

Proposal: Swift Conservation in the Derbyshire Dales

Background

In common with several other long-distance migratory bird species such as spotted flycatcher, wood warbler and cuckoo, breeding numbers of the Common Swift (*apus apus*) have **declined by more than 65%** across the UK over the past 25 years (ref), a statistic reflected by its recent designation as a **red-listed bird of conservation concern** (ref). In contrast to these other species, however, the main factor behind the decline of Swifts appears to be the ongoing loss of suitable nest sites (ref) as building repair renovation and replacement gradually results in the loss of access holes to their nest sites within the fabric of buildings. As Swifts nest almost exclusively on buildings and readily take to artificial nest boxes and nest bricks this presents an opportunity to stabilise and potentially reverse this situation by the provision of supplementary nest sites in the form of nest boxes.

Swift Conservation in the UK

The vast majority of the Swift conservation movement in the UK is driven by volunteers. There are over 100 Swift groups nationally, some focussing on villages and towns, some working at the county level and a couple which are national in their coverage.

Nationally, there are numerous examples of once Swift-rich areas which have suffered obvious population declines being rescued by the timely actions of local Swift groups, always by the simple measure of installing nest boxes or bricks. Notable examples are the **North Milton Estate** and **Regents Park** in **Hampshire** (refs) and similarly XXXX in Cambridgeshire. Unfortunately, there are also examples of large swift colonies which have been totally lost because nothing was done at the time (ref).

Swift Conservation in the Derbyshire Dales

In **Rowsley**, just outside Bakewell, a large Swift colony was discovered in 2021 and how Derbyshire Swift Conservation Project have managed this represents best-practice in terms of the conservation of this species. The process we have implemented has 3 stages:

- 1) surveying (i.e. identifying the exact location of every nest);
- 2) risk assessment (who owns the building, when will it be renovated and what are the chances we can intervene?) and
- 3) mitigation measures (installing as many nest boxes as possible in the immediate vicinity to create alternative nest sites).

In the case of Rowsley (and other towns and villages in the Derbyshire Dales such as Darley Dale and Bradwell), the burden of the surveying work falls onto volunteers. We currently rely on a number of lead co-ordinators across Derbyshire (a 'Swift champion') in each area who is prepared to manage contacts, co-ordinate surveys through the breeding season, and then collate and submit survey data. The second phase depends on local knowledge, and this is best accessed via public talks and meetings with local groups and like-minded individuals followed by contacts with landlords and other property owners. Phase III requires co-ordination of box supply and installation as well as sourcing grants to minimise the cost to householders.

Rationale

At the local level (and indeed this is echoed nationally), successful swift conservation is constrained by the availability of sufficiently motivated and knowledgeable volunteers. For example, in the

Derbyshire Dales there are 14 towns & villages with populations of 1000 people or more. Of these, we have detailed knowledge of the Swift population in two or three (Darley Dale, Bradwell, and to a lesser extent Hathersage), thanks to local enthusiasts and their teams. We have preliminary survey data and site evaluation/knowledge of the situation in a further 5 locations. This leaves a huge gap in our knowledge: we do not have a complete picture of the distribution and number of swift colonies in Derbyshire. We do not have sufficient data to make evidence-based decisions for Derbyshire Dales; and we still don't know where most Swifts are nesting, meaning we cannot take action to protect these nest sites.

Project proposal

To address this deficit in information in a timely manner we propose a collaborative project between Derbyshire Swift Conservation Project and Derbyshire Dales District Council.

Aim

To promote species conservation in the Derbyshire Dales by conserving Swifts, by

- 1) providing data to support decision making
- 2) conserving and increasing nest site availability

The Derbyshire Dales Swift Project would have 3 phases, as follows:

Phase I : surveying

Objectives:

- 1) To provide accurate data to determine distribution of nesting swift colonies**
- 2) To provide accurate data to determine estimates of swift population numbers**
- 3) Establish areas and types of buildings used and preferred by swifts**

Recruit a professional surveyor ('project co-ordinator) to identify, train and co-ordinate volunteers, working with local groups to provide detailed mapping of Swift nest sites in [to be confirmed] locations in Derbyshire Dales. The aim would be to collect the data needed to make good, evidence-based decisions to support swift conservation, including ascertaining the areas favoured by Swifts and to identify the precise buildings and structures they use to nest.

Phase II: risk assessment

Objectives:

- 4) Identify high risk areas where nest sites will be lost**
- 5) Raise awareness of swift decline and importance of nest availability**

Working with the project co-ordinator and local volunteers, the Derbyshire Dales Swift Project would fund events (meeting rooms, printing costs etc) and help raise local awareness of the project and what we're trying to achieve. The Aims would be to identify high risk areas, establish contact with landlords, social housing managers and householders and plan distribution and extent of nest box installation.

Phase III: mitigation

Objectives:

6) Establish nest installation programme

7) Monitor impact of nest box programme

Once the target number of boxes is identified, based on the evidence collected, Derbyshire Dales Swift Project would set up a nest installation programme. By providing a recognised, credible source of advice, an installation service, we would be able to instigate a successful nest box programme across the Derbyshire Dales. Examples of actions to encourage uptake could include: a) pay installation costs; b) subsidise box costs for householders who take part in the scheme; c) a fund to be allocated for free provision of boxes to households unable to pay.

Monitoring: householders would be encouraged to take part in citizen science project to record uptake of swift nest boxes We would also use nest box webcam to create public awareness on our websites and social media

Delivery Plan

Delivery Plan and costings to be established by Derbyshire Swift Conservation Project in consultation with partner DDDC.