

Accommodating swallows, swifts and house martins



Guidance notes for
developers, builders, surveyors,
architects & house holders

Produced by: Cornwall Council

Endorsed by: RSPB, Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Natural England,
The British Trust For Ornithology and Swift Conservation.



Swifts, swallows and house martins are amongst the most endearing of British breeding birds. They are not resident, escaping to warmer climes to over-winter, but substantial numbers arrive in Britain in the spring to breed.

All three species have declined in numbers over the last 20 years.

There are numerous factors attributing to this decline:

- Recent climatic changes may have affected their over-wintering sites, caused their migratory routes to become more difficult and created wet and cold summers.
- Changes in farming practices abroad and in the UK reduce their insect food source.
- The reduction of suitable nesting sites due to loss of old farm buildings, new buildings lacking appropriate nesting sites and peoples negative attitude to birds nesting in or on their property.

Cornwall Council encourages those who are planning to undertake building works, including barn conversions, renovations, new development and property maintenance, to safeguard existing nesting sites and provide new opportunities for these birds to nest in or on the buildings.

This leaflet has been prepared in association with a variety of bodies who have a direct concern about the plight of swifts, swallows and house martins and who will be able to provide additional information.

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (01392) 432691
www.rspb.org.uk/helpswifts

British Trust for Ornithology (01842) 750050
www.bto.org

Natural England. Truro Office 0300 0602 544
www.naturalengland.org.uk

Cornwall Wildlife Trust (01872) 273939
www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk

Swift Conservation
www.swift-conservation.org.uk

Cornwall Council 0300 1234 202
www.cornwall.gov.uk

Swallows - *Hirundo rustica*



Swallows breed all around the northern hemisphere: in North America, Europe and Asia. They sometimes use natural nest sites, such as caves and cliffs, but more often use man-made structures allowing them to become more widespread.

Swallows return to ancestral nesting sites in April and May, males arriving before the females, claiming and defending the nest sites. They are monogamous, and may return for up to three years.

Swallows normally raise two or maybe even three broods depending on the weather. The young of the first will help to raise the succeeding broods.

Swallows leave in September and October, sometimes travelling in flocks, over-wintering in South Africa, feeding on the way. This makes them vulnerable to food shortages on their migration routes.

Nests are normally built inside a building, on a beam or ledge and they are often not much higher than head height. The nest, built by both birds, is a deep bowl of mud with grass and other fibrous material incorporated to strengthen it and lined with feathers. They require cover above the nest, keeping it dry and relatively secure. They prefer farm buildings, particularly close to stock as this ensures a plentiful supply of insects close to the nest. They have been recorded using a wide range of different sites including mine shafts, under bridges and even within construction sites. Single nests are common but swallows often breed in small colonies of four or five pairs.

Swallows numbers are in decline.

There are a number of contributory factors but it is recognised that changing farming practices and loss of suitable nest sites is a serious one. This can be addressed through thoughtful action by architects, developers, builders and property owners.



Swallows - *Hirundo rustica*

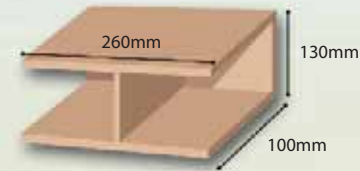
Conversion of farm buildings can remove existing traditional and potentially new nesting sites for swallows. There are a number of actions you as an architect, developer, builder or property owner can take to retain or provide nesting sites and thus help sustain swallow populations.

Firstly, if you have to carry out work to a building, ensure that swallows are not nesting. Their presence in a building is relatively easy to detect. Frequent visits by swallows or, if you get too close, mobbing by them are sure indicators. If swallows are present, delay work until the young have flown. This usually happens by mid August, but in good summers, young can still be in the nest in early September.

You can provide additional nesting sites or make access into garages and outbuildings for the birds to make their own nests by:

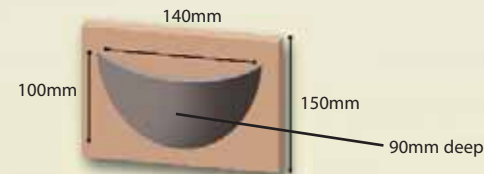
- Making a small opening, H:50mm x W:70mm, under the eaves or leave a window or door permanently open from April - September.
- Fixing a nest platform where you would like them to nest, preferably high up, out of reach of cats.

Fig.1



- Making a mock nest platform from four flat pieces of wood (Fig.1), or by fixing a sawdust and cement or papier-mache cup or even 1/4 of a coconut to a wooden backing plate (Fig.2).

Fig.2



Droppings may cause a nuisance... Fix a black plastic bag or a board beneath the nest to catch droppings, this can be disposed of later.

Swallows need mud to construct their nests. This can be in short supply, particularly during a dry spring. Providing a muddy area close to the nest site will further encourage swallows to nest nearby. Simply choose an area of soil safe for swallows - watering it in the morning and roughing it up a bit will suffice.

Swifts - Apus apus



Swifts are the black, sickle-winged birds that characteristically wheel at speed high in the summer sky, often making their high pitched single note calls, hence the old country name of Devil Screechers. They are supremely adapted to flying and flying at speed. They feed, sleep and even mate while in the air.

They are not related to swallows or house martins but many of their habits and reliance on man-made

structures are similar.

As their natural tree, cave and cliff nest sites are rare in Britain, they depend almost exclusively on man-made sites such as houses, typically high up under the eaves, in ventilators and other available cavities. Most nest sites are at least five metres above ground and all have a drop to allow the birds to pick up speed as they leave the nest.

Over-wintering in Africa, the birds arrive in early May and depart in early August. Swifts usually nest in colonies, determined by the availability of nest sites. Very little material is used for the nest which is glued together with saliva. They lay two or three eggs, and these are incubated for up to 20 days and the young usually fledge at about six weeks old. They are fed food balls containing some 300 insects every hour or so. This makes swifts highly effective in controlling insect populations. Individual swifts may return for up to six years. They tend to breed successfully after four years, giving a possible two years for successful rearing of replacements.

Swifts pair for life and are likely to return to the same nest sites year after year. Nestlings will also return to the vicinity where they were reared. Thus, where there are swifts nesting, it is likely to be a local population with links to that locality going back many years.

Swifts will use old and new buildings.



Swifts - Apus apus

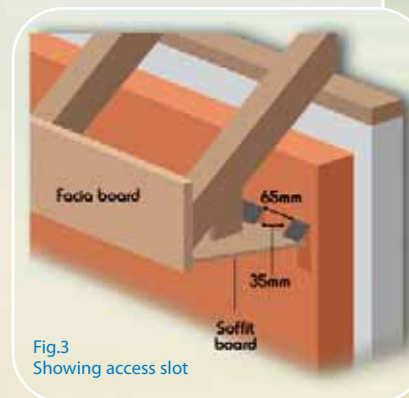
Modern building methods, changes in building regulations and better maintenance of properties all contribute to excluding swifts from their usual nesting places in roofs. The following information will help to ensure swifts can find and use suitable nesting sites and thereby maintain their populations. Swifts usually use the area of roof just inside the eaves, not attached to the outside as with house martins.

The most important guiding principle if swifts do use your property is:

- Generally avoid undertaking any work to soffits, gutters, eaves and roof between May and mid-August.

More specific advice includes:

- Before starting any work on your property, identify if it is a site where swifts breed. Ask previous owners or make visual checks for old nests. Remember that swifts usually nest out of sight.
- If roof timber treatment is required, specify water-based insecticides such as Permethrin, not spirit-based ones.
- Loft insulation should not extend to the far corner of the roof. Leaving a small gap by the soffit or fascia board allows access for swifts and aids ventilation.
- Adequate loft ventilation is a Building Regulation requirement. Swift access and ventilation slots should be 35mm X 65mm. This prevents access by most other birds (see fig.3).



- Swift nest boxes can be made and have proved successful. They should be sited as high as possible under the eaves. Swifts need a drop in

order to gain flying speed, bungalows/single storey buildings are therefore not suitable for swift boxes. The shape of the box is not important, but the best have had an access tunnel with a slightly wider chamber at the end. Entrance hole to be 30mm, box to be 600mm deep, 130mm wide and 100mm high - but more restricted sites are often used. 'Swift Conservation' have many nest boxes which can easily be built in or attached to buildings.

House Martins - *Delichon urbica*



House martins are summer visitors to the British Isles, spending the winter in tropical Africa. Traditionally, house martins used overhanging cliffs and rock ledges on which to build nests, but house eaves mimic this habitat adequately and are more widespread.

House martins tend to breed in colonies and whilst they are not so loyal to particular nest sites as are swallows, nevertheless many do return year after year.

Their nesting period is slightly longer than either swifts or swallows and the third brood can still be in the nest in mid September. This is important when considering when to undertake work which may cause disturbance to the birds. Remember it is illegal to remove a nest while being built or in use.

House martins are declining in numbers for a variety of reasons. The loss of suitable nest sites and the wilful removal of nests on buildings, are contributory factors.

The following information provides some hints on how to live with house martins and how to encourage them to nest on buildings, thus helping to sustain their populations.

House martins need three things to help them breed successfully - a suitable nesting site, the correct building materials (mud, grass and various fibrous materials) and plenty of food.

While you may not be able to provide a food source for house martins, unless you can influence the management of nearby habitats, you will be able to help conserve and provide nesting sites on buildings.

Eaves, or flat bottomed overhangs are essential. Retain any eaves in any conversion or provide ledges about 120mm wide, preferably on north or east facing walls.

Artificial house martin nests can be made easily or purchased from the RSPB amongst others. Such nests should be placed in groups and usually serve to attract birds which then build their own nests.



House Martins - *Delichon urbica*



Whilst house martins may not use these nests their presence can encourage them to build their own. It is a good idea to provide a safe and accessible muddy patch near to existing or potential nest sites, approximately 1m square, ideally with proportions of soil, clay, lime and even cow dung. This provides ideal building material and in

dry springs will be essential for the birds.

Phone 01743 709545 for supplies of ready made mud.

You can make your own house martin nest by using Polyfilla or similar material, smoothed to a thickness of 8mm over a quarter segment of a plastic ball about 180mm in diameter. Leave a flange around the edge to assist fixing the nest to a wall or backboard. The entrance hole should be no deeper than 25mm and no wider than 65mm.

Artificial nests can be taken down during the late autumn to store over winter and to allow for property maintenance.

House martin droppings are seen as a nuisance by some and many try to get rid of nests on their properties. By placing a ledge, wider than the nests, e.g.. a suspended plank, about 2m below them, droppings can be prevented from marking windows, doors etc. Make the ledges easily detachable for subsequent cleaning.



THE LAW

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 ALL birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law and it is therefore an offence to intentionally:

- Kill, injure or take any wild bird.
- Take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use or being built.
- Take or destroy the egg of any wild bird.

Nestbox Information

BTO Guide No. 23, Nestboxes - Chris du Fey.

RSPB free leaflets:

'Nestboxes for small garden birds' and 'Nestboxes for larger birds'.

All available by contacting the relevant organisation.

(See introduction page)