

Speedy action to bring back swifts

By Denis Brown

A GREEN team has hatched a plan to boost dwindling numbers of swifts nesting at Perth grounds.

Gardeners Tommy Dick, Susie Eisner and Stuart Alston, are using a SITA Tayside Biodiversity Action Fund grant to combat the plummeting Scottish bird population in the gardens of Kincarrathie House Residential Home.

According to the British Trust for Ornithology, there has been a 62 per cent decline in swifts visiting our shores between 1994 and 2003, mainly due to an increasing scarcity of nesting and feeding sites.

As a result, the spectacle of numerous swifts engaging in 'screaming parties' above Kincarrathie House and adjacent Doocot Park on summer nights, is no longer a guaranteed crowd pleaser.

Taking off from central and southern Africa, the high-flying birds arrive here in early May, then have just until August to raise up to three chicks before their return flight.

Swifts live their entire life on the wing, feeding, mating and even sleeping in flight, only landing to tend to chicks.

While the birds return to the same nesting site each year – typically under roof eaves or holes in walls – human activity has inadvertently made many homeless.

But four special nesting boxes constructed by gardener Stuart Alston may lift local numbers.

Ms Eisner said the swift plan was part of a wider biodiversity strategy targeting birds and bees developed in conjunction with PKC countryside ranger Daniele Muir and the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership.

The Kincarrathie project is in line with the Tayside local biodiversity action plan that aims to maximise wildlife diversity in the grounds of hospitals, sheltered housing and residential complexes.

Research shows environmental factors improve the well-being of res-



BOXED IN: Countryside ranger Daniele Muir (centre), with Kincarrathie House gardeners Susie Eisner and Stuart Alston, prepares to install the swift nesting boxes.

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idents and patient recovery.

While the swifts remain a priority, Ms Eisner said a native wildflower meadow has also been established at the 14-acre gardens to attract bumblebees, now also less common due to shrinking habitat options.

"We had a beautiful wildflower circle last year, really colourful and vibrant, which had a dozen different species like cornflowers, corn marigolds, ox eye daisies and poppies," she said.

"It attracted a huge amount of bumblebees and other insects like hover flies, ladybirds, and basically anything needing shelter or nectar."

The green-fingered crew have also

erected 12 bird boxes for blue tits, great tits, blackbirds, thrushes and robins, and an additional three boxes, two for tawny owls and one for "a barn owl, just in case".

Small cup-shaped, eave-mounted nests for housemartins and a hive for honey bees are also on the horizon.

"Our managers have been very supportive of the project and the 44 residents are loving it," she said.

"It's becoming a real nature reserve – we even have roe deer in the gardens at the moment. They sit around the trees and graze, which is lovely to see, both for us and the residents."