

Forfar Swift Conservation Project

Final Report

May 2022



Tayside Biodiversity Partnership



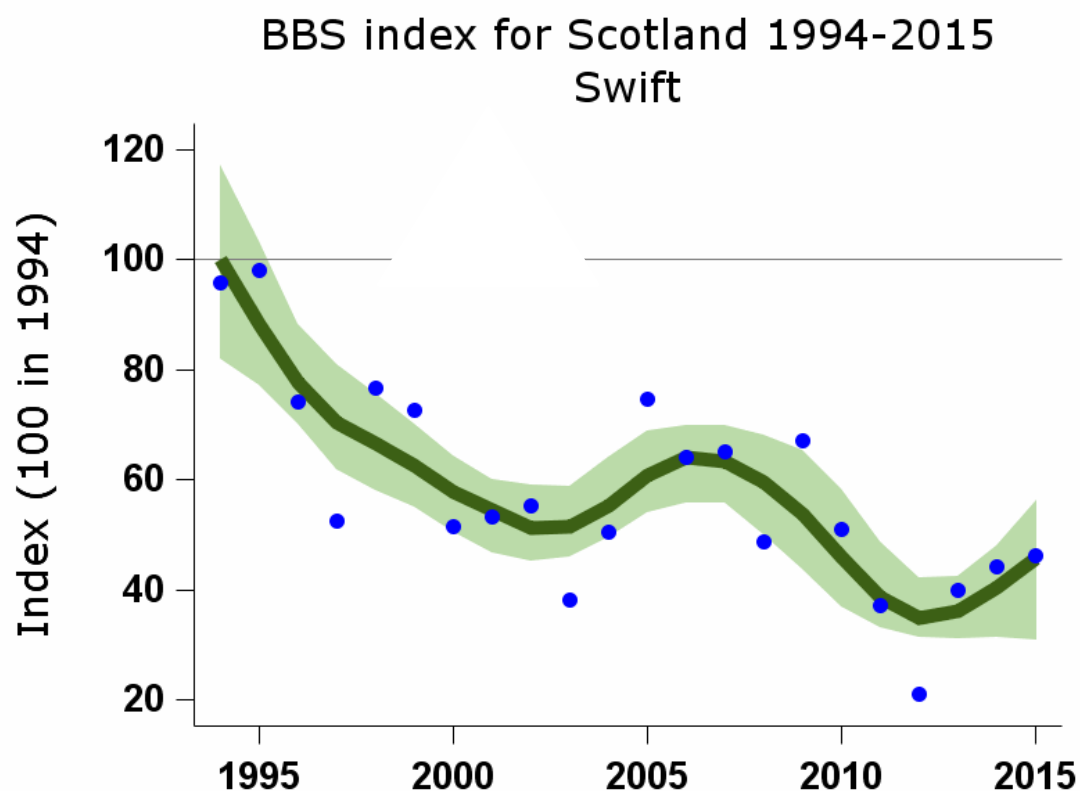
Angus Council
Comhairle Aonghais

Swifts in Scotland

The Common swift (*Apus apus*) is a summer visitor to Scotland, arriving in early May and leaving in early August for its wintering areas in southern and central Africa. They are superbly adapted aerial birds which live their entire life on the wing, landing only to breed. Originally using cliffs, crags and occasional trees for breeding, they have adapted well to using man-made buildings.

Surveys carried out by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) show that there has been a decline of over 60% in the population of swifts in Scotland between 1995 and 2013 (Breeding Bird Survey Report for 2014). In 2009 this led to swifts receiving an Amber listing, showing that they are now a UK Species of Conservation Concern. They are also included in the Scottish Government's Biodiversity List of Priority Species.

Figure 1 – Graph showing the Breeding Bird Survey index for the Swift in Scotland



A major contribution to the decline in population is the ever-increasing loss of nesting sites. Swifts are predominately associated with older buildings where they use the gaps under eaves, gaps in pointing and cracks in stonework to nest. As these buildings are renovated, these gaps and cracks are filled in, resulting in the loss of nest sites. As swifts return to the same site year after year, it is increasingly difficult for them to find a new nest site in which to breed. It is likely that one of the limiting factors in the size of swift populations is the availability of nest sites.

Photo 1 – Young swift in nest site, ready to fledge



Swifts will also nest in newer buildings where there are suitable gaps and spaces. However, modern building practices tend to exclude swifts from their traditional sites by using materials which seal all gaps and cover ventilation spaces. Wire mesh plates or grids are now used to cover ventilation gaps, and new building materials and techniques do not offer alternative possibilities.

Swifts are declining in number as we exclude them from renovated buildings. This project brought together the local community in proactively helping to safeguard the existing population of swifts in Forfar.

Swifts in Forfar

Tayside Swifts has been working in Forfar via Angus Alive Ranger Service for many years, with nest boxes on the new buildings at Orchardbank Industrial Estate having been erected a number of years ago. None of these boxes has been recorded as being used by swifts, but Starlings and House martins nest in them every year. House martins even nest within the Swift nest boxes which is unusual.

The Forfar Swift Conservation Project was kindly funded by the Angus Council Town Centre Fund and set up to raise awareness of local swifts with the local community. The project aims were as follows:

- Carry out guided walks to raise awareness of swifts and encourage swift recording;
- Map existing swift nest sites and screaming party locations using the Swiftmapper;
- Work with businesses and householders to find good locations for swift nestboxes and erect them;
- Disseminate information across Tayside, Scotland, the UK and to the international swift community.

Events:

The project was started in 2020, just before the first Covid lockdown, and was severely impacted by the pandemic.

The following events took place over the course of the project to raise awareness of the issues affecting Swifts, engage the community and recruit volunteer surveyors.

Table 1 – Events held as part of the project

Event	Purpose	No of people involved
Talk to Planners and Architects, Angus Council – Jan 20	Raise awareness of swifts & how Planner and Architects can help	15
Guided walk in Forfar – Aug 20	Survey training and recruit surveyors	6
Nest site surveys – July & Aug 20	Mapping nest sites & screaming parties	2
Swift nestboxes erected on properties & schools – April 22	Provide new nest sites for swifts	100

A number of press releases were featured in the Courier, posters were displayed in the library and at Murton Nature Reserve close by, and the project was publicised on the Tayside Swifts and The Real Forfar Facebook pages. Scottish Television (STV) got in touch to arrange filming prior to the erection of the boxes but ended up being too late to get involved. They have since said they would like to film a future project.

Photo 2 – Nestboxes going up on Letham primary school



Recording:

Volunteer recorders were encouraged to put their sightings onto the Swift Mapper, a recording system recently set up by the RSPB and local swift groups. This is an easy to use system and sightings can be added to the app when out surveying. The information is then available for everyone to use and download. Planners will hopefully use the data with their GIS maps to help create Swift Priority Zones to safeguard future populations of swifts. It can also be used to pinpoint good locations for swift nestboxes.

<https://www.swiftmapper.org.uk/>

The information will also be passed on to BTO and this report circulated within the Swift community in Scotland, the UK and further afield.

The location of nest sites and screaming parties were recorded, with three confirmed nest sites and the biggest screaming parties being made up of twenty birds (see tables 2 and 3).

Photo 3 – Forfar sightings on the Swift Mapper May 2022, showing known nest sites in yellow, nest boxes in green and screaming party locations in blue



Table 2 – Results of nest site survey

Reference	Address	Probable/ definite	No of nest sites
1	17 Green St	Probable	1
2	15 Green St	Probable	3
3	28 Green St	Probable	1
4	3A Green St	Probable	3
5	54 Queen St – The Town House	Confirmed – young swift looking out	1
6	192 East High St	Probable	1
7	Cable End House, Albion Pl	Probable	1
8	Doigs of Forfar, the Vennel – east side	Probable	5/6
9	Doigs of Forfar, the Vennel – west side	Probable	1
10	14 Montrose Rd	Possible	1
11	1 Gordon St	Possible	3/4
12	Morley Place, 14 Jamieson St	Confirmed - (2 flew in)	2
13	19 Glamis Rd	Probable, 1 definite	2/3
14	9 Glamis Rd	Probable	1
15	6 Nevay House, Manor St	Possible	1
16	31 Manor St	Possible	1
17	51 Glenclova Terrace	Confirmed (by resident)	1

Table 3 – Locations of Swift screaming parties, indicating areas where birds are likely to be nesting

Screaming party locations	
Address	Number of swifts
High Street	10
Green St	4
The Vennel	5
Castle St	20
Arbroath Rd	20

Nestboxes:

Nestboxes were erected across the Forfar area to ensure there will be more places for swifts to nest on their return in 2022. The completion date for the project was later than originally planned because of Covid, with the boxes being erected in April 2022 to be available for birds returning in May. All recipients of nestboxes were encouraged to play a swift call system to attract young birds looking for a nest site, and asked to monitor the box and inform Tayside Swifts of uptake.

A new design of nest box was used which are made of wood fibre and concrete and are consequently very long lasting and need no maintenance.

Photo 3 – A Swift nestbox being erected on a home in Forfar



Twenty eight nestboxes were ordered and placed in the following streets and buildings:

Table 4 – Nestboxes on Forfar properties

Address
Turfbeg Avenue
Don Street
Robertson Terrace
Forfar Loch Ranger base
Lour road
Montrose Road
Westfield Drive
Chapel Street
Hillside Road

Gowanbank
South Mains Farm
Glenclova Terrace
Glenmoy Terrace
Letham primary school
Inverarity primary school

A Nestbox Reporting Portal named Home Swift Home has been set up on the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership's website for people to record when birds take up residence and a volunteer will also be monitoring them over the summer. This can be seen at:

<https://www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk/tayside-biodiversity-surveys/tayside-biodiversity-survey-swifts/>

Conclusion and Legacy:

The project raised awareness of what has happened to swift numbers, recruited volunteer recorders to continue the swift survey beyond the lifetime of the project, found the location of a number of nest sites and erected a number of nestboxes.

Covid did have a big impact on the project but, with many new boxes in place, lots of new homes are now available for swifts to nest in when they return from migration in May 2022. With more nest sites available, the swift population in Forfar will hopefully start to recover in years to come.

Tayside Swifts would like to continue to work with the community in the area, especially the schools that have been involved; however this all depends on funding. National events such as World Swift Day and UK Swift Awareness Week are especially important in raising awareness of the swifts' plight and how we can help these wonderful birds.



All photos © Danièle Muir

For more details on swift action in Tayside and guidance for Planners, Architects, Builders & Community groups see: <http://www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk/get-involved/projects/projects-swifts/> and <http://www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017-SNH-Swift-Best-Practice-Advice-Note.pdf>

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