



Comhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo  
Mayo County Council



# COUNTY MAYO

# SWIFT SURVEY 2024

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## Executive Summary

- According to the 2020-2026 Red-list of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BoCCI) produced by BirdWatch Ireland and the RSPB NI, the breeding population of Common Swifts in Ireland of high conservation concern. It was previously categorised as Amber Listed (moderate conservation concern) but was moved to the Red-list due to the “recent severe declines in their breeding population”.
- The County Mayo Swift Survey 2024 was supported by the County Mayo Heritage Officer to provide updated information on the Common Swift population given the substantial installation of nest box projects, built-in and external, throughout the county over the past 12 years.
- The survey was conducted across County Mayo during the breeding season, May to August 2024 by a team of Swift Conservation Mayo volunteers.
- Previous records of swift nest sites gathered by Swift Conservation Mayo’s volunteer efforts over the past 12 years provided base-line information on locations of natural nest sites and nest box projects.
- In 2024, a total of 23 locations (towns and villages including Heritage Sites) were found to have active nest sites. With an additional 5 locations surveyed that had no active nest sites.
- With a total of 94 breeding sites in the 23 locations.
- The total number of occupied nests confirmed was 308 for the entire county

	Number Occupied Nests
<b>Natural nest sites</b>	191
<b>External nest compartments</b>	43
<b>Built-in nest compartments</b>	74
<b>Total</b>	<b>308</b>

- In 2024, 38% of Mayo’s population of breeding Swifts were using nest box compartments.
- A total of 92 buildings were confirmed to contain swift nest(s). With 37 of these buildings being protected structures (NIAH/RPS).
- A total of 163 External Nest Box Compartments have been provided across the county and 43 of these were being used by Swifts in 2024 = 26% occupied.
- A total of 220 Built-in Nest Box Compartments have been provided across the county and 74 of these were being used by Swifts in 2024 = 34% occupied.
- County Mayo’s Swift breeding population has been in recovery due to the large number of nest box projects that has been and continues to be provided across the entire county.
- Swift Conservation Mayo is committed to ensuring that as many built-in nest projects as possible are accommodated in public buildings across the county in the coming years.
- Swift Conservation Mayo is extremely grateful to Mayo County Council officials, in particular Heritage Officer, Architects Office and Environment Office for supporting a wide range of built-in nest box projects throughout the county (see page 12).



## Introduction

The Common Swift *Apus apus* is a red-listed bird of conservation concern in Ireland and the UK. They come to Ireland to breed, arriving in late April/early May and departing in late August/early September each year. They spend the rest of the year in Africa, but it is important to note that they do not breed there.

**They breed here which means that here is HOME.**

Swifts are faithful to their partner and their nest sites, returning to the same one for the duration of their breeding life. The nest sites that they have found in our urban buildings are often referred to as a ‘traditional’ nest sites as opposed to the ‘artificial’ nest sites found in nest boxes provided by us.

Swifts are the quintessential ‘Tidy Towns’ bird because:

- ✎ **The Swift exists in our towns without causing any public nuisance**
- ✎ **They do not leave any droppings under the nests (adult birds consume the chicks’ droppings)**
- ✎ **They provide an essential ecosystem service by consuming thousands of flying insects, including midges**

## Swifts in Mayo

County Mayo is on the north-western edge of the Swift’s breeding range, and this formed the basis for Jaroslaw Majukusiak’s MSc by Research carried out at GMIT (now ATU) Mayo “Breeding Biology of the Common Swift (*Apus apus*) in Ireland – the most north-westerly edge of the nesting habitat”

[Breeding-Biology-of-the-Common-Swift-in-Ireland\\_Jaroslaw-Majkusiak-update-21.01.2023.pdf](#)

Ireland’s foremost ornithologist, Major Robin F. Ruttledge, recorded seeing Swifts in his 1989 publication “Birds of Counties Galway and Mayo” where he noted:

*“Swifts breed fairly widespread in both counties. An increase first noticeable about 1932 led to an extension of the breeding range to western seaboard towns, it being abundant in Newport and Westport. Has bred in Achill and Belmullet, though breeding was not confirmed during the 1988-91 Breeding Atlas Survey. Recently there are indications of a local decrease, such as at Ballina railway station which has been vacated.*

*Swifts arrive early in May: most have departed by mid-August. Passage continues exceptionally to the end of August. Early dates of arrival are 20<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> April.”*

## Survey Aims and Objectives

The project aimed to undertake a detailed survey of Swifts in Co. Mayo to establish the baseline population and distribution of nesting Swifts. The data collected will allow planners and decision makers to effectively manage Swifts at site level, helping to continue the recovery of the Swift breeding population in the county.

This 2024 report presents the results of surveys carried out of all major towns and some villages in County Mayo. The aim of the surveys was:

- **To identify as many as possible active swift nest site locations**

Previous surveys took place in 2012, 2013 and 2014, with most towns and villages covered in 2014 providing cumulative information on breeding sites. However, 2024 is the first time that a complete County Survey was carried out in one breeding season. The results of this 2024 survey give us the opportunity to assess the number of ‘natural’ nests across the county and the success of the nest box projects, both external and built-in nest boxes.



## Survey Methodology

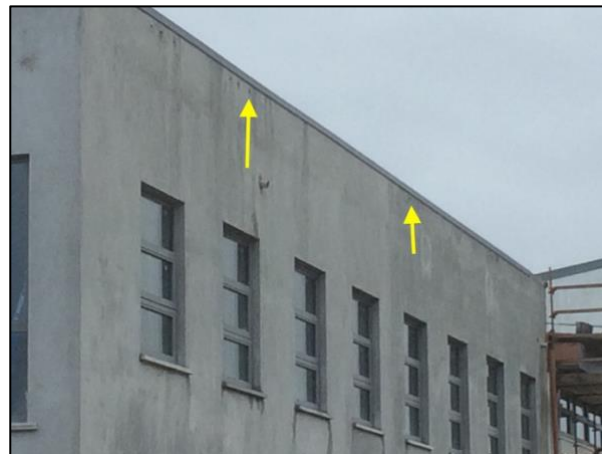
All surveyors used the Swift Conservation Ireland Survey Guidelines and advice available on the Swift Conservation Ireland website <https://www.swiftconservation.ie/survey-advice/>

Each surveyor was provided with a high-viz vest



All survey records of occupied nest sites were entered onto the National Biodiversity Data Centre's Swift Portal with photos identifying the location of the nest site.

<https://records.biodiversityireland.ie/record/common-swift#7/53.455/-8.016>



*Example of survey image submitted to the NBDC Swift Portal  
With arrows indicating occupied nest sites*

## Some General Information About Swifts

Swifts are extraordinary birds renowned for their incredible adaptations to life in the air. Their Latin name, *Apus apus*, means "footless," which is somewhat misleading. While they do possess feet, their legs are remarkably short, minimizing drag while flying and allowing them to excel in their aerial existence.

### Understanding the Swift's Unique Lifestyle

Swifts are fascinating birds with remarkable adaptations that enable them to spend most of their lives in the air.

#### Life in the Air

Swifts are almost entirely airborne, engaging in activities such as sleeping, eating, bathing, and even mating while in flight. This extraordinary capability sets them apart from most other bird species.

#### Challenges on the Ground

If a swift is found on the ground, it often indicates a problem. The bird may be injured, have failed to fledge properly, or fallen from the nest. In such cases, they require assistance as they are not well-adapted to take off from flat surfaces.

#### Clinging to Vertical Surfaces

Swifts do not perch like other birds. However, they are capable of clinging to vertical surfaces, such as walls near their nest sites.

#### Breeding Season Behaviour

The only time swifts land is during the breeding season at their nest sites. This is necessary for raising their young, after which they return to their life in the sky.

## Identification

Swifts are often mistaken for hirundines, such as the Barn Swallow, House Martin, or Sand Martin, due to their similar aerial lifestyles and appearance. However, Swifts do not share the same genealogical tree with the hirundines. Here are some key characteristics that set Swifts apart:

**Streamlined Body and Long Wings:** Swifts have a distinctively aerodynamic body shape that allows them to manoeuvre effortlessly through the air. Their long, narrow wings give them the appearance of a boomerang and are a crucial adaptation for their life spent mostly on the wing.

**Short, Forked Tail:** Swifts possess a short, forked tail that aids in their rapid, agile flight.

**Dark Plumage:** Swifts typically have dark, almost black, plumage and a tiny white patch under the chin. This white patch is most visible when they are feeding young and carrying a bolus in their throat.

**Piercing Screech:** One of the most recognizable features of Swifts is their loud, high-pitched screech. This vocalization is often heard when the birds are flying in 'screaming' parties.

**Monomorphic Species:** Swifts are monomorphic, meaning males and females look alike. Unlike some bird species where males and females can be visually differentiated, the sexes of Swifts cannot be distinguished based on appearance alone.



Photo courtesy of Killian Mullarney



## Breeding Season

In Ireland, the breeding Swifts start to arrive in late April and continue to arrive until late May. The nest cup is constructed using airborne materials carried by the wind, such as dried pieces of vegetation or feathers. These materials are collected mid-flight.

On the livestream at ATU Mayo we have noticed birds using strands of Molinia grass, willow catkins and regrettably there are increasing examples of small pieces of plastic being used.

Swifts rear just one brood of chicks in a season. If the first clutch of eggs is knocked off the nest either accidentally or following a dispute with an intruder then the adults will lay a second clutch but if that fails then they will not make a third attempt. A completed clutch typically contains between one and three eggs. Incubation lasts between 19 and 21 days and chicks fledge between 36 to 49 days after hatching. The adults depart the nest within a few days or weeks after the last chick has fledged.

Swifts are long-lived birds, around 12 years. They reach productive maturity between two and four years old. Breeding pairs form life-long bonds and return to the same nest each year. They mostly breed in colonies but solitary nest sites are frequently found.

Social behaviours specific to this species include "banging" and "screaming parties". "Banging" describes the practice of non-breeding Swifts flying up to occupied or unoccupied Swift nest cavities and 'banging' against them and hanging onto them or brushing against them. A "screaming party" is the term used to describe a formation of Swifts that flies above and near occupied nest sites emitting loud, excited, calls.

## Why is it important to help Swifts?

In the Republic of Ireland, swift numbers have declined by over 40% in the past twenty years. The main cause of this decline is loss of breeding sites. They mostly nest in buildings in towns and villages.

Their traditional nests can usually be found at the top of walls or in cavities in brick or stone 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.

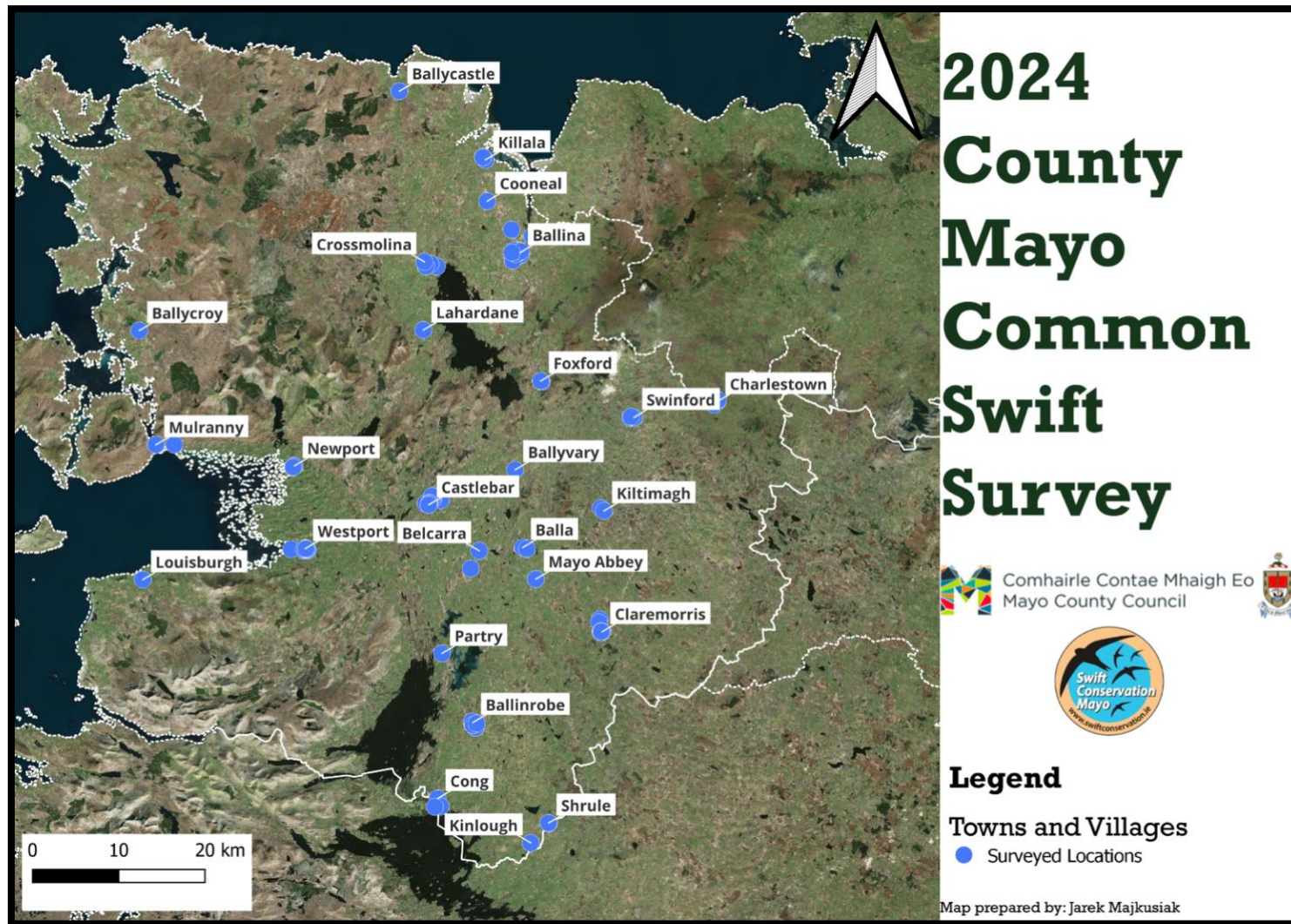
Swifts now rely on the buildings in our towns for their nest sites. To secure the future of Swifts we need to ensure that their traditional nest sites are protected and maintained where possible and to provide new artificial nest sites so that the population can recover.

Swifts are a very important part of our urban biodiversity and nest in many heritage (protected) structures.

The Swifts come here to breed and do not breed in Africa where they spend our winter months. They go to Africa to feed on the insect food that they depend on, but they do not land or breed in Africa. Since they breed here in Ireland this is their 'home' and we have a very important role to play in securing the long-term survival of the species.



## Map showing all locations with Swift nests and/or nest box projects



The following locations were surveyed in 2024 but no Swifts were observed:

- Aghagower
- Ballyhaunis
- Castle Burke
- Kilmaine
- Turlough

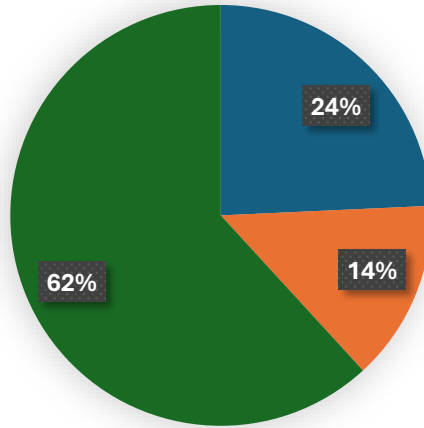
## Overview of Total Number of Occupied Nest Sites in 2024

TOWN	BUILT-IN BOX PROJECTS			EXTERNAL BOX PROJECTS			NATURAL Nests 2024
	No Projects	BUILT-IN COMPARTMENTS	BUILT-IN COMP. OCCUPIED	No Projects	EXTERNAL COMPARTMENTS	EXTERNAL COMP. OCCUPIED	
Aughagower	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Balla	1	16	0	1	3	1	0
Ballina	4	50	18	4	21	0	44
Ballinrobe	2	21	0	1	6	0	17
Ballycastle	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Ballycroy	0	0	0	1	6	0	0
Ballyhaunis	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballyvary	1	6	3	0	0	0	0
Belcarra	0	0	0	1	5	0	0
Castleburke	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Castlebar	1	23	19	3	30	20	24
Charlestown	1	6	1	2	9	4	9
Claremorris	1	24	8	3	15	6	6
Cong	0	0	0	2	12	1	1
Cooneal	0	0	0	1	4	0	0
Crossmolina	3	28	13	1	6	3	3
Foxford	0	0	0	1	3	0	26
Killala	0	0	0	0	3	0	8
Kilmaine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kiltimagh	1	14	2	1	6	0	0
Kinlough	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Lahadarne	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Louisburgh	1	6	1	0	0	0	0
Mayo Abbey	0	0	0	1	4	3	0
Mulranny	0	0	0	2	6	1	0
Newport	1	8	0	1	6	2	12
Partry	1	6	0	0	0	0	0
Shrule	0	0	0	1	3	0	6
Swinford	0	0	0	1	6	1	5
Turlough	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Westport	1	12	9	2	9	1	19
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>191</b>

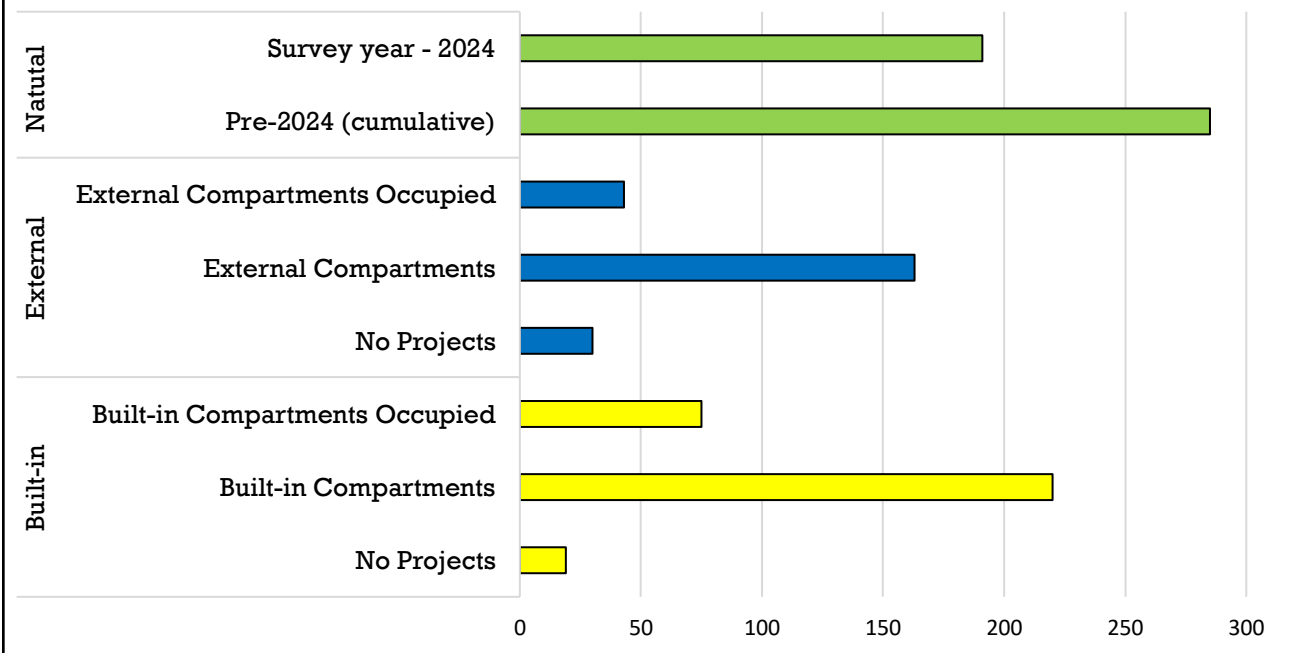


## OCCUPIED NEST COMPARTMENTS (individual nest boxes)

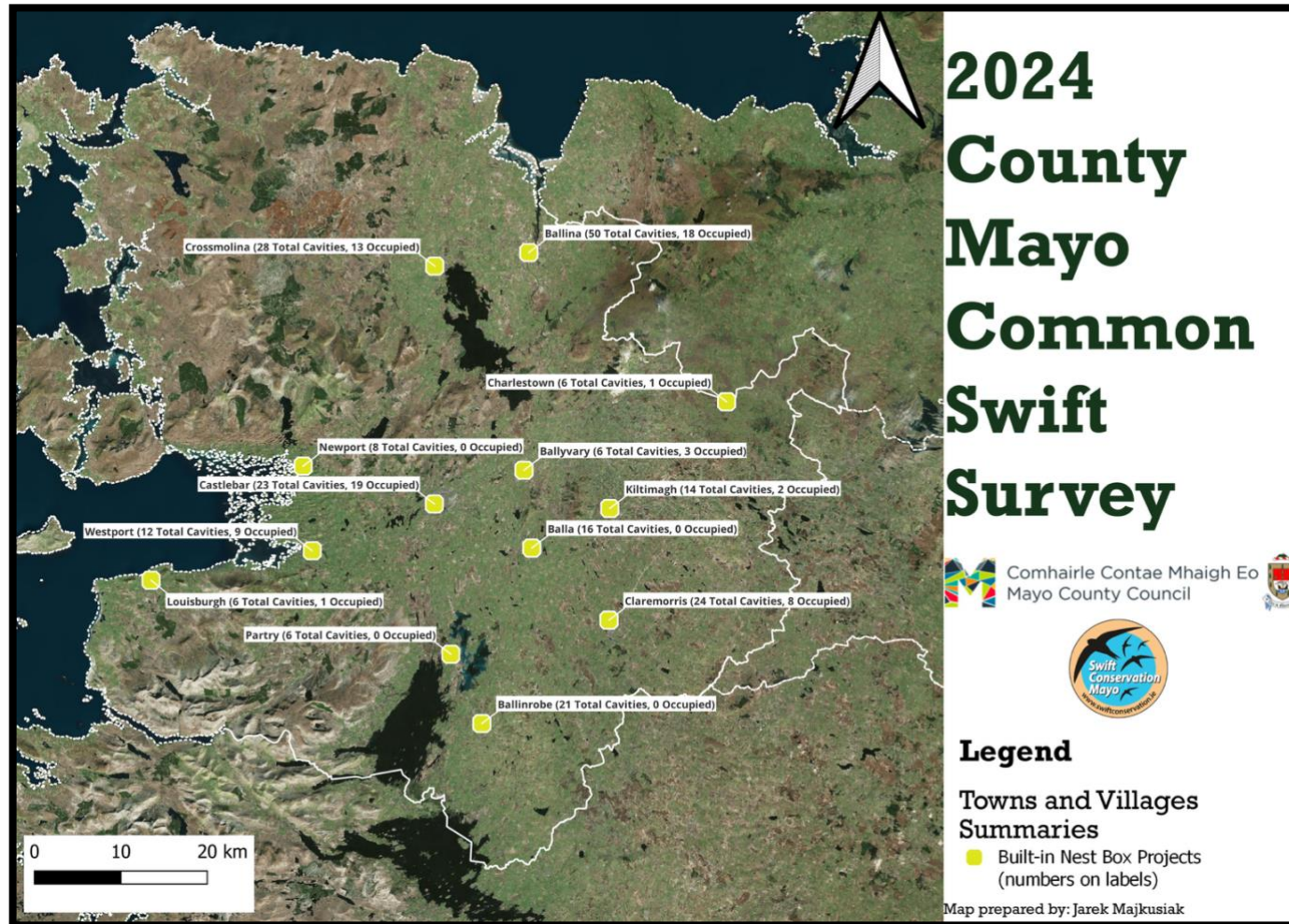
■ BUILT-IN COMP. OCCUPIED   
 ■ EXTERNAL COMP. OCCUPIED   
 ■ NATURAL 2024



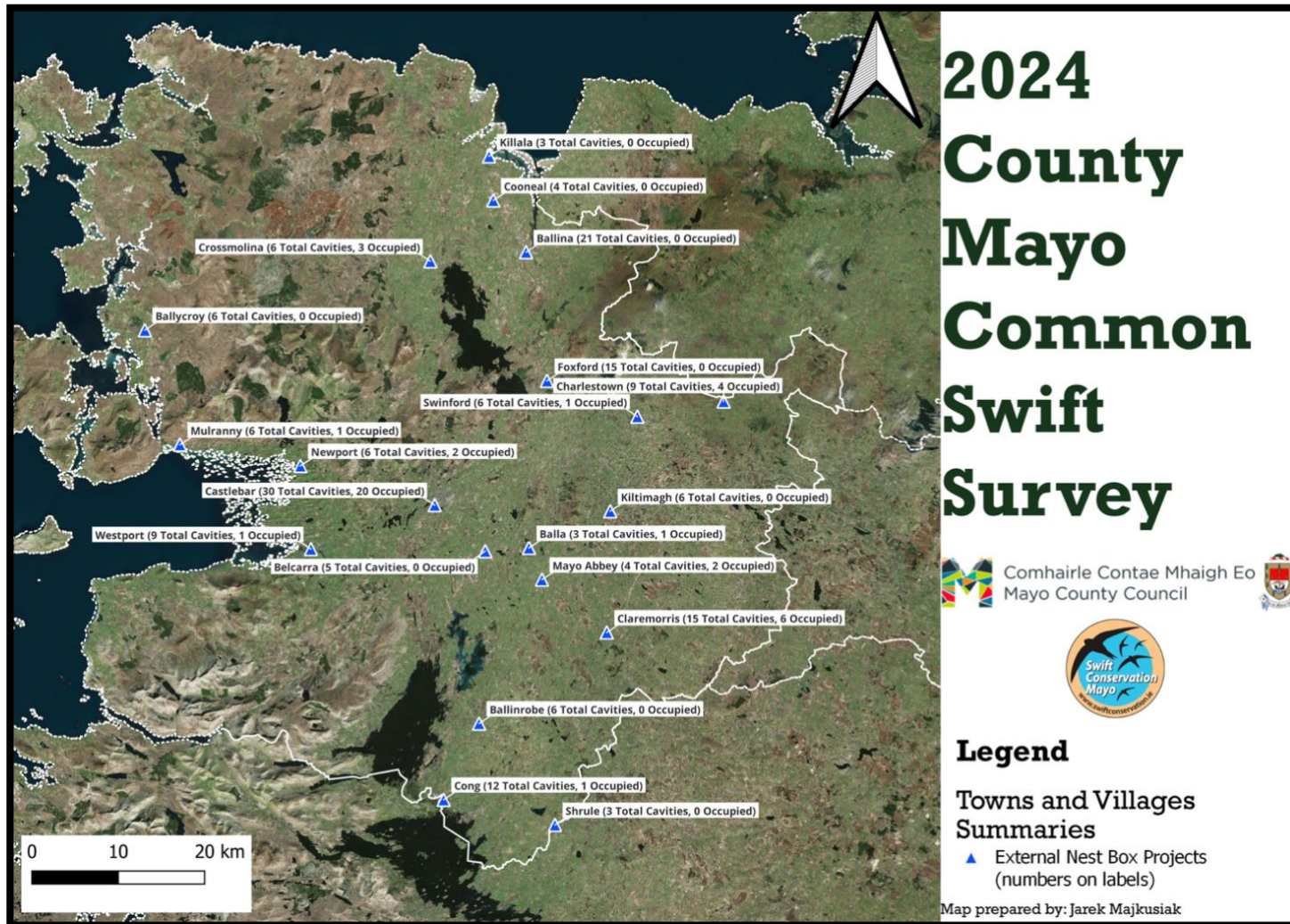
### Common Swift Population in County Mayo



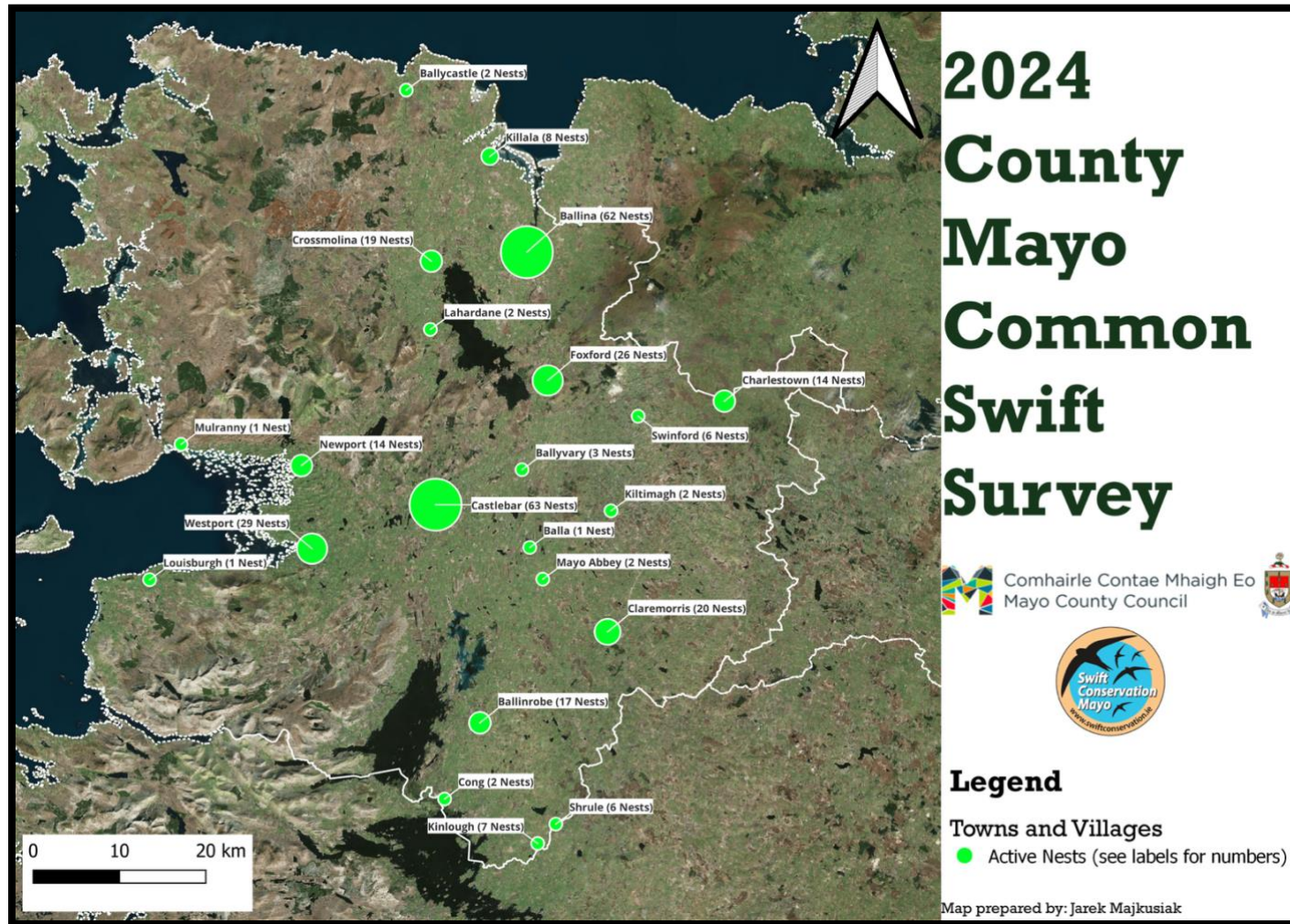
## Map Showing Locations of Built-in Nest Box Projects



# Map Showing Locations of External Nest Box Projects



## Map Showing Locations of Active Nest Sites

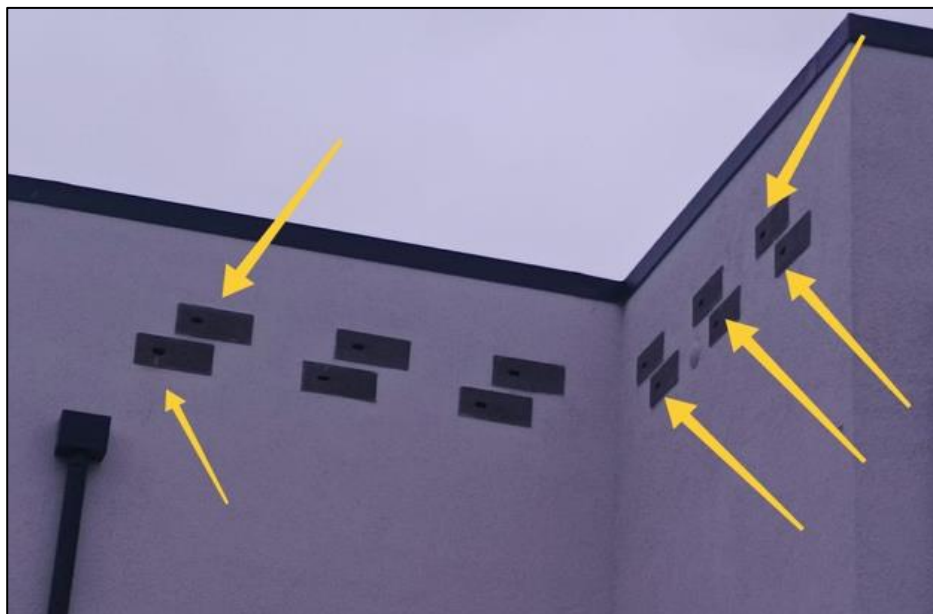


## County Council Buildings with Built-in Nest Boxes

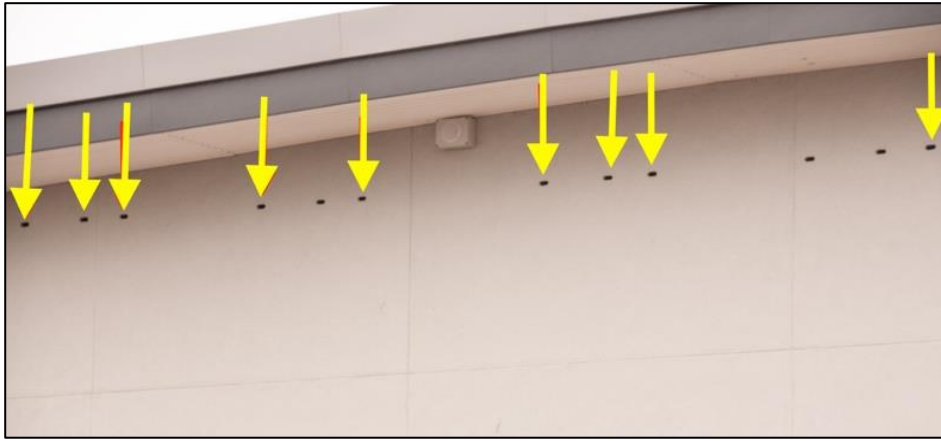
Note: The arrows indicate occupied nest boxes



*Westport Town Hall (Schwegler 17A)*



*Crossmolina Fire Station (Vivara 03)*



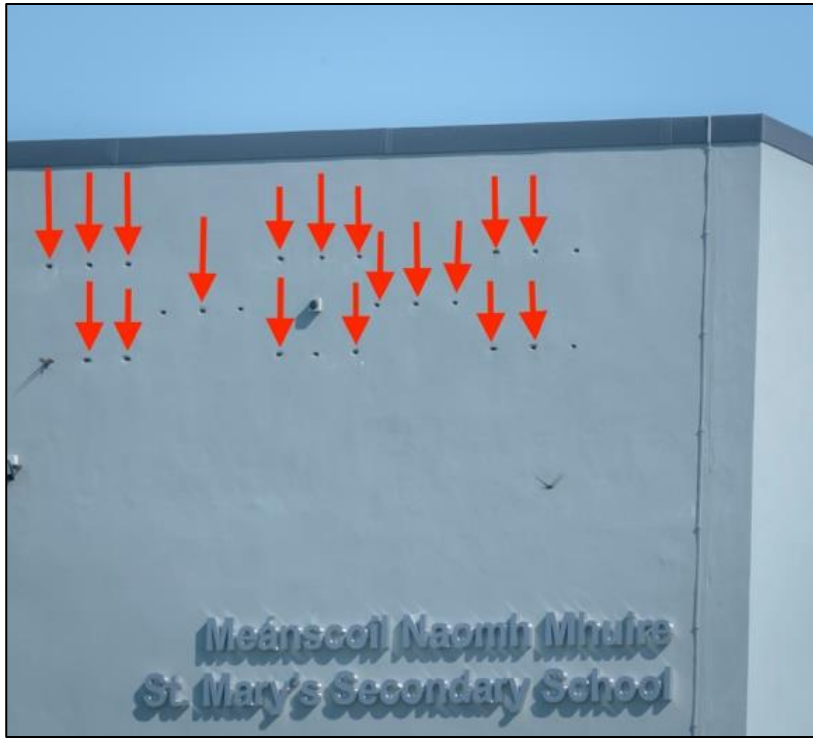
*Lough Lannagh Leisure Centre, Castlebar (Schwegler 17A)*



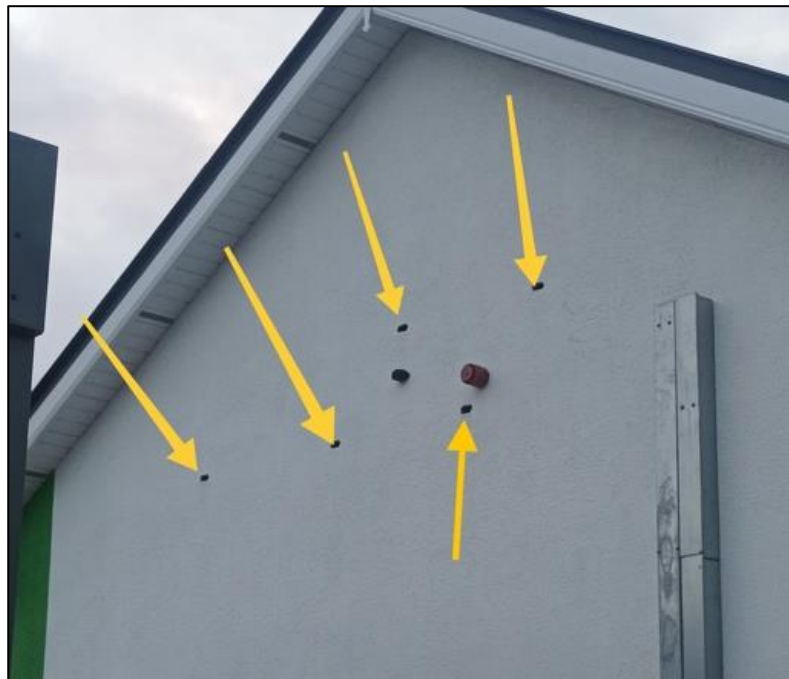
*Mary Robinson Centre, Ballina (Schwegler 17A)*

## Schools with Built-in Nest Boxes

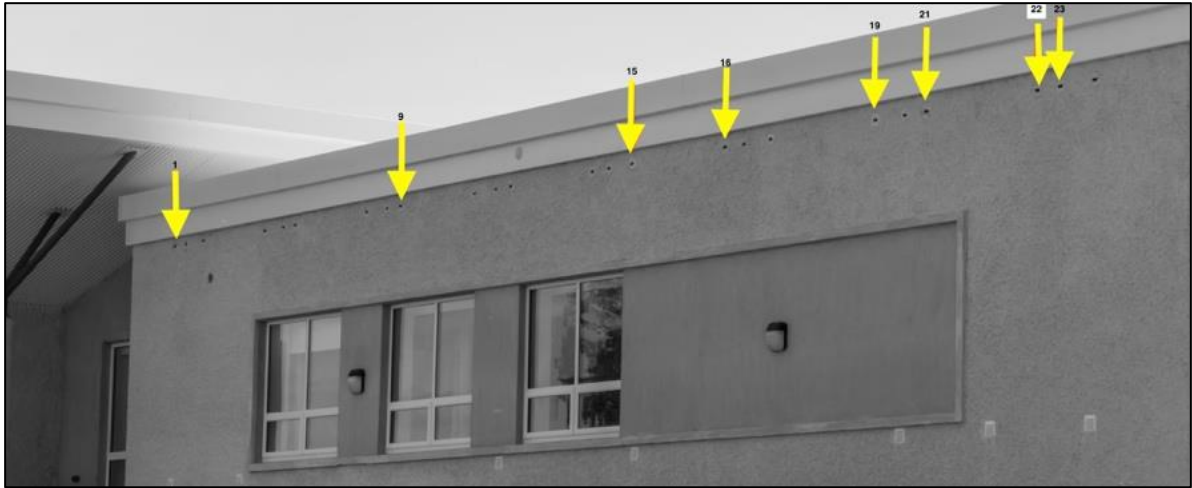
Note: Arrows indicate occupied nest boxes



*St Mary's Ballina – Nest Box Model Vivara 03*



*Crossmolina NS (Vivara 03)*



*Mount St Michael, Claremorris (Schwegler 17)*



*Ballinrobe NS (Vivara 03)*

## Summary Tables by Town

Below are tables summarising the survey findings for each location. The complete surveys with a map showing each location with photos of all nest sites can be found on the Swift Conservation Ireland website <https://www.swiftconservation.ie/information-by-county/county-mayo/>

*Note: There is no Table for Mayo Abbey because this nest box project is located at a private rural residence but the total occupancy of 3 nest compartments is listed in the Overview Table on Page 10.*

### Balla Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>1</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	3
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	16
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	1
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Ballina Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>62</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	21
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	50
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	18
No. Natural nests occupied	44

### Ballinrobe Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>17</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	6
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	21
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	17

### Ballycastle Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>2</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	2

### Ballycroy Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>0</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Ballyvary Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>3</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	6
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	3
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Belcarra Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>0</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	5
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Castlebar Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>63</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	30
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	23
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	20
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	19
No. Natural nests occupied	24

### Charlestown Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>14</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	9
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	6
No. of External Nest Boxes occupied	4
No. of Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	1
No. of natural nests occupied	9

### Claremorris Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>20</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	15
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	24
No. of External nest boxes occupied	6
No. of Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	8
No. Natural nests occupied	6

### Cong Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>2</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	12
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	1
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	1



### Cooneal Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>0</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	4
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Crossmolina Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>19</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	6
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	28
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	3
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	13
No. Natural nests occupied	3

### Foxford Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>26</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	15
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	26

### Killala Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>8</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	3
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	8

### Kiltimagh Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>2</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	6
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	14
No. of External nest boxes occupied	0
No. of Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	2
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Kinlough Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest boxes)</b>	<b>7</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	7



### Lahardane Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest boxes)</b>	<b>2</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	2

### Louisburgh Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest boxes)</b>	<b>1</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	6
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	1
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Mulranny Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest boxes)</b>	<b>1</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	6
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	1
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Newport Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest Boxes)</b>	<b>14</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	6
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	8
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	2
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	12

### Partry Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>0</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	6
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	0

### Shrule Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>6</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	3
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. External Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. Natural nests occupied	6



### Swinford Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (Natural and Nest boxes)</b>	<b>6</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	6
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	0
No. of External Nest Boxes occupied	1
No. of Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	0
No. of natural nests occupied	5

### Westport Summary Table

<b>Total Occupied Nests (natural and boxes)</b>	<b>29</b>
No. External Nest Boxes available	9
No. Built-in Nest Boxes available	12
No. of External nest boxes occupied	1
No. of Built-in Nest Boxes occupied	9
No. of Natural Nests	19



## Conclusion and Recommendations

The breeding population of Swifts in County Mayo has grown over the past few years as a result of the nest box projects that have been implemented since the first project was established at GMT (ATU) Mayo in 2012. The success of the nest box projects demonstrates that it is possible to stabilise and recover a county Swift breeding population. Mayo County Council has been extremely supportive of Swift conservation throughout the county and has been instrumental in the recovery of this iconic bird that breeds in our towns, villages and historic sites.

### Recommendations:

1. Incorporate the Swift nest site geolocational data into the Mayo County Council's GIS for use by all decision and policy makers in the County Council.
2. Make the data and report available to each relevant department within the County Council e.g. planning, architects and to relevant stakeholders.
3. Where locations highlighted within this report are to be developed/redeveloped, the planning application should account for the presence of nesting Swifts for their protection. Where possible the inclusion of built-in nest boxes should be included in the project to ensure long-term secure nest sites.
4. Use the planning system to ensure that built-in Swift nesting bricks are incorporated into planning conditions for any large public buildings e.g. schools, libraries etc.
5. Repeat the whole county survey in 5 years to assess the status of the Swift breeding population and monitor the continued success of the nest box projects.



*Swifts inspecting nest entrances at Westport Town Hall*