



NOTES ON THE COMMON SWIFT AND SETTING UP NEST BOXES

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INTRODUCTION

The Swift is an amber listed bird of conservation concern in Ireland and across Europe. Swifts come to Ireland's towns to breed, arriving in May and departing in August each year. They are faithful to their nest sites returning to the same one for the duration of their life, it is known as a traditional nest site. The Swift exists in our towns without causing any public nuisance as there are never any droppings left under the nests, making them an ideal town inhabitant, especially as they provide a good service by consuming thousands of flying insects.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FACILITATE NESTING SWIFTS?

Swift numbers have declined by over 40% in the past twenty years. The main cause of this decline is loss of breeding sites. They nest in buildings in towns. Their traditional nests can usually be found at the top of walls or in cavities in brick work. They gain access to the tops of walls by climbing behind the fascia board. When repairs or renovation work are carried out to roofs and guttering the birds can no longer gain access to their traditional nesting site. Since Swifts are colonial birds, repair or renovation work can often affect more than one pair of birds.

Swifts now rely on the buildings in our towns for their nest sites. In order to secure the future of Swifts we need to ensure that their traditional nest sites are secured where possible and to provide new nest sites so that the population can recover.

TRADITIONAL NEST SITES

TRADITIONAL NEST SITES

Please try to follow these rules when working where swifts have a traditional nest site :

1. Do not work on the roof while the Swifts are nesting (late April to late August)
2. Leave existing Swift nest places undisturbed by any works
3. Preserve the Swifts' access holes or make new ones to match the old **exactly**
4. **Do not block access with scaffold** and do not net or wrap areas when swifts are nesting because they need a clear flight path to the nest access hole

Some advice on how to repair & renew roofs and replace guttering without destroying traditional nests

Repairs, re-roofing and replacing guttering are unavoidable, but where there are swifts nesting this usually means the loss of the traditional nest site. The new efficient building systems almost always deny them access to the holes, crevices and open eaves where they nest with the result that Swift numbers are declining at an alarming rate as there are ever fewer places left for them to nest in. **But** with just a little foresight, planning and care it is possible to preserve the swifts' nest places.

Where Swifts nest and how to save their traditional nests

Never re-roof where and when there are Swifts nesting (end of April to late August)

Inside Eaves - in "open" eaves, under the bottom row of tiles, above the gutter, just inside the roof-space. Leaving the eaves open is the simplest & best solution or cut slots in the soffit or facing boards to match the old entrances

In Holes - in holes in walls e.g. under the fascia board or behind a down pipe where it meets the guttering. Where it is not going to be a problem just leave holes.



Swift entering nest site in small hole just under the fascia board of Claremorris Town Hall, Co. Mayo

Behind Flashings - on brick ends or in holes under loose / missing flashings on chimneys and skylights. You can offset or lengthen flashings and ridge/end tiles to let the Swifts back in without affecting weatherproofing.

Inside Gables - behind barge boards and gables, on the brick ends. You either leave well alone or else fit simple wooden nest places behind the bargeboards.

Missing Pointing - in voids behind gaps between stones or bricks where the pointing has washed out. Leave as is if you can.

ARTIFICIAL NEST BOXES

Artificial nest boxes can be used very successfully for Swifts if they are placed in the correct location.

LOCATION OF BOXES

They should be at least 4 metres above ground level and placed such that they do not receive full sun in summer. There must be a clear flyway in front.

BUILT-IN OR EXTERNAL?

While it is preferable to incorporate nesting places into a building structure, external nest boxes placed near to nest sites that have been lost can be particularly effective to mitigate the loss.

HOW MANY BOXES?

Swifts are colonial nesters so you need more than one nest box at your chosen location, however, that being said they need to have the own nest space. Nest boxes come as either a single boxes or with multiple cavities (that have a dividing wall between each nest area).

SIZE OF ENTRANCE HOLE

The entrance hole size is critical and should ideally be 28mm x 60mm but no bigger than 30mm x 65mm. If the hole is bigger than this then starlings can enter the box and they out compete the swift and will take over a nest box. Other birds, such as sparrows, will be able to get in to the 30mm x 65mm hole but this is not a problem because the swift is able to evict them.

The nest boxes listed below have the appropriate sized hole. **There are other makes and models but most of them have nest entrance holes that are larger than the size specified above.**

RECOMMENDED NEST BOXES :

GENESIS NEST BOXES : MADE IN IRELAND

These boxes are made from magnesium oxide which is an environmentally friendly material. They can be bought as single boxes or triple cavity (see image below of two triple cavity boxes being installed – painted before installation to match the wall colour of the building).

These nest boxes have a nest entrance size of 28mm x 60mm. They are quite light and so installation is easy but does require scissor lift or cherry picker.

At time of writing the single boxes cost €37 and the triple cavity €96 plus postage.

They can be purchased from the manufacturer, Stephan de Beer, Killarney, Co. Kerry.

Mobile : 086 1087266

Email : genesisnestboxes@gmail.com



SINGLE SCHWEGLER WOODCRETE NEST BOX No. 17

German company Schwegler make a selection of nest boxes for Swifts that are made of woodcrete and have a 25 year guarantee. **They can either be built into a wall or fixed to the outside of a wall.**



This No17 Schwegler single

TRIPLE CAVITY No. 17 Woodcrete Schwegler box

This box has three nest spaces in each box. Each nest space is separated from the next door space by an internal dividing wall. The disc where the entrance is located can be unscrewed which allows access to the inside of the box which is useful for camera installation.

Example of external installation

Four of the triple cavity boxes (giving 12 nest spaces) were installed at GMIT Mayo Campus in 2012. Successful breeding from two pairs (in boxes 1 and 12) was recorded in 2014. Swifts have been seen entering each of the 12 nest boxes.



Example of internal installation

Four of the triple cavity boxes (giving 12 nest spaces) have been built in to the new build of the Westport Town Hall in Co. Mayo in 2014 and were already being used by swifts in 2016. Please note that a lintel was placed above the box to support block work above the nest boxes. **Also the nest boxes were slightly off-set as it is inadvisable to have entrance holes situated immediately above or below each other because this may lead to swifts colliding with each other when approaching nest entrance.**



Where to buy the Schwegler boxes:

At the moment is not possible to buy Schwegler boxes in Ireland. You can buy them from England at the outlets mentioned below. The triple cavity boxes cost approximately €180 each but postage must be added to this. I usually order at least 6 boxes at a time to spread the cost of the shipping which can be as much as €80.

NHBS in England www.nhbs.com

Or

Living with Birds www.livingwithbirds.com

IBSTOCK SWIFT NEST BRICK

This is a terracotta fronted nest box which can be installed in a new or restored brick building. <http://www.ibstock.com/sustainability-ecozone.asp>.

They were used successfully in new public library in Antrim, Northern Ireland (see picture below showing side wall of the library).



HOMEMADE WOODEN SWIFT NEST BOXES

It is possible to make Swift nest boxes from wood. These are quite cheap to make **but it must be remembered that if they are placed externally the wood will rot and the boxes will need replacing after several years.** The significance of this is that swifts nest in the exact same location for the duration of their life, which can be as long as 10 years, so any replacement box must be located in the exact same place.

See information on dimensions below. Also, several designs can be found on the following blog : actionforswifts.blogspot.com



Basic design of a swift nest box showing measurements. Please note that the entrance hole is located at the right hand end of the box and the nest mould at the left hand end of the box. This is because the nest should be located at the furthest point away from the entrance hole.

The entrance hole size is critical and should be ideally be 28mm x 60mm but no bigger than 30mm x 65mm as mentioned earlier.



NEST MOULDS

Nest moulds can be added to a nest box to make the box more attractive to potential nesting swifts and to speed up the process of nest building for the swift. They are not essential but do make an important contribution to attracting swifts to a nest box.

If you are using the No 17 Schwegler nest box do not buy the Schwegler nest moulds for them as they do not fit in the No. 17 model box.

The type of nest moulds I use are as per the picture below. They are sold in pet shops in England and Northern Ireland and are used for nesting Budgies. It is possible to make them yourself from pieces of wood or any non-toxic material by just hollowing out a bowl shape. This hollow is to hold the eggs in to try to avoid them rolling off the nest. We add some hen feathers, sticking them on with non-toxic wood glue such as copydex. The moulds should be glued to the base of the nest box with wood glue.

If you don't use a nest mould you can just add some dry grass and feathers to speed up the process of finding nesting material. Do not add twigs or moss as this is not the type of nest material suitable for swifts. Remember that swifts have to find all their nesting material on the wing and this can take quite a while so providing some suitable nesting material for them can speed up the nest building process for them.

With regards to the types of feathers, don't use feathers with a hard quill rather soft feathers and don't use feathers from a bird of prey or magpies.



Left: no nest mould but dry grass and feathers add to the box

Right : Nest mould fitted inside nest box

PLAYING ATTRACTION CALLS

Speed of occupancy of a nest box can be considerably accelerated by playing swift attraction calls. The attraction calls make the swift think that other swifts are nesting in this location and so indicate that this is an attractive place to breed. So any swift looking for a nest site will explore this area for a vacant place.

Whichever sound system you are using should be placed as near as possible to the nest boxes e.g. on a window sill or attached to the box.

The calls should be played for as long as possible during the day from mid-April to end August. Playing the calls 24 hours a day is best but if not then as long as possible from 8.00 am to 11am and 8.00 pm to 11pm. Copies of the swift call can be obtained from me : swiftconservationireland@gmail.com

Patience is essential, it could take a year or three for swifts to find the boxes even when playing the calls. You will need to play calls from mid-April until end August each year until the swifts have started to breed in one or more of the boxes.

Equipment for playing the calls

CD player can be used and it works very well. You must use a CD player that has a repeat button so that the calls will keep repeating until the machine is switched off. The disadvantage with the CD player is that it doesn't work with a timer unless you can tape down the play button.

If the situation allows, I prefer to use the Cheng Sheng Player Amplifier which can be bought on Amazon. Below is a picture of all the bits you will need for this system. There is a leaflet on the website www.swiftconservation.ie which details on where to buy the equipment and how to install it.



The advantage of using the Cheng Sheng system is that it can be used with a timer and the speaker is more powerful than with a CD player. It is more expensive than CD player but is more versatile.

NEST BOX CAMERAS

It is possible to install nest box cameras if you want to view activity in the nest box on either a tv or a computer monitor.

Information on how to set this up by contacting me :

Lynda Huxley, Carrajames, Belcarra, Castlebar, Co. Mayo

094 9032422

swiftconservationireland@gmail.com

or

natureofireland@eircom.net