old birds looking for a nest site and will fly up to investigate wherever the call sounds are coming from. If you are lucky enough to attract a pair they will spend the rest of the summer building a new nest ready for next year. The third wave arrives in the middle of July. These swifts are yearlings returning for the first time. They are interested in joining a colony and will visit several in the local area to suss out the best ones. Attracted by calls, they might even enter one of your boxes, roosting in it until they leave in August, but they won't start nest building until the following year.



Swifts entering a nest box. Copyright © Bristol Swifts

Installing the boxes

Secure boxes with strong rustproof fixings to the external wall or eaves and ensure the box is fixed soundly to avoid any risk of it detaching. Some boxes come supplied with all the fixing brackets and screws needed to get them installed. Some boxes are not pre-drilled at the back and you will need to do this. Our leaflet '*Swift boxes available to buy for exterior fitting*' details which boxes this applies to and which come supplied with fixings and which do not.

Always observe sensible safety precautions when making or fitting any boxes. Ensure your means of accessing high walls is safe. Drilling into walls at height is potentially dangerous and great care should always be taken when working on ladders, scaffolding or platforms.

For information about ladder safety please see here: <http://www.bristolswifts.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Ladder-Safety.pdf>.



Installing boxes at a school. Copyright © Clarke Brunt

If you are in any doubt about your ability to install the boxes ask a professional to do it for you. We can recommend a local swift friendly handyman if required.

If you live in a conservation area or your building is listed you will need planning permission to erect external boxes. Cutting holes into your soffits and eaves may be the best option. A leaflet about creating homes for swifts in soffits and eaves can be found here: <http://www.swift-conservation.org/Leaflet%203%20%20Swift%20Nest%20Places%20in%20Soffits%20%26%20Eaves-small.pdf>.

Swift nest boxes can be fitted with spy cameras and connected to your PC or TV, allowing you to get a remarkable insight into their world and to have your own mini Springwatch.

www.gardenature.co.uk sell camera-ready swift boxes and camera kits. Camera kits can also be obtained from www.spycameracctv.com/spy/wildlife-cameras/bird-box-cameras/.

After care

Swift boxes do not normally need any cleaning out, as swifts are scrupulously clean birds. After their departure, larvae beetles and moths normally consume their nesting material.

If swifts do occupy your boxes, give them plenty of peace and quiet to breed. Never disturb them at any time as they may well desert the nest and their young. All roofing and repair works near the nest sites should therefore be avoided whilst they are present from May to early August. Disturbing nesting swifts is a legal offence.

Avoid letting creepers and plants encroach on the nest, as this will attract predators.

Visit www.swift-conservation.org and www.actionforswifts for to learn more about swifts and for nest box inspiration.

Most importantly – **enjoy your swifts!!**

Rebecca 07772290891
Forest Hill SE23 & Lewisham Borough Swift Group



Happy swifts in nest! Copyright © Suffolk Swifts



This information sheet was recreated using information kindly obtained from Swift Conservation, Action for Swifts, Bristol Swifts and Maidenhead, Marlow and Cookham Swift Group.