



# SWIFTS IN TAYSIDE

Newsletter Issue 01

**W**ith alarming news that the swift population in Scotland has declined by some 62% in the past few years, there is new urgency in finding out where our swifts return to each year, and a realisation that swift nest conservation is a priority. Swifts (*Apus apus*) do not build mud nests as swallows and house martins do – they use small crevices under eaves and roof tiles. The nest is minimal: small air-borne particles glued together with saliva to form a small saucer.

The birds are at direct risk from refurbishment or demolition of old buildings. The re-use of warehouses and industrial buildings as residences invariably leads to sealed roofs and walls – and another swift nest site lost. However, some architects are taking action to protect this acrobatic species, and many roofing contractors and builders are keen to implement simple actions to safeguard the birds. Some years ago Historic Scotland innovatively restored Stanley Mills, Perthshire. Nest spaces were retained under the eaves of the roof for the building's existing colony of swifts.

The liaison between Historic Scotland, its project architect and Concern for Swifts Scotland (CfSS) led to a "Swifts in Historic Buildings" Advice Note being written. This can be downloaded from [www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk](http://www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk) or [www.concernforswifts.com](http://www.concernforswifts.com).

This year sees the publication of the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership's Swift Action Plan with safeguarding swifts its prime objective throughout Tayside. There will also be a Good Practice Advice Note giving guidance on how best to safeguard or create nest sites in buildings. In the meantime the Tayside Town Swift Survey will continue to collect details on where these special summer visitors are found; further details about the survey are given elsewhere in the Newsletter.



Swift in flight © Marc Guyt / www.agami.nl

## DUNDEE'S SWIFTS

The Dundee Swift Project started in 2001 as part of the Naturebase Project run by the McManus Galleries. It was then taken over by the Ranger Service and in the first few years focused on the Dundee Swift Survey. Fifty wooden nestboxes were made at public events, but unfortunately the untreated wood has not lasted very well - swifts can take several years to discover boxes.

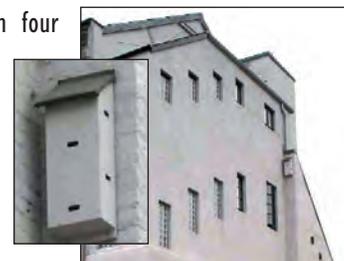
### DUNDEE SURVEY

The survey continues and last year a team of ten surveyors brought the total number of known nests up to thirty and the number of colonies to forty. Lots of new swift activity was discovered in the west part of Dundee and in the east, in Broughty Ferry. There are still large gaps where we have no records, including the whole of north-east Dundee. There was a bonus when Simon Morgan, an Open University student, carried out a study on swifts in Invergowrie. Although a stand-alone initiative, the Dundee Swift Project is part of the Tayside Town Swift Survey and shares its findings with the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership. The Dundee Ranger Service promotes swifts at public events and has produced a colourful leaflet about Swifts in Dundee which has a tear-off section to report swifts.

### LOCAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION LINKS

Involvement with the Hillcrest Housing Association came about through encouragement from Clare Darlston of Concern for Swifts Scotland. As part of their

training, Hillcrest apprentices constructed two multi-storey swift boxes, each with four apartments. These have been put up on Burnside Mill, a renovation project which was Hillcrest's 5,000th property. The company produced a brochure for the occasion in which swifts had a double page spread and the birds were also mentioned in Hillcrest's



Newsletter and in the opening ceremony speech by the Chief Executive of Communities Scotland.

The Ranger Service provided children's activities at the Hillcrest Tenants' Day and, of course, took the opportunity to promote swifts! As the Association was concerned about the perception of bird flu a risk assessment was provided to prove that the risk is exceptionally low. This should enable them to carry on their excellent work.

In 2007 it is hoped many more local people will take part in the survey. Liaison will continue with Hillcrest and as many other property owners as possible. Dave Shepherd would be pleased to hear from anyone wanting more information on swifts in Dundee. His telephone number is 01382 431848; e-mail [countryside.rangers@dundecity.gov.uk](mailto:countryside.rangers@dundecity.gov.uk).

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Swifts live entirely on the wing - feeding, mating and sleeping.
- They only land to breed.
- They arrive in Scotland from Africa at the beginning of May and leave again in early August.
- The birds are boomerang-shaped and look all black against the sky (their white throat patch is not often visible).
- They feed on large quantities of insects.
- They only feed on the wing, so are very dependant on weather conditions.
- The adults will fly hundreds of miles, if necessary, to find food.
- On fine summer evenings swifts gather in "screaming colonies", chasing at high speed around the buildings where they nest.

## WHERE DO SWIFTS LIVE?

- Almost exclusively in buildings - under roof tiles, on the wall head of buildings (gaining access via gaps and cracks in the wall or soffit), or in holes in the walls of buildings.
- Usually in older buildings, including church towers, but they will use new buildings if there are suitable gaps and spaces.
- They need a clear flight path to and from the nest, usually over 4m above ground.
- They can use holes too small for starlings or pigeons.
- They are loyal to their nest sites. If disturbed or excluded, they rarely relocate to a new nest site for that season.

## SWIFT RESPONSE FROM RANGERS

Perth & Kinross Council Ranger Service first became involved in the Tayside Town Swift Survey two years ago, having learnt that swift numbers in Scotland had fallen by a dramatic 62% in recent years. Although the Ranger Service was a relatively small team with only three Rangers at the time, strong efforts were made to raise the profile of swift numbers and encourage involvement of the public in the survey.

A press release featured in both the Courier and the Perthshire Advertiser, and the survey given prominence on Radio Tay. The response was phenomenal - the 'phone rang non-stop on the day the articles appeared. Reportings from members of the public continued to flood in over the next few weeks, resulting in a large number of sightings. These came from as far afield as Blackford in west Perthshire, Kenmore in the north, Blairgowrie in the east and Crook of Devon, in Kinross-shire, in the south.

The results were shared with the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership's Swift Interest Group and Angus Council offered staff time to input the data from all over Tayside on to their Geographic Information System (GIS). The information was then passed on to the three local planning departments in Angus, Dundee and Perth & Kinross.

The survey was run again in 2006 with new sightings and nest sites recorded. New locations included Kinross, Madderty and Pitlochry. The Ranger Service held a guided walk in Comrie towards the end of July, a swift 'hot-spot', where attendees were treated to excellent sightings of screeching swifts and were shown examples of nest

sites. Swallows and House martins were also seen which was very useful for comparison as the three species are frequently confused. As an added bonus, many Pipistrelle bats were spotted too.

The Ranger Service will be involved surveying these fantastic birds again during 2007 and would be pleased to receive further sightings and locations of nest sites/ colonies. The more information we can amass, the more we can add to the Tayside Swift Map. As before, the information will be made available to the three planning departments in the local authorities. This will help safeguard existing nest sites, or highlight potential artificial nesting sites to consider if development work or property renovation is to take place within a "hot spot" area.

If anyone in Perth or Kinross is willing to help in the survey, or has any general queries about this enigmatic species, please contact Daniele Muir on [dmuir@pkc.gov.uk](mailto:dmuir@pkc.gov.uk) or 'phone for a chat on 01764 657572.

### The information needed is:

- How many birds can you see in the "screaming colonies" — and where are they?
- Do you know of a specific nest site — and if so, where?

If anyone in Tayside can spare an evening in July to check their local area for swifts, please contact Catherine Lloyd, the Tayside Biodiversity Co-ordinator (contact details on the back page).

## SUCCESS AND DISAPPOINTMENT: A HOUSEHOLDER'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Swifts have nested in my neighbour's house in Scone, Perthshire, from at least 1965, and probably long before that. Screaming parties of these wonderful summer-time visitors were a regular occurrence all round the neighbourhood. So — when in the spring of 2002 an extension to my property provided an ideal situation for swift nest sites, I cut a hole in a suitable part of the roof. It then had to be blocked up until the swifts arrived, as starlings somehow managed to fly in and start nest building — and this after they had been provided with excellent nesting facilities in other parts of the property!

To my great surprise and satisfaction, a pair of swifts nested successfully that first summer. The following year June and July was cool and wet, but a pair again nested successfully. The young, however, did not leave until 3rd September - which I thought may have been a record 'late leave' for the species in this area.

In the third year, 2004, nesting again took place. However, I found an egg underneath the nest and an autumn inspection confirmed the year had not been a good one for

breeding success. Nesting again took place the following summer but one day, to my horror, I saw a Grey squirrel running around the walls near the nest entrance. Could the entry hole be too big and allow the squirrel access, and could this explain last year's failure? I felt sure the nest had been predated and as it was another unsuccessful year, I reduced the entrance size to that recommended by Concern for Swifts Scotland.

I also cut another hole close to the original and had high hopes for 2006. Unfortunately, although inspections by local swifts were regular, no birds used either sites. All is not lost though — last July swifts entered the new opening and I could hear their screaming calls inside. This, I believe, may be younger birds investigating possible nest sites for the following year. I await the summer of 2007 with optimism that *Apus apus* will again become neighbours and successfully nest and rear their young.



Young Swifts in their nest box  
© Erich Kaiser / Kronberg

## MODERN DEVELOPMENT IN PERTH HOPES TO HELPS SWIFTS

Following the requirement on the developer, Stuart Milne Homes, to produce a Site Biodiversity Action Plan, a number of House Martin and Swift nest boxes were included in the prestigious Monart development in the centre of Perth. The Swift nestboxes may not prove suitable, but the House Martin boxes appear to be fine and all eyes will be on both types of boxes to see if there are any takers for the eaves-level new homes.



## SWIFT GAINS IN NEW COUNCIL OFFICES

Last year Angus Council's Housing Department received a grant of £1,600 from the SITA Tayside Biodiversity Action Fund to erect a mixture of 36 swift and bat boxes on their new William Wallace House in Orchardbank Business Park, Forfar. An active Conservation Group of local authority staff will help enhance the office surroundings to provide food and shelter for birds and bats, as well as monitoring the use of the new boxes.

The project will contribute directly to the Tayside "Businesses with Land" Action Plan by raising awareness of the benefits of biodiversity to other businesses and organisations at Orchardbank, together with their staff and the public who visit the buildings. It will also demonstrate how best to protect existing wildlife areas associated with businesses and the opportunities to create new areas.

## THE GLENHEAD SWIFTS

Our first spring at Glenhead, Kinross-shire, in 1994, introduced us to seven or eight breeding pairs of swifts who occupied nests in the eaves on the south and east side of the house. To an extent we felt like interlopers, but made sure they remained undisturbed, even to the point of undertaking the lime washing in September and keeping the yew trees on their approach clipped to allow a direct flight path. However, the farm needed repair, including re-slatting sections of roof. We arranged for the scaffolding to be erected and the work carried out after the swifts had departed in August. We briefed the contractor on how to leave the nests undisturbed.

The following May the swifts returned, but I noticed they were just flying up to their nest sites and not going in; some were able to go part way in. Something was wrong and there was a real danger we would lose the colony. I had not been able to check the nest sites before the scaffolding had come down the previous winter and it seemed the contractor had not followed my instructions. I tried to rectify the situation off a ladder but too late to be of benefit that year; that summer was the first at Glenhead without swifts screaming around the farm and their absence was keenly felt.

The following spring I gave each nest site a major overhaul, unblocking the ones which had been filled in and using shims of steel or thin slate to support the under-slatting felt. That May I was to be seen walking around the buildings, watching the skies. When I had almost given up, a solitary swift appeared. It stayed and was seen using one of the east wall nest sites. Within a few days we noticed there were two swifts flying around. I wondered if they had been juvenile non-nesting birds at the time of the mass eviction. If they were, they might have remained aloft and perhaps failed to appreciate that the rest of the colony had moved on. Despite such speculation, at least two birds now consider Glenhead home.

Since then we have seen more swifts, but only one pair has nested. I still hope their progeny will eventually take up residence. If so then I will be ready for them as plans are in place for new nests to be provided.



Arrows indicate the locations of the previous swift colony nests. The one marked \* is the only active one this last year

### PRACTICAL MEASURES TO HELP SWIFTS

The options for making boxes designed into new buildings or applied to older buildings has, so far, been limited. Very often the nestboxes are applied to the buildings, rather than built in and usually they are placed on cool elevations as it is not easy to regulate the temperature in a box on the outside of a building. However, the Glenhead swifts only

nested along the wall head of the south and east elevations, probably because the west walls are more exposed to ferocious winds, even in the summer. I suspect the south walls are popular because of the open approach to them, but the temperature is also regulated by being under the eaves slate on the stone wall heads.

We have developed a solution to a problem which contributed to the swifts leaving Glenhead. Some holes had been blocked, but a significant problem was the newly introduced under-slatting felt which lay loose between the sarking and the rones, sagging into the nest void over the wall head. By sliding metal shims between the wall head and the coarse felt we made a newly raised and smooth access. As the metal may eventually corrode, we tried thin slate in some places instead - but thin slate may crack and heavier slate may make the eaves slate buck too much.

Some wall heads have sarking going to the edge of the wall on fillets and this presents a different set of problems. If the wall plate is too near the outside edge there may not be enough space for a nest zone without some deterioration in the bottom edge of the sarking or wall plate, so a different measure is required again.

However, as some of the nest sites may only be viable for a few years, we have a contingency plan. We will install two or three prototype boxes to the south-facing brick gable on the nearby byre. I am working on a new design with the Perthshire-based Errol Brick Company. Terracotta is a good material for building in to brick or stone walls and it will be better at regulating the temperature and humidity for the occupying birds. We are making them with removable front plates so that if they fail to attract swifts, they can be quickly adapted to other birds. I will be using a 'bird call CD' in May to encourage interest as this technique seems to have worked at another project site.

In the meantime, other prototype nests for wall heads in existing steading repairs are in the pipeline. Slating or tiling tends to give adequate weathering for the stone wall heads so there should be no element of compromise to good building practice if the nest tiles are inserted in the remade wall head construction. As it is not always practical to build the nests into gables or eaves we are also going to adapt pressed zinc roof cowl for some steeply pitched roof nests.

From our initial experience to the designing of different prototypes, we hope common errors made many years ago can be learned from to safeguard a variety of existing swift nest sites into the future. This does not overcome the significant problem of programming works outside the breeding period. However it may offer some alternatives for helping to maintain existing sites as well as developing the expansion or relocating of nesting sites on a durable basis.

## SWIFT GET-TOGETHER

In November 2006 a meeting was hosted by Stirling Council. Chaired by Clare Darlston of Concern for Swifts Scotland (CfSS), six Biodiversity Partnerships were represented, namely Tayside, Stirling, Edinburgh, Highland and North Lanarkshire (plus a report from the Cairngorms), together with support from the Planning Department and Ranger Service of Perth & Kinross Council and the Dundee Ranger Service. Charlie Macpherson, a stalwart volunteer surveyor from Perthshire, also attended.

With such a good representation from so many sectors, much information was shared about the different surveys already underway and the best way to record the information being amassed. Catherine Lloyd described the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership's "Dots on Maps" method where paper maps are becoming a useful tool to take round local shows and festivals so that the public can help fill in the gaps. The information is also being put on GIS and shared by the planners in the three Tayside local authorities to assist them in planning applications.

Discussions were held on how to involve the local community (by volunteer survey, guided walks, press publicity, etc.) and Keith Morton from the RSPB's Species Policy Unit spoke about the importance to all public bodies of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.

Clare Darlston reported on how she uses data to identify Swift Priority Areas, especially in Glasgow. The Glasgow Housing Association now send their demolition programme to Clare to check against these Priority Areas; it is hoped Glasgow planners will issue an Advice Note to developers applying for planning permission to build or renovate within such an Area. This is beginning to happen in Edinburgh; it is fairly commonplace in England and Wales.

## THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND PLANS AHEAD FOR SWIFTS

Although there appears to be no swift nests in Dunkeld's Cathedral Street, there are plenty of colonies in the area, possibly coming from nearby Birnam. The National Trust for Scotland's Clerk of Works delayed roof work on the properties until last autumn in case there were any nesting swifts. The local NTS Ranger meets the Clerk of Works twice a year to undertake building surveys for bats and swifts.

## NEWS FROM ELSEWHERE IN SCOTLAND



Surveys are showing that swifts have colonised housing stock built between the 1920s and 1950s in many places - including Dundee, Glasgow, North and South Lanarkshire, and Edinburgh. These buildings are now being extensively re-roofed and renovated and there is consequently a loss of swift nest sites. This may well have serious consequences for our swift populations in the next few years.

Swifts do not nest in any one place on these houses - we have noted them under tiles as well as at eaves level. As swifts do not like re-locating it is important to replace nest sites wherever possible in the exact location of the older ones. The photograph shows a successful project in North Lanarkshire. Swifts were nesting under the ridge tile and had been for the past forty years according to the residents of the house. A re-roofing contract was delayed during the summer of 2005 to allow the young to fledge. Then an entrance 25mm high x 60mm wide was cut into the plastic of the new end capping tile. Last summer the swifts were back in the space below the ridge tile, the residents were happy and maybe the swifts did not notice the difference!

North Lanarkshire has lead the way on this type of project, but there is huge potential for housing associations, local authorities, and indeed any private householder to do the same. In most instances there is little need to erect a specific swift nest box. Most sustainable designs which fit the building style can be very cheap and, importantly, integral to the fabric of the building.

In fact, Andrew Rodger, a member of the Tayside Swift Interest Group, is a Glendevon-based architect currently working on box designs which will be attractive or at least an acceptable feature in modern and traditional house designs. He is searching for a Scottish clay pipe maker to make up the prototypes - and possibly take on commercial production.

Andrew is also working on a new style of vent to be used in the creation of nest spaces in the apex of dual pitched roofs. Unlikely to work in anything lower than a 45% slope, they will be ideal for use in much steeper roof pitches and mansards. Again a local fabricator will be sought to make them and although the prototypes are likely to be expensive, volume of production will bring the cost down in the future. If anyone would like further information about Andrew's plans, please contact him on Tel. 01259 781622, or via [ara@glenhead.net](mailto:ara@glenhead.net).

### GLASGOW HOUSING ASSOCIATION

The Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) has recently approved its Sustainability Strategy in which there is a commitment to protect biodiversity and natural resources. In particular it promises "our environmental work will aim to provide opportunities for enhancing biodiversity by preserving natural habitats and wildlife..... This will include protection of nest sites and provision of bird boxes. The GHA is working with Concern for Swifts Scotland (CfSS) to ensure swift nesting sites are preserved following GHA roofing programmes."

### FURTHER INFORMATION

Tayside Biodiversity Partnership - [www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk](http://www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk)  
Concern for Swifts Scotland (CfSS) - [www.concernforswifts.com](http://www.concernforswifts.com) email: [swiftscot@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:swiftscot@yahoo.co.uk)  
London Swifts - [www.london-swifts.org.uk](http://www.london-swifts.org.uk)

There are numerous traders offering a variety of nestboxes. One of the most comprehensive selections of integral brick boxes for both swifts and bats, as well as a variety of ordinary nestboxes, is provided by Jacobi Jayne contact [www.jacobijayne.co.uk](http://www.jacobijayne.co.uk) or tel. 0800 072 0130.

If the words "renovation and repair programmes" were substituted for "roofing programmes" this would be a perfect model for other Housing Associations to adopt. Importantly the policy document commits the GHA to 'ensuring adequate resources are available to implement the strategy.' It also states that 'Managers are responsible for ensuring that the strategy is implemented and maintained in their own service areas and for ensuring that monitoring arrangements are in place'.

CfSS has worked with GHA since it took over Glasgow City Council's Housing stock. GHA submits its demolition programme to CfSS at the beginning of the year to check that buildings to be demolished during the summer are not - as far as we know - in areas where swifts breed. This does not, of course, exonerate GHA from its obligations under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, but the checks were begun before the Act became law when it was only an offence to destroy a nest site "intentionally".

There have also been one or two schemes where nestbox provision has compensated for lost holes in the concrete soffits of inter-war housing. However, this has until now been dependant on good will, so that whereas in Dennistoun the boxes featured in the BTO magazine were put up, two other significant soffit-based nest sites were lost.

In itself, a Policy is not sufficient to ensure the conservation of swift nest sites, but it is an extremely useful tool. Unsuitable provision should be avoided by tying into a partnership with CfSS. There will also be an opportunity to work with GHA staff on the production of a Biodiversity Policy.

### WHAT CAN I DO?

Whether an architect, builder or householder, there are plenty of opportunities to save existing nest sites and create new ones. There are potential swift nest sites on nearly every building, so it is a case of 'getting your eye in'. The aim of swift solutions must be to be: simple, as nearly cost-free as possible, repeatable, sustainable, appropriate, and unobtrusive.



If the easy options which exist were to be properly exploited we could be confident that there would be a net gain in swift nest sites. As has been demonstrated in the Newsletter, there are countless architects, contractors and builders who go out of their way to assist and invent; it is very rewarding to discover how many swift enthusiasts there are throughout Scotland.

Nothing happens without people doing something. Thinking about it or writing it down might be a first step, but "act from thought should swiftly follow, or what is thinking for" wrote W.H. Auden, aptly. So if you have access to the internet check [www.concernforswifts.com](http://www.concernforswifts.com) and [www.london-swifts.org.uk](http://www.london-swifts.org.uk) as there is much information to glean about creating new nest sites. Externally - fitted nestboxes should be the last option, but both websites have plenty of advice about how to make such a box too. If you cannot access the internet contact Concern for Swifts Scotland direct: Tel. 01431 554 8262.

With a 62% decline in the swift population in just the last decade, there is a serious amount of work to do to turn this situation around. Whether you can volunteer just one summer evening to walk around your neighbourhood counting swift colonies for the Town Swift Survey, or if you can recommend a school or church as being a suitable nest site - or if you can incorporate new nest sites into a new-build or property renovation, 'every action counts'!

Newsletter compiled and edited by Catherine Lloyd, Tayside Biodiversity Co-ordinator, with contributions by Charlie Macperson; Andrew Rodger; Daniele Muir, Perth & Kinross Ranger Service; David Shepherd, Dundee Ranger Service; Clare Darlaston, Concern for Swifts Scotland.

**Photograph credits:** Marc Guyt, David Shepherd, Erich Kaiser, Andrew Rodger, Catherine Lloyd and Clare Darlaston

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