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Amazing project aims to make the swift feel at home in Cork

Inserting bird boxes on public buildings in Cork can help the annual visitors from South Africa settle in here, says **DR CATHERINE CONLON**



The swift is a remarkable bird: Picture: Killian Mullarney



DR CATHERINE CONLON

SWIFTS are in decline. It is estimated by Birdwatch Ireland that their numbers are down by more than 50%.

The evidence suggests that because of the impacts of climate change, the decimation of insect populations and a shortage of places to nest, this extraordinary bird is in serious trouble.

Extraordinary is an underestimation of this beautiful bird's abilities. Every year they fly from Sub-Saharan Africa to Cork, arriving in May and leaving in late

August. They spend most of their lives airborne, eating, sleeping, drinking and mating on the wing while weighing the same as a Cadbury's Crème Egg.

In terms of self-powered horizontal flight, they are the fastest bird, reaching speeds of 110 km/h. They mate for life and are completely faithful to their nest site, the location becoming imprinted on them once selected.

Their feet are unusual for a bird in that all the toes point forward and so they are unable to perch or even walk or hop on the ground. They can cling to vertical surfaces and are just about able to shuffle around their nest sites. These creatures really are built for flying - they would not land at all if it wasn't for the requirement to have chicks.

Swifts nest in nooks and crannies in the eaves and walls of buildings. They seem to exult in the sky, screaming excitedly to one another, and are such a joy to watch if you are lucky enough to spot them.

We can do so much to help them. One way is to insert swift bricks at the building stage. These can be inserted at the point of construction and are hardly noticeable. The swift is a bird that does not leave a trace on the walls of buildings and they reside in boxes for only four months of the year.



Swift nesting boxes installed at Blarney Street CBS

Cork City Hall supported an Avian Tower exhibition last May featuring the work of 3rd year students of the Cork Centre for Architectural Education. Cork Healthy Cities invited the architecture department down to the foyer along with those working in the climate, parks and biodiversity offices to view the towers.

Maria Young, Co-ordinator of Green Spaces for Health, Cork Healthy Cities, showed them the swift bricks and spoke of the importance of protecting this beautiful bird in our city.

“With all the new building going up in Cork over the coming years it is vital that nature be included into designs, not just for the swift but for other bird species also,” she said.

“We ought not wait until it is too late and surely we can make it mandatory,” Maria added.

“Other cities across Europe, notably in the Netherlands, have been incorporating nature support features into their cities at the design stage, can we not do the same in Cork?”

“I’m thinking of the docklands development, what a great opportunity to cater for people and nature.”

Noel Linehan, a member of Swift Conservation Ireland, agrees. He has been working with Green Spaces for Health for a number of years to improve the conditions for swifts and other birds to find a foothold in the city.

The projects that have emerged from this collaboration include the Avian Tower Concept introduced to third year students at the Cork School of Architecture, resulting in 24 exquisite models designed largely but not exclusively for swifts.

These were exhibited first at the college in 2023 followed by an exhibition at Cork City Council earlier this year.

Another project involved the construction and installation of a Sand Martin wall at the island on the Lough in 2023.

The most ambitious project involved the purchase by Green Spaces for Health of 81 swift boxes that were installed across the city to entice the swifts to use the city as a life-long location to hatch and nest their chicks.

Gas Networks and Cork City Council have been generous with sponsorship of the Swift Boxes. Twelve have been installed in St Finbarr’s Hospital where I work, and in the summer evenings, if you are lucky, you will see the swifts’ airborne acrobatics, gliding low over you head at speed as they return to the box portals.

Swifts have also been spotted going in and out of one of the boxes that were installed at the MTU campus in Bishopstown. These are only up a month so it is so heartening

that the birds have already found them, as it can sometimes take a year or two. It is hoped that they will also find the boxes at Murphy's Farm, as it is so near MTU.

Maria outlined how all the boxes are made of composite material that is long-lasting and weather-proof. They are put up by certified builders and a call system is installed with them. The call system is essential - it is a recording of swifts that attract fellow swifts into the boxes - the projects will not work otherwise.

"The call is a very effective method of attracting swifts," Maria explained. "It only needs to be played at a low volume and can be set on a timer to suit the particular location."

Because swifts like to nest in colonies, a minimum of six boxes are usually put up per location.

Recently, Nagle Community College in Mahon installed 12 boxes. Transition Year Students visited the Avian Tower exhibition at the School of Architecture and immediately wondered if they could get swift boxes for their school.

Noel Linehan arranged to meet the students at Nagle Community College to look at the suitability of the site for the boxes.

Orientation is important. It is good if the boxes face north, north-east or north-west but not south as they are in danger of getting too hot inside. This can cause the chicks to leave prematurely and they will not survive.

Height from the nearest horizontal surface below is very important, best guidance being at least five metres off the ground or a flat roof. Boxes should not be put near air vents as when young swifts are investigating an area with the call playing, they will fly into other openings until they figure out what the nest boxes are.

Other counties have been tackling this decline in swift populations with some success. Linda Huxley, of Swift Conservation Ireland, is successfully reversing the decline in the swift population in Mayo.

This year, the swift population in that county was 30% higher than in 2012 - the only county in Ireland where it is known the population is increasing.

While swift boxes and bricks provide a vital nesting ground, we also need burgeoning insect populations to feed these amazing creatures that can fly up to a million kilometres in a lifetime.

We need to install swift boxes and swift bricks in buildings and we need to let the grass grow, the wildflowers bloom, and the magic of nature to take hold.

For more information on swift boxes, contact greenspacescork@gmail.com

Dr Catherine Conlon is a public health doctor with the HSE in Cork

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