

Roofing & Swift Conservation

You don't have to be a bird watcher to stop and enjoy the glorious sight of a swift in flight as they gracefully swoop through a cloudless sky, to appreciate the swift's distinctive cries so evocative of our English summers, or to imagine the ecological consequences if these beautiful and inspiring birds were to disappear.

Since 1990 the number of swifts nesting in the south-east of England is thought to have fallen by more than half. What is the cause of this dramatic drop in numbers? Well, modern roofing practices may have an important role to play. Although swifts originally nested in more conventional sites such as caves, trees, or cliffs, they are opportunistic birds that have long taken advantage of the ready-made nesting sites offered by the roofs in our buildings.

Swifts are largely airborne birds. They eat, drink, mate, and sleep on the wing and spend the first two to three years of their lives in flight. However, every year in May the UK's swift population completes its 14,000 mile journey from South Africa in order to breed. During the breeding season, from May to August, the swifts nest in the various nooks and holes offered by our buildings. Popular nesting sites include: inside the eaves and gables of roofs, on roof timbers or felt where loose tiles have allowed access, under loose or missing flashings on chimneys and skylights, and in gaps in brickwork where the pointing has washed away.

However, over the past century our building techniques have developed in such a way that ventilation features, such as open eaves, are no longer necessary, meaning that the majority of houses built in the last 60 years are completely swift proof. A lot of traditional nesting sites in historic buildings, factories, warehouses, and churches, are also declining in numbers as these types of structures are increasingly being demolished or renovated.

Nevertheless, there are simple steps that can be followed to ensure that swifts are protected for future generations to enjoy.

Repairing or re-roofing existing buildings

When carrying out repair work to an existing roof, or re-roofing a building, the first step should always be to check for nesting sites. Swifts may also nest in gaps in the walls of a building, so it is important to check here as well. If swift nests are present and it is between May and August then any work on the roof should be postponed. Indeed, it is a little known fact that swifts are protected under UK and EU law, which means that it is an offence to interfere with swifts, their chicks, eggs, or nests.

If work is being done outside of the swift breeding season, then any work should leave nesting sites undisturbed and preserve existing access holes. Where swifts are nesting in holes in the pointing it is



A swift in flight. Such sights may become less common in the UK if we don't act now to preserve their nesting sites. © David Moreton

best to simply leave the holes. If rain is an issue then a tile can be fitted above the hole to form a protective ledge. With eave nests, the best option is to leave the eaves open or cut access holes into soffits or facing boards. If this is not possible, another option is to install a plywood partition inside the loft. This encloses the swift nesting site, whilst still allowing for a usable loft space.

Where swifts are nesting behind flashings or ridge-end tiles these can be offset or lengthened in order to allow the swifts to re-gain access without affecting the weatherproofing of the building. If swifts are nesting under tiles then there are two possible options. The gap where the swifts are accessing the roof can be retained by inserting cement and pieces of tiles under the new tile. Make sure a gap of at least 30mm is left to allow the swifts access. Alternatively, ridged tiles are available that provide swifts with an access tunnel to a hole in the under tiles.

In all cases it is crucial to make sure that new access holes are placed in the exact same position as old ones, otherwise the swifts may reject the nesting site.

Encouraging swifts in new builds

If you are working on a new build and wish to encourage swifts to nest in the area then there are a number of nest boxes available. Internal nest boxes are the best option. They fit with UK brick sizes and so can be built in to the structure of the building. They are much more durable than external boxes and therefore provide swifts with a secure and reliable nesting site. However, if this is not an option, a number of external boxes, which can be fitted to the outside of the building, are also available.

All nest boxes should be fitted at least 5 metres from the ground, with a clear access route, as swifts do not stop when entering their nests. They should also be fitted away from any place where other animals could potentially access the nest. Once fitted they should be checked for any signs of damage and replaced as needed. However, swifts are very clean birds and minimal maintenance is required by the building owner.

Help is also at hand from Swift Conservation, a not-for-profit advice service set up in 2008 by Edward Mayer after he became aware of the decline in London's swift population. Swift Conservation aims to boost the bird's numbers in the UK and across Europe by raising awareness of their falling numbers. They also offer help and advice to all building professionals wanting to preserve or encourage nesting swifts, and in some cases are able to make on-site visits.



Illustration of an internal nest box, which can be built in to the structure of the building.
© Dick Newell



An example of an external nesting box on a cricket pavilion in Chiswick. © Edward Mayer

Mayer believes that the roofing industry is crucial to the preservation of swifts: "The roofing industry has a great contribution to make in preserving the UK's natural heritage. Many attractive and beneficial insect-eating birds and bats live in our roofs, in eaves and under tiles. By taking care not to disturb them when working, and by maintaining their nest places and creating new ones for them, the roofing industry can play its part in keeping the UK's wildlife with us for all our futures."

It would be a huge loss to the UK if our swift population continued to decline. However, now that this issue is increasingly being brought to the attention of people in the roofing industry, the future for swifts in the UK is looking brighter. More and more new nesting sites are being created, as well as old ones being preserved. It is simple and cheap to do and could offer a life line to these beautiful birds. When swifts are not in their nests they fill our summer skies with impressive aerial displays, add to the richness of local wildlife, and contribute to our quality of life. They are only with us for a few months of the year - let's make them thrive! ◆

Naomi Racz is a nature writer based in Manchester. She recently completed an MA in Writing, Nature and Place at the University of Exeter and is currently carrying out research for a book about urban nature.

For more information about the range of nest boxes available, and for advice on preserving swift nesting sites visit www.swift-conservation.org.

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