

Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project Report 2019

Several members of The Survey Group who met one evening each week during the nesting season



Background to the Project

Swifts (*Apus apus*) arrive in Britain from Africa in early May to breed before heading back to their winter home in late July or early August. Swifts are colonial and so usually nest in groups. They pair for life and will use the same nest site each year. Nest sites are usually high up on buildings, just inside the roof space, 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.

As swifts use the same nest site each year, these sites can be lost if maintenance or alterations are undertaken to buildings. As swifts are gregarious and nest in groups, alterations to one building could prevent access to nest sites of many pairs and this could have serious negative impacts to the local swift population.

In May and early June swifts can be seen returning to nest sites with nest material, especially in the morning. 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. Swifts do not usually breed until they are 4 years old but the younger birds return to the area where they were born each year and begin to pair up and look for potential nest sites. Young birds 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 young 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 these buildings can be watched for adult breeding birds returning to their nest holes. This is best done later in the evening but as the chicks grow and require more food the parents tend to return to the site more frequently throughout the day.

The Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project began in 2018 after members of the Ledbury Naturalists Field Club noticed that scaffolding on the Barrett Browning building (the old Ledbury library) was still in place from maintenance work and this could be preventing swifts from entering known nest sites. Ledbury Places now manage the building and they kindly agreed to erect 6 swift boxes while the scaffolding was still in place. The boxes were purchased by the Ledbury Naturalist Field Club and following publicity in the Ledbury Reporter, Hereford Times and Ledbury Focus local sponsors very generously came forward to fund the boxes

It was clear that this may not be an isolated case and so the Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project was created with the aim to identify, safeguard and create new swift nest sites in Ledbury.

The 2019 Survey

Swifts were first seen in Ledbury on 6th May and the surveys started at the beginning of June and continued weekly until the end of July. As in 2018, by early August all of the birds had left, with the last swift seen by the members on 5th August.

The group looked for birds flying low down and (usually) screaming and identified likely looking buildings to watch for swifts entering nest sites. All of the known nest sites found in 2018 were revisited and there were also a number of potential new sites reported to the group which were all surveyed.

In addition to the surveys in early spring 2019, six swift boxes were installed in the tower of St Michaels Church Ledbury and two boxes provided by the householder, were also put up by the Club in Bank Crescent.

The group also purchased two sheets of heavy duty marine plywood. This was very kindly cut up into the various shapes & sizes by John Churchill, In March a group met at Ast Wood yard and made eight boxes which are available for sale. The other sheet was cut to size to be sold as kits for people to make up themselves.

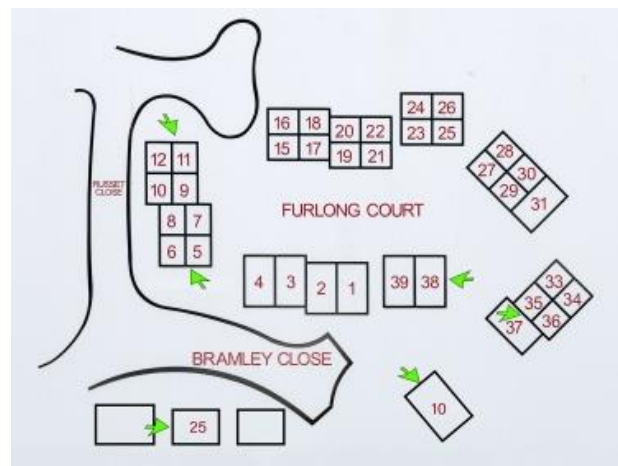


The Nest Sites

A total of 19 properties are known to be used by swifts for nesting. Numbers of nests on each property ranges from one to at least 6 (Barrett Browning building and a black and white residence at the rear of the Homend). At least 14 new nest sites were recorded during the 2019 survey together with the 29 nests found in 2018.

2018 sites- All of the seven buildings with active nest sites found in 2018 were once again supporting nesting swifts. These included the Barrett Browning building; the Almshouses ; two timber framed residences & two brick built houses.

Deer Park - Nine relatively modern houses and bungalows on the Deer Park estate (Bramley Close and Furlong Court) were found to support at least 10 nest sites. These buildings are all around 20 to 30 years old. All nest sites were behind unusual gable end fascia tiles. Each of these tiles had a convenient swift-sized hole for access to the roof space



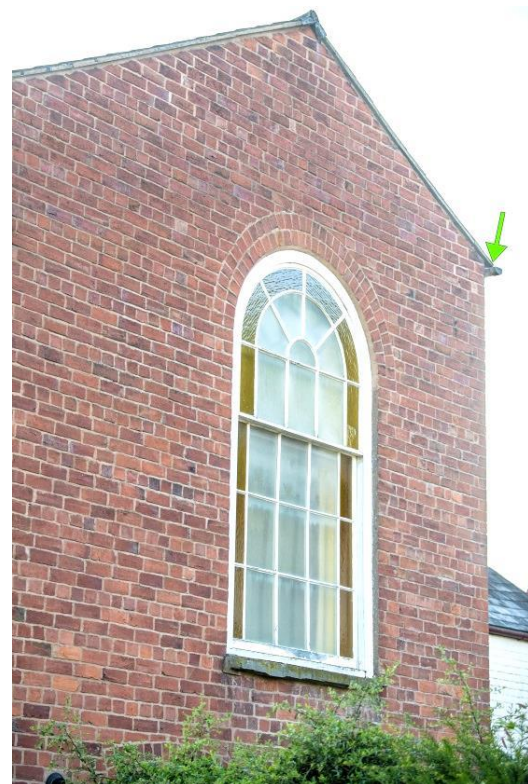
Barnett Close - A house of the same age and roof design on the junction of Barnett Close and Bridge Street also supported one pair of nesting swifts. The owner said that the swifts were already nesting when they moved in and the house was then only a year old. So the swifts must have moved in very soon after construction.



Bridge Street - A property in Bridge Street, no. 88 had two nest sites

Margaret Road – A screaming party of young swifts was seen in the Margaret Road area and after a short while adults were seen entering a nest hole in a semi-detached property at the Western end of the road. Swift activity was quite intense initially but then fell off to a point where no swifts were seen during a further half an hour's observation. This shows that there is an element of being 'in the right place at the right time' in discovering new swift sites. If we had walked down the road 20 minutes later we may have not realised the nest was there.

Burgage Hall - A report late in the survey season was given to the Club of a nest on the Burgage Hall where Lednats hold our winter meetings. A site visit was met by two very enthusiastic neighbours who had been carefully watching 'Their Swifts' throughout the season. They pointed out the nest high on the East facing wall in a convenient hole behind the fascia board. They had even managed to get some decent pictures of the parents flying in.



An adult swift returns to the nest with a food ball of insects for the chicks

Other reports. Several local residents reported regularly seeing swifts around Oatleys Crescent, but only a large number of House Martin nests were found during the survey. While the presence of swift nests could not be ruled out by a limited amount of survey time this likely illustrates that the public at large may, quite reasonably, not be quite clear as to the difference between Swifts, Swallows & House Martins.

There were also reports of swifts possibly nesting in a property in Bank Crescent but this could not be confirmed after several visits during the survey.

The stability of the known nest sites and recommendations.

The Barrett Browning building - This listed building has undergone maintenance work and 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 blocked. No work or scaffolding should be in place during the nesting season (last week of April to the first week of August).



2019 Nest sites (green arrows) & nest boxes (mauve arrows) on the Barrett Browning building

Other 2018 sites - Of the five residential properties found to support swift nest sites in 2018, contact has been with all but one of the owners or occupiers and all are supportive of protecting their swift nest sites.

Deer Park and Barnett Close - The owners, occupiers or managers of the modern properties in the Deer Park and Barnett Close were all made aware of the swift nest sites. Due to the design of the properties actually providing the nest site, there is little risk of maintenance work blocking access for swifts, although one of the bungalows did have a swift nesting under a broken ridge tile. Contact will need to be made again with the manager of the property to make them aware not to undertake maintenance work during the time swifts may be in residence.

Bridge Street and Burgage Hall – No maintenance work is known to be planned on these properties, but contact should be made with the owners/occupiers.

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

Known nest box locations – Nest boxes are known or have been put on five properties. One is a property on the Southend. This private residence has three swift boxes all on the rear north-facing elevation, another is a nest box on the east side of a timber framed residence adjoining the west side of the churchyard. Fourteen boxes have been put on the Barrett Browning building, the Church tower and a house in Bank Crescent.

No birds were seen to be using any of the nest boxes seen or put up in 2018 or 2019, although 3 of the boxes on the Barrett Browning building are hidden from view. From mid-July on, swifts were seen flying around the boxes on the Church tower, possibly investigating the sound of the lures

St Michaels Church In 2018 we surveyed the churchyard & the church itself for signs of swift activity but found very little, a suggestion of the possibility of nests on the east end of the church could not be confirmed. Screaming parties of young birds were noted passing the western edge of the churchyard but these were thought to be associated with the colonies on the Barrett Browning Building & close by.

Churches have historically proved to be good sites for swifts and we entered into a dialogue with the Church Authorities to see if we could erect some nest boxes. Just before the swifts were due to return agreement was reached and a work party installed six concrete nest boxes in the church tower. Two boxes were put at the top of the window arches on each on the north, west & south facing walls.

There is no guarantee that birds will take up boxes erected at a new site but there is a wealth of scientific evidence that playing the sounds of nesting swifts at a new site will encourage them to take up residence. Sounds of chicks in the nest and the activity and sounds of their parents attract the younger adult birds who are not yet nesting to the area where they prospect for nest holes to use when they are finally old enough to breed themselves.

A number of swift conservation websites provided enough information for us to obtain the necessary equipment. A CD of swift sounds was transferred to an SD memory card to use in a small car player/amp and a pair of small tweeters (Loudspeakers for high pitched sounds) were cannibalised from an old 'hifi' no longer used by one of our members. The equipment was quite quickly installed in the tower one evening before bell-ringing practice. Since we had no general access to the tower an electronic timer was used to automatically switch on the swift sounds in the morning and to turn them off in the evening. This worked well without any problems apart from one occasion when a power cut in Ledbury tripped the circuit-breaker we had installed to make the whole system as safe as possible. Luckily this corresponded with one of our visits to check all was well before a bell-ringing practice, the trip was reset and the system worked faultlessly until we removed it when the swifts had left in the late summer.

We hope we will be able to use the sound system again next year and we will use the experience gained this year to fine tune things like the volume (We did probably set it a bit too loud this year) and the length of time the sounds are played. (Two shorter periods, one in the morning & one in the evening rather than all day)

The big question is did it actually work? Early on we were worried as the birds did not appear to be taking much notice but then one evening quite a number of screaming parties were seen to pass the west side of the tower close to the nest boxes and from then on this became a regular observation. Later on in the season birds were seen flying up to investigate the nest box entrance holes.

Will some the young birds who prospected the tower this year nest there in 2020? That would be very rewarding but the reality is it may take a number of years if it happens at all.



A 'screaming party' at the church tower

Potential nest box locations- 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 large wall in St Katherines car park does have a small number of holes in the stonework. Whilst no swifts were seen using these sites in 2018 or 2019, 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. Contact has been made with the owners of the wall and it is possible that boxes could be placed there in future.

New housing developments are taking place in Ledbury. Developers have been 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. Contact should be made again with the developers now building work has resumed after a long period of no work.

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

The Club still has six wooden boxes made by members which can be provided for use by interested property owner/occupiers.

Sites identified for future surveys- all of the known sites should be surveyed at least once during future nesting seasons and all of the nestbox locations should be visited.

There are a number of other sites identified for survey in 2020, including properties at the rear of the Homend, Bridge Street, Bank Crescent and the Old White Hart Pub in Church Street

Thanks to all those who helped once again with the surveys, box making and box erection and to Eden and Wendy Tanner for putting swift lures and keeping them going all season,

Also thanks to Anne Scull and who arranged permission and access to put the boxes on the Church tower and David Lee of Herefordshire Mammal Group for helping to put the boxes in the tower and on the property at Bank Crescent.



Young swifts investigating an occupied nest site

Some interesting websites

actionforswifts.blogspot.com

<https://www.rspb.org.uk> > [safeguarding-species](#) > [help-us-help-swifts](#)

<https://www.bristolswifts.co.uk>

<https://oumnh.ox.ac.uk> > [swifts-diary](#)

THE SWIFTS OF LEDBURY



2019 SURVEY