

Tubbercurry Swift update 26/7/2016

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Tubbercurry Tidy Towns Circular Road Swift nestbox colony update

As we near the end of the Common Swift breeding season, I thought I might put together a brief update on the project, long promised to Geraldine Brennan - thanks for your patience Geraldine!

I am very pleased to report another successful breeding season at this colony, and another new pair have joined the colony, this year bringing us up to four breeding pairs. This slow steady growth is very satisfactory, from such a precarious start where we had very few breeding birds (probably 4 or 5 pairs) left in the town, and got our first pair exploring a box in 2013 and breeding for the first time in 2014, and building steadily up to three breeding pairs last year.

This year the three established pairs successfully bred again, producing three, two and one chicks respectively, that were successfully reared by the adults and are currently fledging (leaving the nest and taking to the wing). Two chicks is pretty typical for Irish Swifts, so on average, three pairs producing six chicks is exactly the level of productivity we would expect. The chicks are growing well, and most have already fledged or are about to at time of compiling this report (see Photo 2). These chicks will not return to the colony to breed, but will seek nest sites elsewhere, and that is the importance of the new Swift projects going on elsewhere (Ballymote, Sligo town, and in many Mayo towns) to secure existing nest sites and create new ones.

We hope our colony will continue to attract new breeding pairs, and it was great to get another pair establishing a nest this year. They did not breed (very common for new pairs not to breed in their first year), but they did build a nest where they roosted each night, so I am quite confident they will return to breed there next year, bringing our breeding pairs to four, and hopefully we will continue to attract new breeding birds.

This year was also the first time that some adult Swifts in the Tubbercurry colony were trapped, and ringed, in addition to all of the chicks as in previous years.

As well as ringing the birds, weights and measurement are taken that will help shed light on the biology of Swifts. In total, 14 Swifts (adults and chicks) were housed in the Circular Road nestboxes this year, a very gratifying result, and a sign that we are well on the road to a success story with our colony.

Swifts form loose social groups and fly in close formation, calling constantly, a sound that is characteristic of summer in Irish towns (or used to be, sadly). It was fantastic this year when I was ringing the chicks on Sunday 17th July to observe a screaming party of 11 Swifts zooming past the colony at Circular Road

again and again, the largest I have seen in the town for several years. The population is still precarious, and very dependent on the nestbox colony but appears to be stabilising and even beginning to recover, which is a fantastic result for the Tidy Towns Swift project.

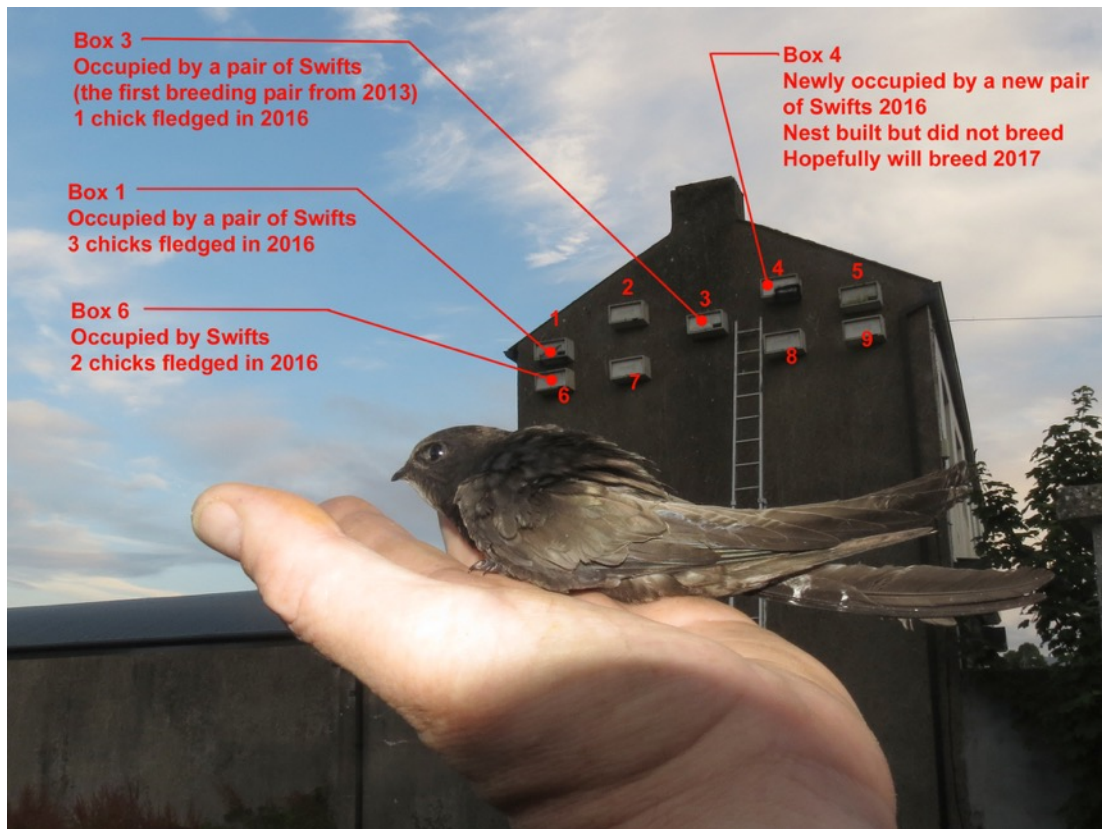


Photo 1
Tubbercurry Tidy Towns Swift Colony, Circular Road
17th July 2016 540am

One of the adult Swifts from the Tidy Towns Swift Nestbox project at Circular Road being released after ringing and having a range of biometric measurements taken. This work is done at daybreak in early July, and this explains why I may have been seen by a few returning revelers up a ladder on Gearóid Surlis's store at 4 am on a Sunday morning in July!

The labels in the photo show the numbering of the boxes referred to above, and the 2016 outcome in each of the active boxes. Many of the other unoccupied boxes have characteristic Swift droppings in them, so they are being used for roosting by non-breeders, giving a basis for the optimism for future seasons.



Photo 2:
Box 6, Tubbercurry Tidy Towns Swift Colony, Circular Road
17th July 2016 630am

Two of the three Swift chicks in box 6. These chicks are about a month old and will fledge in the next week to ten days. Although their nest hygiene leaves a lot to be desired, outside the nest shows virtually no evidence of occupation - a tidy species for a Tidy Towns project!

Three chicks is an exceptionally good brood, as they typically fledge two chicks. Feeding these three requires a lot of hard work by the parents, bringing a steady supply of food to satisfy their ravenous appetites. Their rapid growth from a couple of grams at hatching to 45-50 grams weight each a month later at the time this photo was taken requires a huge amount of protein-rich flying insects, all caught in flight.

These chicks are now at about their maximum weight and will in fact lose 10-15 grams in order to reach their 'flying weight' of 35-40 grams. Observations on nestbox cameras reveals that they also spend a lot of time exercising in the nest at this stage, flapping their wings and even doing 'push-ups' on their wings!

Other Swift news from the area:

The Irish Swift Geolocator project:

Seven geolocators were attached to Irish Swifts last year, three in Antrim and four in Tubbercurry. The return on the Tubbercurry birds has been disappointing, with only one geolocator recovered from a returning bird, but all three Antrim birds returning. This is the luck of the draw ! Results from these devices, which will hopefully show the migration routes of Irish Swifts for the very first time are awaited with interest.....



Photo 3: Fitting geolocators to swifts in 2015 at Rathscanlon

The 4 devices recovered at Antrim and Tubbercurry have been sent to Dr Chris Hewson at the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) in Norwich the UK, who is analyzing these as part of a joint BTO/BirdWatch Ireland all-island project.

Chris fitted these devices in Antrim and in Tubbercurry last July.

The failure of three tagged birds from Tubbercurry to return has been a slight setback, but the other four tags should provide useful data.



Photo 4: Geolocators: These tiny lightweight devices are being used to track a wide range of species on migration. 4 out of 7 fitted to Irish Swifts in Antrim and Tubbercurry last year are now being analysed to see where they, and the Swifts that carried them, have been for the winter. The wintering sites of Irish Swifts is believed to be in southern Africa but is not knownyet!

Rathscanlon Swift nestbox colony:

I established this nestbox colony in 2009 at my house, on an old farm building at Rathscanlon, about a mile outside Tubbercurry, and this was a disappointing year, when we lost two of our longest established breeding pairs, which had been breeding here for 5-6 years. They just failed to return. Three of these were carrying geolocators (tracking devices to plot their migration route), so the loss of the data is a further disappointment as well as losing the bird. This is a well proven technique, and all three tagged birds in Antrim returned safely, so we may just have been unlucky.

Four other pairs bred at the colony, producing 8 chicks most of which have now successfully fledged, so had we the other two pairs it would have been a record year for the colony.

'Swift Lane' - Tubbercurry's latest address!

The unveiling of 'Swift Lane' as the name of the new access path developed by the Tidy Towns Group and Sligo co Council between Wolfe Tone Square and Circular Road was a very nice touch, and recognition of the profile that Swifts now have in the town.

Markievicz House, Sligo

Séamus Feeney, Michael Bell & myself made contact with the HSE and managed to get nine Swift nest boxes erected on Markievicz House in Sligo Town, when Sligo Tidy Towns Committee erected scaffolding on it for redecoration.

Ballymote Swift Boxes erected

Michael Bell has erected Swift boxes on two buildings in Ballymote - a primary school and an industrial building.

Sligo Tidy Towns Swift Project

Sligo Tidy Towns Committee has erected new nestboxes on Gilhooley Hall, beside Sligo Cathedral

Note:

All handling and photography is done by a licenced bird ringer with specific permits from the National Parks and Wildlife Service. This also applies to the handling of the chicks and the photography at the nest.

The support of Tubbercurry Tidy Towns and Abbott Diagnostics is acknowledged, as is the original sponsorship from Surlis's Supervalu, who as well as supplying nestboxes provided the building to put them on!