



To:
Heritage Ireland 2030
Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Custom House Dublin 1
D01 W6XO

20 February 2019

Re: Heritage Ireland 2030 – Policy to protect and rebuild the population of the Swift (*Apus apus*)

The Common Swift, an amber-listed bird of conservation concern having suffered a >46% decline in the past 40 years, spans two aspects of Heritage, built and natural, and in this respect it falls between the two and is very often overlooked in both.

The Swift is an extremely important part of our urban biodiversity. At least 90% of their nest sites are found in our urban buildings, this can be said of no other species . They now rely on our buildings for their future.

The Problem

This Swift is totally faithful to its nest site and this has been a major factor in the significant population decline. They come here to breed (from late April to mid-September) and this is the only time when the nest site is protected. When the birds have gone the site has no legal protection.

Because of this absolute fidelity to the nest site, when a building undergoes repairs/renovations and the site is ‘lost’, the birds will continue trying to get into the nest site for several breeding seasons before they accept that they can no longer get access. During this these years they will not breed. Once they have accepted they can no longer get into the nest site they then have to try to find a replacement. But this is not a quick or simple process because Swifts have evolved to spend the majority of their life flying and when not breeding will fly 24 hours a day (they even sleep on the wing).

In reality, most birds will die of old age before they ever find a replacement nest site. Since they are colonial nesting birds building repair/renovation work can often result in the loss of many breeding sites. Many towns in Ireland have lost all or most of their Swifts in this way.

The Solutions

Conservation work carried out by Swift Conservation groups over the past few years has shown that it is possible to halt the decline of the Swift and to rebuild the population. Since 2013, County Mayo has seen a 12% increase in occupied nest sites through provision of nest boxes. The following measures should be adopted in Heritage Ireland 2030 :

1) Build nest boxes into the external walls of new public buildings

New public buildings such as schools, libraries, council offices etc. should incorporate built-in swift nest boxes and an attraction call system from the design stage. This is a simple process which has been very successfully implemented by Mayo County Council working with Swift Conservation Ireland - Mayo (see attached document with examples and detailed procedures).

A policy should be established throughout the relevant government departments to ensure that new public buildings incorporate swift nest boxes and an attraction call system.

Building nest boxes into the fabric of new buildings will secure the future for Swifts. By adopting this policy the Government of Ireland would be at the forefront of Swift conservation in Europe.

2) Protect 'traditional' nest sites

'Traditional' nest sites are natural sites i.e. not nest boxes. Over 95% of Swift nest sites are found in our old buildings. Many of these buildings are Protected Structures and some are sites owned or managed by the Office of Public Works (OPW).

The nest sites in these buildings are at risk from being blocked off during renovation/repair work. Repointing of walls, reroofing and reguttering are all the types of work that have led to the loss of hundreds, if not thousands, of Swift nest sites in Ireland over the past 40 years.

A Government policy should be put in place instructing OPW and County Council planning offices and conservation architects to consult the National Biodiversity Data Centre's Swift database and local Swift groups before carrying out any remedial works on buildings. The Data Centre's database contains records on the location of buildings containing Swift nest sites and in many cases the precise location of each nest site.

If Swift nest sites are present in a structure it is possible to carry out any necessary work **and** retain the Swift nest site. This has been shown to be possible, without causing any significant inconvenience, at several sites in County Mayo through collaboration with County Council Conservation Architects, Heritage Officer and Swift Conservation Ireland – Mayo.

Conclusion

Heritage Ireland 2030 is a unique opportunity for the Ministry for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to secure the future of this ancient and unique species for future generations.

There must be 'joined-up' policy between the built and natural heritage especially concerning the Common Swift. Helping the Swift in the ways outlined above will achieve the Minister's vision of valuing and protecting our natural heritage through 'Heritage Partnerships'.

Communities around Ireland have been doing their best to help secure the future of this bird in Ireland and a commitment from the Government through implementation of a Conservation Policy for the Swifts would not only secure but help recover and build the population for many generations to come.

Swift Conservation Ireland can provide any additional information required. You can contact us by emailing swiftconservationireland@gmail.com

Yours faithfully

Swift Conservation Ireland

www.swiftconservation.ie