

THE SWIFTS OF LEDBURY



Photo ©Michael Colquhoun

Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project Report 2018



The Survey Group. Photo © Eden Tanner

Background to the Project

Swifts *Apus apus* arrive in Britain from Africa to breed in early May before returning to their winter home in late July or early August. Swifts pair for life but are colonial so usually nest in groups. They will use the same nest site each year and these are usually high up at the edge of eaves or beneath roof tiles so the birds are able to drop into the air from the nest entrance. Older buildings are favoured as these frequently offer suitable gaps to access nest sites.

Because nest sites are used each year, they can be lost if maintenance or alterations are undertaken to buildings. Alterations to a building could prevent access to many pairs and this could have serious negative impacts to local swift population.

In early May 2018 we noticed scaffolding on the Barrett Browning building (the old Ledbury library) was still in place for maintenance work and this could have been preventing swifts from entering known nest sites. Ledbury Places who now own and manage the building kindly gave permission for us to erect six swift boxes while the scaffolding was still in place. The boxes were purchased by the Ledbury Naturalists Field Club and following publicity in the Ledbury Reporter, Hereford Times and Ledbury Focus, local sponsors very generously came forward to fund them. Having established the presence of swifts nesting in the Barrett Browning Building the *Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project* was created with the aim to identify, and safeguard swift nest sites in Ledbury, and to identify and create new nesting sites through the erection of swift boxes where permission could be gained.



Locations of the six swift boxes on the Barrett Browning Building.

The Survey

In May and early June swifts can be seen returning to nest sites with nest material, especially in the morning, and at dusk they return to roost at the site. Eggs generally hatch in late June so from late June through July breeding adults will be returning to the nest every hour or so with food for their young. Young birds looking for a future nest site will fly past prospective sites "screaming" and may brush the entrances with their wings. Resident birds respond by coming to the entrance and screaming back, this helps the birds find out where colonies are and which holes are vacant. The presence of a low flying screaming party near to buildings indicate nest sites are nearby and so birds can be seen returning to these sites at dusk.

The Ledbury survey started on Friday 6 July with a core survey group of ten members. Surveys took place every Monday and Friday evenings until the end of July. The group looked for birds flying low down and (usually) screaming and identified likely looking buildings to watch for swifts entering nest sites. By early August all of the birds had departed.

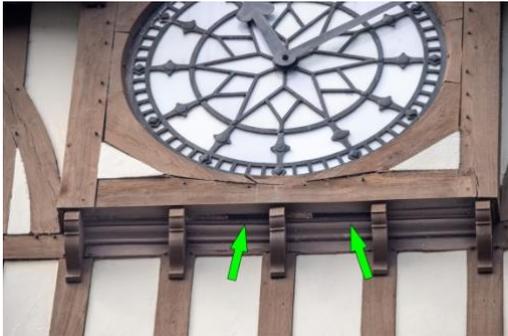
The Nest Sites

In total, seven buildings were found, supporting 29 nest sites and a significant proportion of Ledbury's swifts. These were the Barrett Browning building, the Almshouses, St Michael's Church, two timber-framed houses and two brick built houses.

The building with the most nest sites was the Barrett Browning building with at least 8 pairs of birds seen entering separate nest sites. Four nest sites were seen under the eaves on the west side, above the new nest boxes, one on the south side in a gap between the beam and stone (see photograph below) and at least three nest sites in gaps in the timber on the clock tower. Photographs below shows the east and south sides and clock tower of Barrett Browning Building and the north side of the Almshouses.



Nest site on south side, note the white 'splash' from droppings



Two nests sites on south side of clock tower



Nest site on corner of clock tower



Three nest sites under the eaves on the north gable end of the Almshouses.



This brick built property supported four pairs of swifts, two nests on the front (street side) and two on the west side of the property. See photographs below.



Front (South side) nest sites. Five of the nest sites

Close up of one of the nest sites, marked by droppings below the nest entrance

All of the nest sites on this timber framed property were on the west side of the house. Six nest sites were seen here, five of which are shown.

In general swifts leave very little mess below their nest sites unlike house martins and swallows.



Three of the nest sites

This black and white property had at least four nest sites all on the west side.



This brick semi-detached house had three nest sites, all on the rear (south side) of the property, one in the apex under the eaves and two under the eaves to the left of the apex, partly on the adjoining house. The nest site at the apex of the eaves is a typical site.



St Michael's & All Angels Church was surveyed by the whole group on one occasion, and only one nest site was found on the south east corner. However it was quite late in the season and the building could have other nests for which further surveys are needed.

The stability of the known nest sites and recommendations

The Barrett Browning building This listed building has undergone maintenance work during which the six swift boxes provided by the Ledbury Naturalists Field club and sponsors were installed. Future phased building maintenance work is planned as funding becomes available. Six nest boxes are now in place and it is unlikely that all of the existing nest sites will become blocked during any future work. However, the next phase of the work is likely to be on the clock tower and there are no suitable places for nest boxes here, so the presence of the existing nest boxes aims to mitigate any nest sites that become blocked. No work or scaffolding should be in place during the nesting season (last week of April to the first week of August).

St Michael's & All Angels Church The large parish church is well-maintained and so the one known and any other potential nest sites do not appear are not threatened at present. The church is a Grade I listed building. A number of churches in Herefordshire have had swift nest boxes erected on them as part of the Bats and Swifts in Churches project run by Herefordshire Mammal Group (these include Pembridge, Wellington and Donnington churches). Contact with the Parochial Church Council has been made and permission granted to erect a number of nest boxes.

Of the five residential properties that support swift nest sites, contact has been with three of the owners or occupiers and all are supportive of protecting their swift nest sites. Contact still needs to be made with the owners of two of the properties

Annual surveys, or at least annual contact, with all property owners or occupiers, should take place to monitor the populations.

Known nest box locations Only two sites were found during the surveys. One is a house on the Southend. This private residence has three swift boxes all on the rear (north facing) elevation.

A timber framed residence adjoining the west side of the churchyard has two nest boxes. None of the boxes have been used to date.

Potential nest box locations As identified above, the church is an ideal location for a number of swift nest boxes which would immediately increase the availability of long-term nesting opportunities.

One of the timber framed properties would benefit from at least two nest boxes as the occupied sites are all at the rear of the property and so are quite likely to be overlooked if future occupiers are unaware of their existence.

The outside wall of the Feathers Hotel adjoining St Katherine's car park does have a small number of holes in the stonework. Whilst no swifts were seen using these sites in 2018, it is possible that they could be used in future. Any maintenance work here would block these holes, so it is recommended that at least three swift boxes are placed high on the wall, without compromising any existing holes assuming permission is granted.

New housing developments are taking place in Ledbury. Developers could be approached to request that they place a number of swift boxes in groups around the development. A triple cavity box would be ideal to ensure that boxes are not placed in isolation.

Ledbury Naturalists Field Club and sponsors will continue to raise funds for nest boxes in the Ledbury area.

Sites identified for future surveys All of the known sites should be surveyed at least once during future nesting seasons and both of the nest box locations should be visited.

There are other sites identified for survey in 2019, including houses on the Homend, New Street, Oatleys Crescent in Ledbury and also nearby in Donnington and Putley.

Thank You! To all who gave so generously to sponsor the six nests boxes. We have some funds in hand and plan to raise more for additional installations next year.



Two swifts using a nestbox (Photo ©Michael Colquhoun)