

Ledbury Swift Group

2023 Report



Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Swift Project Full Report 2023 - CONFIDENTIAL.

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.

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 2023 Survey

Young swifts ‘Screaming’ by a nest hole at Kempley

The first birds to arrive back in Ledbury were on 3rd May (2 birds flying over The Homend) and on 5th May (8 birds over Bridge St.)

The last sightings in Ledbury were on 9th Aug. (2 birds over town centre), 13th Aug. (1 bird – ditto) and finally, 3 birds over Homend Crescent on 21st. Aug.

Surveying began on 30th May when a small group of members visited the EBB building and St. Kath's Almshouses; continuing with weekly surveys through to 31st July, followed by an end of season Review Meeting on 7th Aug. to discuss field results and to plan for 2024.

Unfortunately, our attempt to set up a similar swift surveying group in the city of Hereford last year, has not, for a number of understandable reasons, been able to function this year - but we live in hope.

This year we extended our surveying to Ross-on-Wye, Dymock and Donnington: details following.

Surveying again followed the pattern of identifying buildings where swifts were seen flying low, screaming and entering/leaving nests.

Again, the six nest boxes installed in the tower of St. Michael's Church had swift calls played as lures, within the tower, in an effort to attract birds to occupy our boxes. Sadly, again, with no success. However, one new 'natural' nest was observed in the west wall of the tower. The beginnings of something greater we hope!

Details of Ledbury Nesting Sites

Barrett-Browning building – now the Poetry House: not surveyed systematically this year but casual surveying indicated fewer nesting sites than previously. Therefore, we will survey fully in 2024. We have made contact with the Ledbury Poetry people, who are the new occupants, and have been assured that no new external maintenance work will be carried out in the near future and that they are keen to co-operate with us.

St. Katharine's Almshouses – again, not surveyed, so ditto above.

Master's House – a report by a member on 12th June that a bird had been seen flaring and entering at the apex of the west-facing gable of the courtyard was confirmed on 26th: see the included annotated photo. This is excellent news as it is the first evidence of occupation and that there is much potential for swift nesting in/on this key historic public building in the town.

Burgage Hall – Again, as in 2021 and 2022, just the one nest occupied behind the fascia board at the north east corner of the roof.

St. Michael's Church – two birds seen entering at the apex of the top arch in the west-facing elevation of the tower. This is the first evidence of swift nesting/breeding in the tower since our surveying began in 2018. As with the Master's House, there should be high potential for swift colony growth in this location.

Newbury Park – A lady reports only one nest this year under the rear eaves of her neighbour's house. In 2022 there were five! However, nests were newly identified this year at both the north west corner eaves of the front elevation of the same house and at the apex of the gable end of a second house. Plus, a possible nesting location to the rear of a third

Further, the resident of a fourth house, an adjacent property to the above group, is keen to co-operate with us, has installed one of our boxes and would like more for 2024.

Thus, in Newbury Park, we may well have a new area of swift breeding success.

The Homend – Once again, the hospitable and co-operative owners of one house enabled a successful season of surveying: thirteen nests were identified under the west-facing eaves of this and an adjacent property! As such, these two houses represent the most important private property location for swifts in Ledbury.

– see the heart-warming annotated photo.

Sadly, the cooperative owners are hoping to sell, but they will encourage any purchaser to respect their avian summer residents and to co-operate with us.

Rear of Butler and Sweatman – only one nest confirmed this year, ie behind the gutter above the side passage. There were two in 2022.

Another site in the Homend – new nesting activity confirmed on the front, between the rear tall chimney stack and the roof. The nest to the rear was not surveyed.

A house, New St. – Unfortunately, the scaffolding along the south elevation was not removed until 4th June. However, the owner confirmed that the completed roofing work had respected the high swift nesting importance and that, in April, he had found evidence of twelve nests from previous years. Our current year's surveying located only six nests on the property, including the first occupation of the most northerly of our three boxes installed on the west-facing elevation. See the annotated photo.

Queensway – One house had one nest above the downpipe, a second had one nest at the right hand end of the soffit board, a third had a nest at the apex of the gable end and one behind the soffit at the corner of the building, a fourth had one nest above the door and a fifth one above the window. This tally of six nests equals that for 2022.

Flaring activity was also noted along the front elevation of a site in Margaret Rd.

Furlong Court and Bramley Crescent, Deer Park - seven confirmed nests on seven properties, plus two possible nests. See the annotated plan for detail.

A house in the Southend – the owner reported swift activity on the 5th July and on the 7th we confirmed that two new nests had been created under the west-facing eaves. See the annotated photo.

These are the first swift nests to be seen along the whole length of the Southend for approx. ten years and as such represent an important potential nucleus for the repopulation of the neighbourhood – very good news. Perhaps an effort to encourage local residents to purchase and install more of our boxes is called for?

Woodleigh Rd. – another very welcome report: our first evidence of nesting. One or two nests identified at the bottom right corner of the gable end behind the gutter of one of the houses.

Details of Nesting Sites Outside Ledbury

Ross-on-Wye – A new location for our project. The town centre was surveyed on the evenings of 19th June and 17th July.

Hotel Royal Car Park - the eaves above their Buckingham Suite. A total of forty four bird movements recorded from 9.18-10.00pm on 19th June, centred on seven nest sites. See the annotated photo:-

one box noted on the SE-facing wall of the hotel overlooking the car park– not occupied. See the photo.

A house in Cantilupe Rd. – opp. Masons Yard

A second house in Cantilupe Rd. – the Old Chapel Children's centre

A house in Henry St.

Birds seen entering and leaving each of these properties, indicating a minimum of three nests.

Elsewhere in the town centre there was little evidence of swift activity.

Dymock – surveyed on the evening of 7th July. No evidence of swifts!

Donnington Church – ditto Dymock! but two Schwegler boxes noted on south wall and north east corner wall.

Summary

Therefore, our 2023 survey resulted in the identification of 56 nests in 28 properties: 46 of these were in 23 Ledbury properties.

9 of these Ledbury nests were newly identified this year.

Note that two of our key 'hot-spot' Ledbury buildings (ie the EBB building and St. Katharine's Almshouses) were not surveyed in 2023. Therefore their approx. 17 nests are not included in the above figures.

Members of the Swift Group

Numbers of members taking part this year have increased to fifteen – including five members joining us for the first time. Thanks to all for your efforts!

From 'Swifts and Us' by Sarah Gibson, 2021

For five years I have immersed myself in the swifts' world. The more I watch and learn about their behaviour, the more intense is my wonder and excitement at their lives. Their unique ability to live almost entirely in the air, to find sustenance, rest and even nesting materials on the wing, to fly across the world navigating their way around storms and depressions, never alighting on tree, cliff or ground, then back to the very hole in the very building that their sharp-clawed feet shuffled around the previous year – these are mind-blowing skills.

I think of gatherings of young adult birds spiralling into the sky as the sun sets, drifting with the wind, half asleep, half alert; of the breeders, out of their nests at sunrise, snapping up flies and spiders for their young, foraging and feeding for the next sixteen hours; and of the nestlings, eager for food. I think of how their body temperature will drop and their metabolism slow down if the weather is cold, to save energy and survive; how their feathers grow in the darkness of their holes, the gradual transformation from tiny, naked hatchling into sleek aerial acrobat in around six weeks, ready to fly to Africa the moment they leave the nest hole.

The brevity of their summer stays enhances their hold on our hearts. The season is short; their bold, wild chases over the roofs and high-pitched screams a fleeting experience: they are a metaphor for life itself.

We need to act now to ensure these birds will scythe across our skies forever; to keep them in our streets, to keep them in abundance and **common**. All of us can do something within the compass of our lives to help tilt the balance back in their favour.

If the will to do it is there, it can be done.

Grounded Swifts

Young swifts are a little different from other species of passerines in that they can take a variable time to fledge. It can take 5-8 weeks from hatching before they take to the wing for the first time. The flying insect food they rely on is very dependant on prevailing weather conditions. During periods of bad weather the parents may be away from the nest for several days at a time trying to find enough food and swift chicks are adapted to this by going into a semi-torpid state to conserve energy, but this will slow their development hence the variable time to fledging.

It is quite amazing that they can leave the nest and immediately be able to fly so well, but in reality this is not always perfect and fledglings do crash land on the ground. Their very long wings make it difficult to take off and they may need help. If they are well up to size and look otherwise uninjured all that may be necessary is to hold them up high (Do not throw them up in the air as if often quoted!) and they may be able to take off. If a young swift cannot take off from a height it may well have fallen from the nest before it is mature enough and will need specialist fostering.

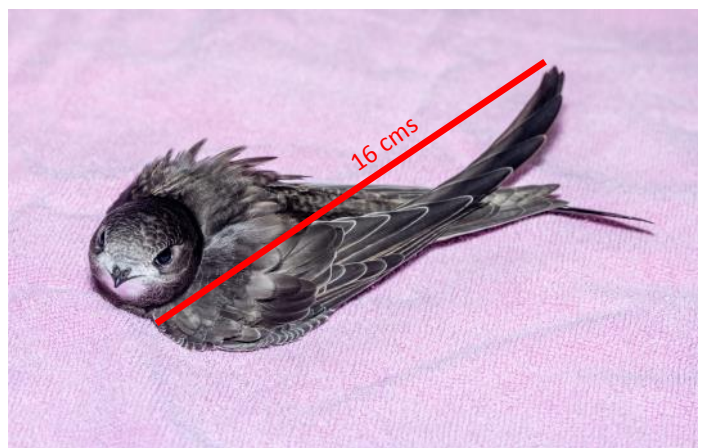
Juvenile swifts are much blacker than adults and have a larger white throat patch and some white feathers on the forehead which contrast markedly with the dark feathers. Their fresh plumage has pale 'scaling' to varying degrees, produced by pale fringes to the feathers of the body and wings.

Adults found on the ground are usually sick or injured and are likely to need medical care. Action for Swifts have a good website for further advice and a list of carers.

<http://actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk/p/if-you-find-grounded-swift.html>

The RSPCA or your local Veterinary Surgery may also be able to recommend local carers.

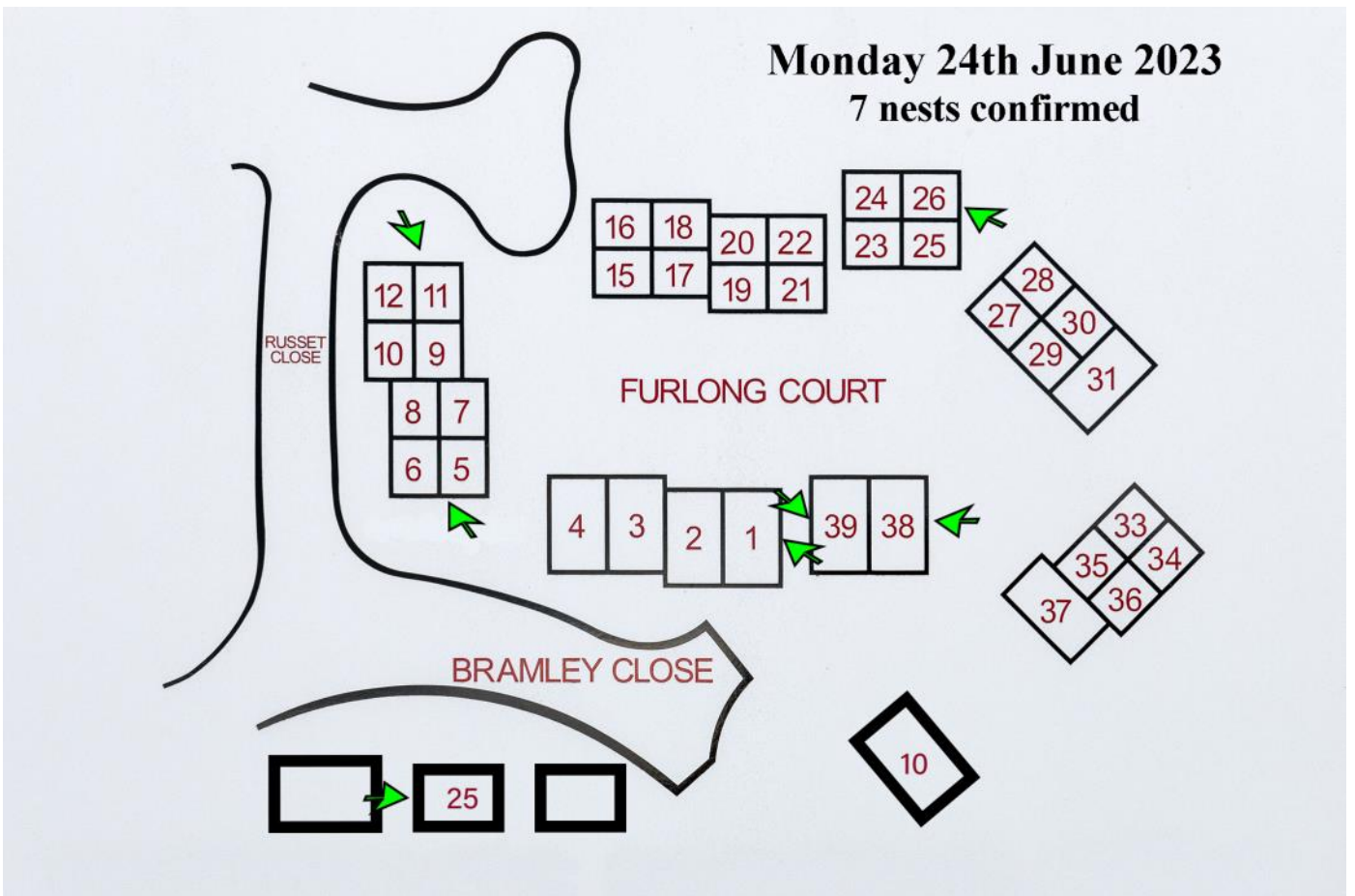
- 1. Put your Swift in a quiet, warm, safe, calm & clean environment - a ventilated shoe box is ideal and put it somewhere away from any disturbance.**
- 2. Take a photo and if you can, weigh the bird too - you can assess its age using the photos below**
- 3. Give it water by running a wetted cotton bud around the edge of the beak avoiding the nostrils**
- 4. Measure the Swift's wing length (see photo below). It can only fly if its wings are each at least 16cm long**
- 5. Don't try and care for the Swift yourself. It is difficult, time-consuming & the success rate is low.**
- 6. Contact a Carer from the Action from Swifts list; give them information about your Swift; and get the Swift to them ASAP.**



Juvenile Swifts are black & white rather than dark brown & white and the feathers have a very marked white border giving a scalloped effect. They also have a large white throat patch. Wing length needs to be a minimum 16cms before they can fly successfully.



Nest sites confirmed this year at a house in New Street



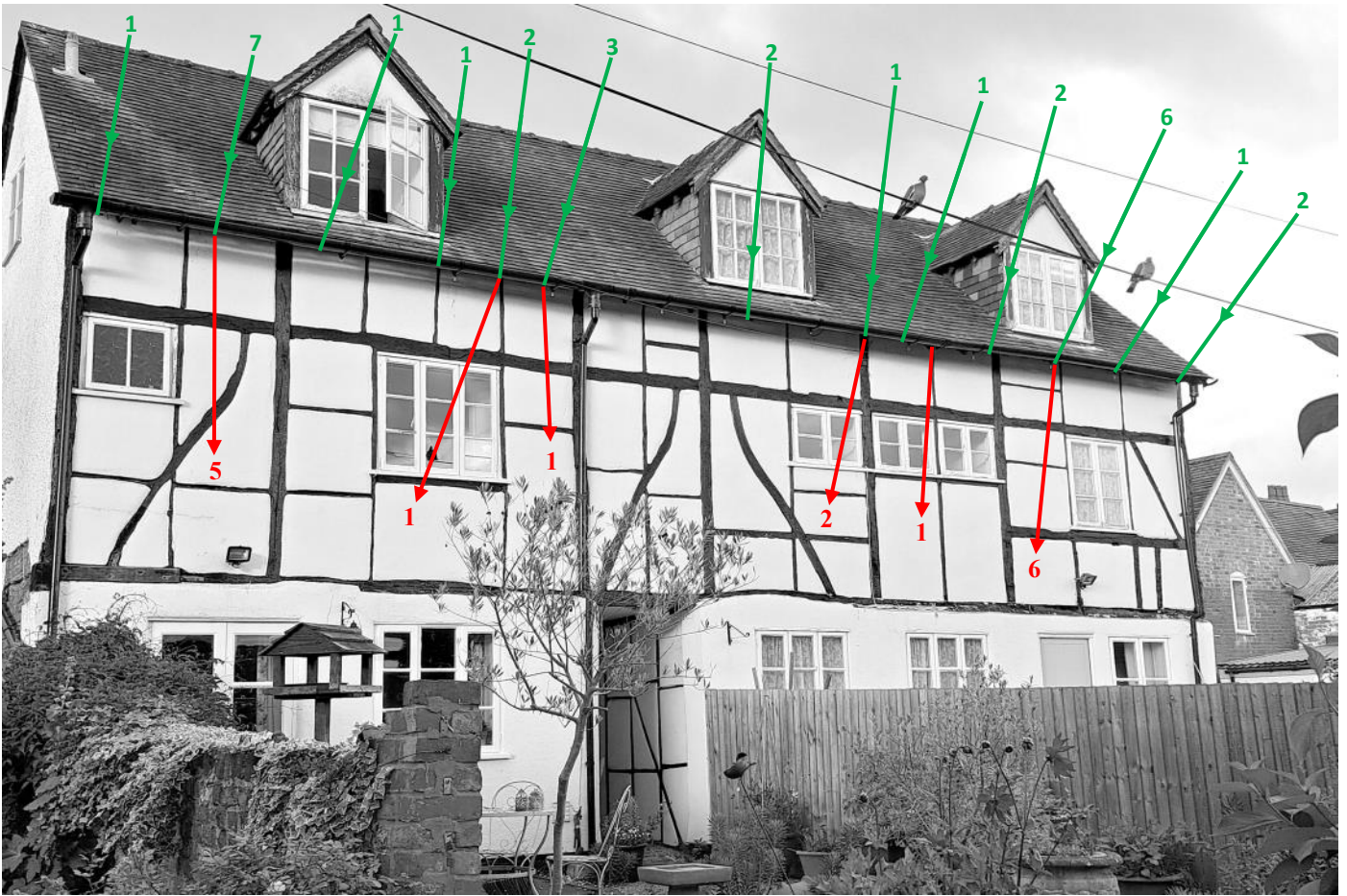
The Deer Park colony continues to do well and nests were confirmed as above. This could be an underestimate as it would take a large number of people to observe all the potential sites at the same time.



After playing swift calls in the church tower for 4 years a swift finally nested on the west face, not in one of our boxes but in a crack close by. Note the blue tit which did use one of the boxes in 2019!



A house in The Southend. 7th July 2023



The combined in's and out's at two houses in The Homend for the 5th June and the 11th July 2023.



Our visit to Ross-on Wye on the 19th June 2023 revealed a thriving colony in the courtyard of the Royal Hotel. This is the east wing and there were a number of nests on the north and west sides as well.

We received a report that swifts might be nesting in The Masters House Courtyard and this was confirmed on a visit on 26th June 2023.

Two birds were also seen looking out out of the nest hole.



Nest Box Building Session at Trehumphrey Farm. Many thanks to John Churchill who used his joinery skills to cut up the plywood for us and to Richard Ball who hosted the event.

Nest Boxes in Ledbury 2023

Location	Year Installed	Type and Number of	Made or Purchased by Ledbury Nats	Occupancy	Comments
EBB Building - now the Poetry House owned by Ledbury Places	2018	Woodcrete x 6	Purchased	Box B on West elevation in 2021, 2022 and 2023?	3 on N. elevation 2 on W. elevation 1 on E. elevation
A House in The Southend	pre 2018	Wooden-Zeist type x 3	inst. by owner	None - 1 box has lost its front	2 on N. elevation 1 on W. elevation
A house in Church Lane	pre 2018	Wooden-Zeist type x 2	inst. by owner	None so far	1 on brick E. elev, 1 on N.ern
St. Michael's Church Tower	2019	Woodcrete x 6	purchased	None so far	2 on each of N. W. and E. walls behind louvres
A house in Bank Cres.	2019	Woodcrete x 2	inst. by owner	None so far - but sparrows	2 under eaves at SE corner 1 under S.- facing eaves
A house in S. Parade,	2019	Wooden-Zeist type x 3	made	None so far - but blue tits	Under eaves on N.- facing wall
Burgage Hall, Ledbury Places	2021	Wooden-Zeist type x 3	made	None so far	On N.-facing wall
A house in New St	2020	Wooden-Zeist type x 3	made	N.ern-most box occupied this year for first time	Under eaves on W. elevation
A house, Newbury Park	2023	Wooden-Zeist type x 1	made	Note erection date	Owner would like more boxes
Wellington Heath Church	2020	Wooden- zeist type x 3	made	None so far	On W. elevation under eaves