

Ledbury Swift Group

2021 Report



Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project Full Report 2021

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 locations 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.



Young swifts 'Screaming' by a nest hole at Kempley

The Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project began in 2018 with the aim to identify, safeguard and create new swift nest sites in Ledbury.

Surveys now include buildings near but not necessarily in Ledbury.

The 2021 Survey

No survey was undertaken during 2020, although it was noted that the first swifts were seen in Ledbury above Deer Park on 29th April.

Surveys started in 2021 on 17th May and continued weekly all summer until the last swifts left around 17th August. The first swifts were recorded on 7th May. All known swift locations in Ledbury and some near-by villages were checked during 2021. A number of new locations were found.

The group looked for birds flying low down and (usually) screaming and identified likely looking build-

ings to watch for swifts entering nest sites. In addition to the surveys, the six swift boxes installed in the tower of St Michaels Church in 2019 had swift calls (lures) played within the tower in an effort to attract swifts to the boxes.

The Nest Sites

From previous surveys a total of 19 properties were known to be used by swifts for nesting. Numbers of nests on each property ranged from one to at least six (Barrett Browning building and a black and white residence at the rear of the Homend). A good number of new sites were recorded during the 2021 survey making a total of 48 nests in 20 properties.

The 2021 nest sites

Barrett Browning building - This building remains a very important site for swifts with at least 2 nest sites under the clock on the East side, 5 or 6 nest sites on the West side, including one swift box being used for the first time. There were also 2 sites on the north side under the clock, although this was not confirmed due to difficulty in viewing the area. 6 swift boxes in total are on the building, having been purchased by the Ledbury Naturalists Field club and kind local sponsors.

The Almshouses - This too, is a key nest site for the swifts. During 2019, 3 nest sites were seen to be used and during 2021, 5 or 6 nest sites were recorded being used, again all on the north side under the eaves on the gable end.

At a house Newbury Park the owner reported active nest sites to be 5, in 2019 there were 3 in use.

At a black & white house at the back of the Homend 6 nest sites were used on the west elevation. One swift got caught in netting on the building and the owner reported it to one of our members who with the help of a kind passer-by managed to release the bird. On veterinary advice the bird was kept quiet and warm overnight in a cardboard box and was offered it's freedom next morning. Thankfully it took to the sky none the worse for its misadventure. Grounded swifts have extreme difficulty in taking off from the ground because of the combination of their very long wings and extremely short legs, so they are best released from a relatively high point.

A black and white flat behind a shop in the Homend had 2 nest sites being used during 2021, down from 3 in 2019.

A large house in New Street had a minimum of 8 nest sites noted during 2021, all on the South elevation. In 2019 the property supported 4 pairs of swifts, 2 on the west side and 2 on the south side.

The Burgage Hall - 1 nest site was seen being used again on the north east corner behind the end of the fascia board. None were seen using the three newly erected swift boxes.

Deer Park- Nest sites were less than in 2019, although there did not appear to be any obvious changes to the houses. All of the houses are of relative modern red brick design and the swifts use the gaps behind the unusual gable end fascia tiles. Each of these tiles had a convenient swift-sized hole for accessing a gap behind. Three properties in Furlong Court had 4 nest sites between them.



Swift nest boxes on The Burgage Hall

Three properties in Furlong Court which had active nests in previous years had none confirmed in 2021. Bramley Close supported 2 nest sites, while no swifts were seen using one Bramley Close property which had nests reported in previous years.

Barnett Close - This relatively modern house, built around 20 to 30 years ago, is of the same design as the Deer Park properties and supported at least 1 nest site

At a Bridge Street property 2 nest sites were seen in 2021, whereas only 1 was recorded in 2019.

All of the above locations were known to be swift nest sites.

New Ledbury Locations for 2021

Two more properties in The Homend each had one nest site identified..

Queensway - 5 houses were recorded supporting a minimum total of 6 nest sites. These houses are also of a relatively modern design, with the swifts utilising small gaps in the gable ends and fascia boards.

New locations for 2021 outside of Ledbury

Bosbury Church - 11 nest sites were seen being used all on the south elevation of the church. The other elevations were not closely watched and there may be other nests not recorded.

St Mary's Church, Kempley – 21 nest sites were recorded on the north, south and west elevations.

On 18th August 2 group members made an evening visit to St Mary's Church to see if there were any swift nests still occupied. There was no swift activity at all so we assumed all the chicks had fledged but just as we were thinking of leaving a single bird whizzed by and entered one of the sites we had previously identified and the chicks could be heard chattering away.

Also at the church were a team of 4 people from 'Wildwood Ecology' surveying bats and we had a friendly discussion about bats & swifts in general.

It was decided there was a fair chance that the bat survey meant that they were considering work on the church. Sending them a copy of the 2021 Report when it is available might be too late so The Friends of Kempley Church were contacted to be sure that they knew about the swifts. Rather surprisingly they knew nothing about them and work was about to start on part of the roof the following week! They gave us the contact details of the English Heritage person in charge and we sent them the details.

Luckily the part of the roof involved did not have any swift nests in it although the last active nest was only two feet away. Hopeful the chicks fledged before they started work.

We had an e-mail by return thanking us for the 'useful' information.

The White Lion Hotel, Wilton, Ross on Wye - 3 birds were seen using 3 locations all under the eaves on the east south east side of the hotel. A minimum of 12 birds were also seen flying over.

Aylton- 1 nest site was recorded by house owner and shown to a Swift group member.



St Mary's North elevation nest sites



St Mary's South elevation nest sites

Other reports –

Canon Frome - 3 nest sites were reported by one of the residents.

Newton St Margarets Church - supports swift nests, numbers unknown.

Putley - Two properties are known to support good numbers of swifts (and lesser horse shoe bats), and up to 30 swifts were recorded flying over the area, but nest surveys were not undertaken as permission would need to be sought from the owners due to visibility issues.

Woolhope - An owner reported at least 20 nest sites on their farmhouse.

Colwall Church - Swifts were reported going into the Church, numbers unknown.

White Horse Pub and the Old Brewery in Mitcheldean - swifts were seen using the buildings, numbers and exact locations unknown.

Good numbers of swifts have also been reported from Much Marcle (near the Church), Ross on Wye (near the Church), Weobley village, Newent centre, Kington and Llangrove. Lower than normal numbers were reported from Hereford in 2021.

St Michaels Church, Ledbury - 1 blue tit was seen entering one of the swift boxes, but no swifts. If the church is amenable, the lures will continue to be played during 2022 as it has been shown to take a number of years before swifts find new boxes even with lures playing.

The stability of the known nest sites and recommendations

Roofing works are being planned at a property in New Street Three of our group boxes have been installed on the West elevation to help mitigate any adverse effects this may have on existing nest sites.

The Barrett Browning Building is the subject of ongoing repairs as funds become available.

Contact has been made with the owners of these properties by the Swift Group and advice has been or will be given as to how to undertake work whilst still providing nest sites for swifts.

All the properties known to support swifts will be given a copy of the non-confidential report and advice offered to owners/occupiers. This includes the Ledbury Town Council, Herefordshire Council, Historic Buildings English Heritage, Herefordshire Diocese and each Church PCC.



LSG boxes installed in New Street

Records should be put on 'Bird Track' and 'Swift Mapper'.

A number of new homes are to be built on the outskirts of Ledbury. The Swift Group will approach the developers Bloor and Barretts to ask that the buildings to incorporate swift bricks/boxes. Barretts were approached previously but no progress was made unfortunately. Changes in planning regulations now state that developments should have a biodiversity net gain.

The Ledbury Naturalists Field Club will continue to raise funds/sponsors to provide nest boxes for properties in the Ledbury area.

Sites recommended for survey in 2022

Re-survey all known sites to confirm swift presence and no changes have been made to the buildings.

Hereford - Some members of the Swift Group live in or near Hereford and would like to try to start a group to survey the City. LSG could pass on our experiences and help get their project started

Bosbury Church (all elevations), Colwall Church, Much Marcle.

Future surveys could also include Newent, Ross, Weobley and Kington.



A swift parent bringing a food ball back to the nest