



KESWICK SWIFTS

Promoting & supporting the conservation of Swifts in the Keswick area

NEWSLETTER September 2025

Preamble

As I started to write this, in mid-July, the skies around my house were often full of Swifts (except when it was raining). They were of all ages, I think: they included the regulars, the adult breeders from the nearby Eskin Street colony – now with 5 known nest sites – hunting busily, at high speed and with great agility, then flying in to take food surreptitiously to the nest-bound youngsters; or making fast, low flypasts round their territory. Their numbers were sometimes swelled by lots more birds, probably from Blencathra Street. There were also occasional big groups of immature adults – the screaming parties – 2- and 3-year olds, flying noisily and energetically round, investigating the area, learning to identify and perhaps how to enter potential nest sites, and generally appearing to be greatly enjoying themselves and each other. Soon too, if not already, there would be young birds, successfully fledged from their nest sites, and suddenly and permanently independent of their parents; flying around for a few days before departing on their long, demanding first flight to Africa.

That short period is the glorious culmination of the Swifts' breeding season, the time when you see the largest numbers: all too soon the skies empty again, or at best we just see or hear the occasional one. Now we'll have the long wait until the first, excited, cries – ours – of "They're back! They're back!", next Spring. Followed by concerns as to whether they are too few in number – because they return in waves, not all together, spaced out over 5 or 6 weeks; and what we remember are the numbers we're seeing right now, when so many are around at the same time. And then our Swift season will be starting all over again....

All of which reminds me of the lovely poem "Swifts", by Ted Hughes, who later became Poet Laureate – you can find it online – and the beautiful arrangement of the first part of his poem, written this year by multi-talented Cumbrian musician Dave Camlin.



You can find a recording of Dave's Wild Chorus choir singing this, on You Tube, at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?si=0OnlS1rCeNj_Wxtw&v=GDrh0tJm6gI&feature=youtu.be

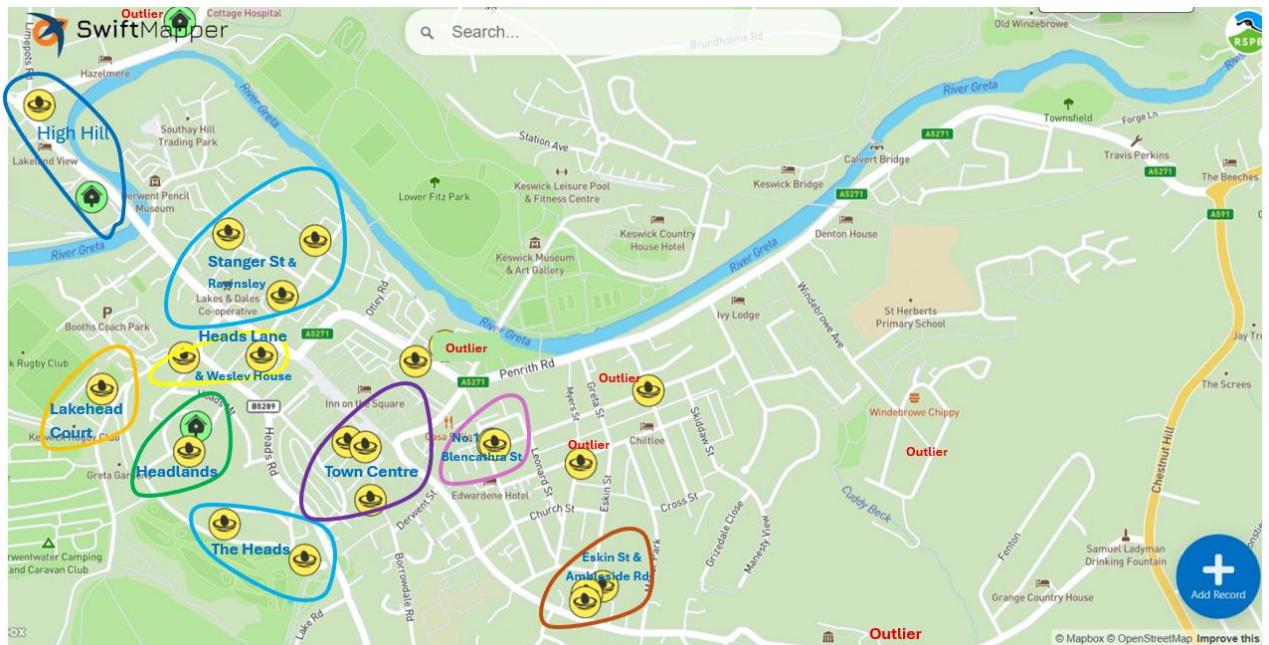
The Swifts came back very early this year – not on 15th May, as in Ted Hughes' poem, but from 27th April. Probably due both to the very warm, sunny Spring this year, and to climate change...

Nest Site Survey 2025: Keswick town

Keswick Swifts carried out our third annual Swift nest site survey in 2025, focusing as before particularly on Keswick town, and with the same number of observers - 17 - as last year. This year's weather during the nesting season was a distinct improvement on last year's, and that probably affected the number of nests found, to a degree.

As expected, most of the nest sites identified in recent surveys were re-used by breeding Swifts. Unsurprisingly, as we think we've now found the majority of the town's Swift nest sites, there were fewer new nest site locations found this year – though part-time Keswick resident Kevin Marshall succeeded in locating several!

A total of 71 nest sites were observed in 2025, at 23 locations. The large majority – 50 – nested in our 4 main colonies, at Blencathra Street, Lakehead Court, The Headlands, and Eskin Street. A substantial number of others are not attached to a distinct colony; but there are nevertheless some apparent clusters where Swifts nest quite close to others; as well as a few apparent outliers choosing to be quite separate. Dave Piercy has had a go at delineating the additional clusters of nest sites:



A rough attempt at mapping colonies in Keswick. These were also used to allocate areas to surveyors. Nine colonies/clusters with six undesigned outliers. Note that the outlier in Blencathra St was recorded on Swiftmapper by an unknown source and we have no further details. - DP

Although total numbers were up by 10 on last year's survey, these could largely be accounted for by the numbers recorded for the Blencathra Street colony, and those observations might have been affected by the weather. However, Jane and Val, the guardians of the colony, also reported a lot of screaming and banging activity by younger birds, late in the season, so perhaps there will be even more breeding Swifts to be seen there next year!

Our work in the areas beyond Keswick

Although the bulk of Keswick Swifts' efforts go into surveying the nest sites in the town, an astonishing amount of additional work in out-of-town locations is carried out by Simon Ireland, often single-handed, but also very much aided by observers in several villages. He reports:

In Thronthwaite, 15 Swift boxes have been put up this year around the village, and Simon's hoping another 6 - 10 will go up this winter. A huge thank you goes to Pete Garner for giving up his time to install them. Obviously the boxes weren't occupied this year, but Simon watched parties of youngsters flying around the village on numerous occasions, so maybe there will be some occupants in the next couple of years....?

Braithwaite, where survey work is much aided by Claire, continues to have several "natural" nest sites. Additionally 4 boxes will go up on The Ruddings at the end of year.

Threlkeld continues to have a number of Swifts nesting at several locations, including the school, Bleasdale Road, and Glenderamackin Terrace. Residents are keen to put up at least 4 Swift boxes.

Castle Inn has had work ongoing in the hotel, so close observation of the staff quarters where the Swift colony lives was not permitted. However, observation from the road indicated that at least most of the nests were being used again.

Ireby continues to have a lot of Swifts in the village. Simon observed at least one nest on the Moot Hall and there may be others; Crosby House has at least 4 Swift nests.

The farm at Bewaldeth is a magnet for Swallows, Martins and Swifts. Simon located two Swift nests, and expects there will be more to be found there in future surveys.

Simon has "watchers" in Uldale, Bassenthwaite, Millbeck and Applethwaite, who reported seeing screaming parties everywhere, but with no observations of nests.

He also gained permission to survey a number of hotels, and found 5 nests at the Borrowdale Hotel (with more suspected); 2 nests at Lodore Hotel, but again, more suspected; and at least 7 nests at Inn On The Lake at Ullswater. Simon found no evidence of any Swifts nests on the Inn On The Square, the Skiddaw Hotel or the Kings Arms, in Keswick.

While Simon has discovered a real passion for this work, and makes a fantastic contribution, he would really appreciate having others to help with the survey work outside Keswick. If you would like to help him next year, you can contact Nicki in the first instance, on nicki.baker@btinternet.com. And there's always room to include more observers in Keswick town!

Swift bricks and boxes

As far as artificial Swift bricks and boxes are concerned, the Swifts are proving rather choosy as to which ones they decide to nest in, though we have no idea how they make their decisions! However no fewer than four of the five Swift bricks incorporated into the Premier Inn in 2022 were occupied by breeding Swifts this year; and in The Headlands, no fewer than 5 of the 8 Swift boxes, on two adjacent houses, were occupied, along with two "natural" nest sites on nearby houses.

Given that Swifts raise just one brood a year, with just 2 chicks usually, and with poor survival rates for chicks in very wet summers, we anticipate that the growth in overall numbers breeding here will inevitably be slow, and erratic – just as the decline in numbers probably was.

As for the numbers of Swift bricks and boxes that have been put up in Keswick and elsewhere, we are very pleased to see a steady and continuing increase in their numbers, and we expect more and more will start to be occupied by breeding Swifts, year by year.

At the start of the season there were 81 Swift bricks and boxes in place in Keswick town – a few more than the number of occupied “natural” nest sites. Highlights are the 10 Swift bricks incorporated by Keswick Rugby Club into their new clubhouse – 5 Action for Swifts S-bricks in the gable end facing Lakehead Court, 5 AfS soffit boxes on the long eaves facing the car park. More recently, Keswick Methodist Church have installed a splendid 4-compartment Impeckable nest box on the north-east wall of the church in Southey Street – conveniently close to the Blencathra Street colony, and hopefully offering “overspill” housing that they will find and occupy in coming years.



← **Methodist Church 4-compartment Impeckable box**

And we are delighted to see that Atkinsons Homes’ proposals to build 129 new houses on Sheepdog Field, extending the Calvert Way development, will incorporate no fewer than 124 Swift bricks, suitably positioned and grouped, if they get planning permission!

Making use of nest site data

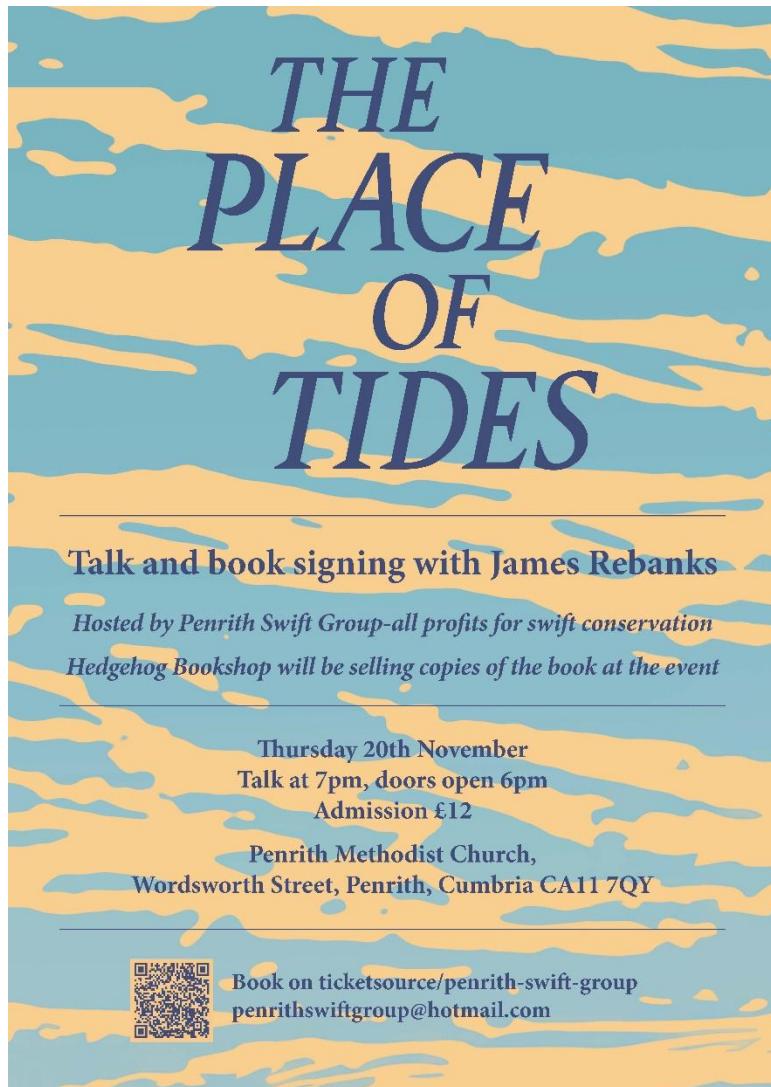
Given all the effort we put into surveying Swifts’ nest sites, and pinning down just where they all are, we are sometimes asked if it’s worth it. The answer is a resounding “Yes!”. Because if we didn’t know just where they all are, we wouldn’t be able to do much to defend them against inadvertent but catastrophic damage when building works are carried out.

Every week, we monitor all the planning applications made to the Lake District National Park Authority, to check on any threats or opportunities for Swifts. We reported in our December 2024 Newsletter how we'd successfully taken actions to promote the inclusion of Swift bricks in the new Keswick Rugby Club building, and to protect the major Swift colony at Castle Inn from potential threats from building works. Recently, we responded applauding the inclusion of Swift bricks in Atkinsons' Sheepdog Field proposals.

We also keep our ears open for news of any developments that might seriously affect Swifts, and in the December 2024 Newsletter outlined actions taken in relation to Wray Castle.

And we're also making increasing efforts to use our information to take a variety of actions. In particular, we're planning to contact all the owners of buildings which have Swift nests in them. We'll encourage them to enjoy them, take very good care of them, and make sure that if they have to do building works that will affect the nest sites, they'll put up bricks or boxes to replace any that are lost.

Penrith Swifts fund-raising talk, 20th November



Penrith Swifts are hosting a fund-raising talk and book signing by the local Cumbrian writer James Rebanks, who is also a traditional Lakeland farmer and passionate advocate for regenerative farming, on Thursday 20th November at 7pm, in Penrith Methodist Church.

James Rebanks' latest book, Place Of Tides, is a fascinating account of the spring and summer he spent on a very remote, tiny Norwegian island, in very primitive conditions, learning from two elderly women about the back-breaking work of preparing and protecting nesting places for Eider Ducks. This has been practised for centuries, so that eiderdown can be gleaned from the nests at the end of the breeding season without harming the duck population.

How the Planning system may better recognise the needs of Swifts

A new Planning Policy document called the Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy should shortly be adopted within each of the 4 planning authorities in Cumbria – Cumberland Council, Lake District National Park, Westmorland & Furness Council and Yorkshire Dales National Park. This follows many months of hard work by a team of planners based in Westmorland & Furness, aided by volunteers from community groups such as our own, and other Nature-oriented groups and charities.

The Strategy covers every species of living things, and every habitat, but gives good recognition to the plight and the needs of Swifts. It endorses the need to get Swift bricks incorporated into all (suitable) new buildings. This will give us a solid base from which to argue that, as and when each area develops a new Local Plan, this policy should be built in – we're already engaging with Cumberland Council and Westmorland & Furness Council on this. So we hope that, in due course, putting in Swift bricks in that planning area will at last become a requirement, not just a good idea!

The Strategy also endorses the need to do more to ensure that, whenever building works are planned, but need planning permission, then the existence of Swifts nests and the needs of Swifts are recognised. We hope to ensure that appropriate actions will then be taken to avoid damaging the nest sites where possible, and alternative nesting options (Swift bricks) are installed as needed. Just how this can be done requires further work!

Would you like to do more to help Swifts?

In addition to always welcoming new volunteers to work on the annual nest site surveys, Keswick Swifts would like to expand its Core Group – that is, the committee that makes things happen. The basic requirement is to come along and contribute to the 5 or 6 meetings that we hold, throughout the year, to talk through what we think we should be doing, what we are needing to do next, how we can make that happen, and to keep an eye on how effective we are being. Doing anything more than attending meetings depends on people's inclinations and availability, and there is absolutely no pressure to do more than you want to or can.

The group's activities are diverse, and include raising awareness and keeping in touch with supporters via newsletters, letters / articles in the Keswick Reminder, and talks; advising people about putting up Swift bricks and boxes; organising, analysing and writing up the annual nest sites survey; keeping an eye each week on planning applications, and taking action as required; keeping in touch with other Swifts groups across the country; engaging with the planning process; and anything else of interest!

If you think you might be interested, **please contact Nicki on nicki.baker@btinternet.com**. She'll be very happy to have a chat about the group's work (or anything else) without obligation!



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