KESWICK SWIFTS

Promoting & supporting the conservation of Swifts in the Keswick area

NEWSLETTER September 2026

Overview

At the time that I'm starting to write this, near the end of August, we have another pleasant, dry, somewhat sunny morning, despite all the threats of imminent rain and storms. But I'm noticing – as I have so often for the last few weeks – how sadly quiet and empty the skies are, now that virtually all the Swifts have gone back to Africa! I know many of us will be waiting eagerly for the first sights and sounds of their return next year – maybe as early as late April.



With all the sunny weather, lots of us were treated to wonderful displays of Swift activity this summer – hunting high up in the sky for insects, or flying around at great speed in noisy groups of 6 – 8 young birds, inspecting prospective nest sites in buildings to use in a future year. These are sometimes referred to as "banging parties" because of their habit of going up to occupied nest sites and banging with their wings on the exterior of the site.

© Robert Folder Swifts over Lakehead Court

Many of us found, not only in the Keswick area but also up and down the country, that the numbers of these young adult, pre-breeding birds seemed to be greatly increased on previous years, and they also seemed to stay around for much longer than usual, too. Can we hope this will lead to significant increases in the numbers of breeding birds, next year?

Where do the young Swifts come from?

But we just don't know where the additional numbers come from. We know that Swifts hardly ever return to the colony or area where they were reared. And we know that, down south, a number of places have seen their local population of Swifts increase greatly, over perhaps 20 years, when large numbers of artificial nest sites (boxes or bricks) have been put up in locations where large numbers of previous "natural" nest sites had been lost to building works.

A paper given at this year's International Conference on Swifts, held in County Mayo, Ireland, showed that in such circumstances, this can't be ascribed only to higher breeding



success rates for existing Swift populations. They argued that some of the birds must be coming in from elsewhere. That could perhaps be from Europe, specially after heatwave summers have led to such high temperatures that very few Swiftlets have survived to fledge. So perhaps, the speculation goes, those that do go on to breed will look for more clement climates, further north, to find a nest site. Let's hope so!

© Robert Greenham Young Swifts banging round a nest site in the eaves

Numbers of nest sites in Keswick & elsewhere have held up

Between May and July, Keswick Swifts carried out their fourth annual survey of Swift nest sites in the Keswick area. Eighteen people gave their time to quietly standing and staring at buildings where Swifts are known to nest, or suspected of doing so, to see if they can spot birds entering or leaving a hole in the walls or under the eaves. Parent Swifts may be away from the nest for many hours, catching enough insects to fill the "bolas", or pouch, under their chin, to bring back to the young swiftlets. And when they do eventually enter or leave the nest, they do so very quickly and unobtrusively, so can be very easy to miss!

Once again, the number of occupied nest sites in 2026 was higher than in previous years – but we can't yet be sure that this indicates a stable, or increasing, population – it could just be that surveyors spend more hours watching, or the parent birds spent less time in the nest because of the consistently warm weather. Or, indeed, chance…

Several colonies - Blencathra Street (by far the largest), The Headlands and Eskin Street – showed welcome increases in the (known) numbers of nesting birds. A new colony was identified around the central area of Keswick, with 3 new-to-us nest sites spotted by Hannah and Rosie, overlooking Lake Road.

After many hours of observation, Simon finally managed to identify the location of a significant colony in Braithwaite, with up to 7 nests, on the corner of the Thornthwaite road. This means the population in Braithwaite is a lot healthier than we had feared - though of course, every nest site matters.



Lake Road, Keswick

More nests were identified in the High Hill area, thanks particularly to Kevin's excellent observation skills. We think this area could well attract additional breeding birds, if anyone cares to put up more Swift boxes or bricks? The fact that the Premier Inn bricks were occupied so quickly, and that the numbers have held up so well, strongly support this idea.



Derwentwater Hotel – under wraps!

And Tony has had very encouraging conversations with the management of the Derwentwater Hotel in Portinscale, where there are major renovations under way. They say their intention is to incorporate a considerable number of Swift bricks. So perhaps we will see more Swifts attracted to the village, to supplement the few hanging on there. Won't that be great!

But some disasters and crises too…

Very sadly, Simon reports that there appear to have been major losses in breeding Swifts at the Castle Inn – the second-largest colony that we knew of, with some 19 nest sites - following long-term building works on and around the staff quarters. One consolation is that the colony, though severely depleted, has not been entirely wiped out; so it is to be hoped that their numbers will build up again, eventually, though we know this is likely to take many years.

In Braithwaite, we knew that there had been Swifts nesting for years in a number of places on a barn behind the shop, and that these have been much valued by the shop owner, Daphne. However, building works on the barn, that should have been completed well before this year's breeding season, got stalled, and the access to all the nest sites was compromised. Keswick Swifts heard about this just a few days before the Swifts were due back, but we pulled out all the stops, and were able to put up a motley selection of 4 Swift boxes, and a call system, very close to the barn.



However, the returning Swifts spurned our offerings of these alternative nest sites; hopefully they found vacancies elsewhere in the

village, and weren't deterred from breeding this year. By next year, the conversion of the barn should be complete, and Daphne is planning to include a number of Swift bricks under the eaves. Let's hope they will attract new residents to the village in future years!

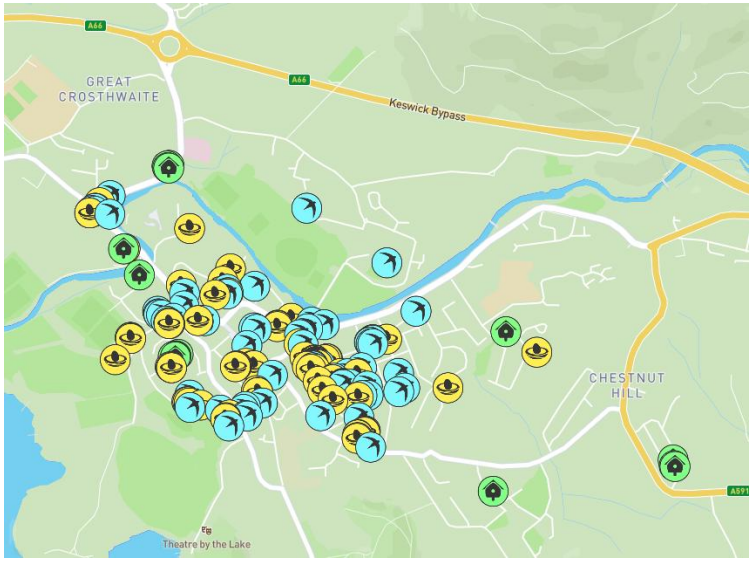
What do we do with the information on nest sites?

Given all the effort we put in to identifying and monitoring Swift nest sites, how do we make that all worth while? Well, it all takes more work, but there are several ways we use this information to actively support the conservation of Swifts.

First of all, of course, we share the information with the wider world – as in this Newsletter – in the hopes that more people will come to recognise, care about and help to support Swifts.

Then, we are in the process of contacting the owners of properties where Swifts have nest sites. Very few of them have had any idea that they had these important summer visitors; and most of them are pleased and interested to learn about them. We exhort owners to avoid doing building works during the breeding season, if this would impact on known Swift nest sites, as this would contravene the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981. And where they do need to do works, out of season, that might end up compromising their nest sites, we strongly encourage them to take mitigating action such as putting up a number of Swift bricks or boxes.

Also, with a substantial proportion of the properties with Swifts being holiday lets, guest houses, a hotel, or commercial properties, all used by a lot of different people during the season, we offer a supply of specially-designed leaflets to tell their visitors about the Swifts they may see!



Screen grab, swiftmapper.org.uk

And last but not least, we enter data on the location of our nest sites on the RSPB's Swiftmapper app, www.swiftmapper.org.uk, and also submit the data to the Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre (CBDC). CBDC keep a permanent record of reported sightings of every conceivable species of animal, plant and fungus, and in this way, we use their database to create an archive of all our hard work, that future Swift enthusiasts can build on.

CBDC data are also used routinely by planners and ecologists, to identify where any planned building works might impact on key species – of which Swifts are recognised as one. We will be seeking to influence the imminent revisions of the Local Plans. Our aim is to ensure that these will Incorporate the Measures for Swift conservation that were identified in the Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy. These reinforce the need to avoid compromising existing Swift nest sites during building works, and insist that Swift bricks should be incorporated into all new builds, conversions and renovations requiring Planning permission. Obvious measures, you might think – but it takes a massive amount of work to get the message across to the right people at the right time!

Enthusiasm for helping Swifts is growing…

We are greatly heartened to see how often Swifts and their needs are now mentioned by all sorts of organisations, including the RSPB, British Trust for Ornithology, Cumbria Wildlife Trust and even the Woodland Trust. And there were a couple of great pieces about Swifts included in the BBC's Springwatch series this year. All this is very much an improvement on the situation 4 years ago; in 2022, things started to change quickly once the Swifts were added to the Red List of Endangered Species.

And perhaps as a result for so much more favourable publicity, more community groups are being formed. Sue's Penrith Swifts group has worked to help a new group establish in Appleby, and we are very much looking forward to working with a couple from Distington, near Workington, who have Swifts nesting in their eaves and are very keen to get more attracted to their village.

But bad news from some big artificial colonies…



Just some of the many nest sites in the colony near Sedbergh

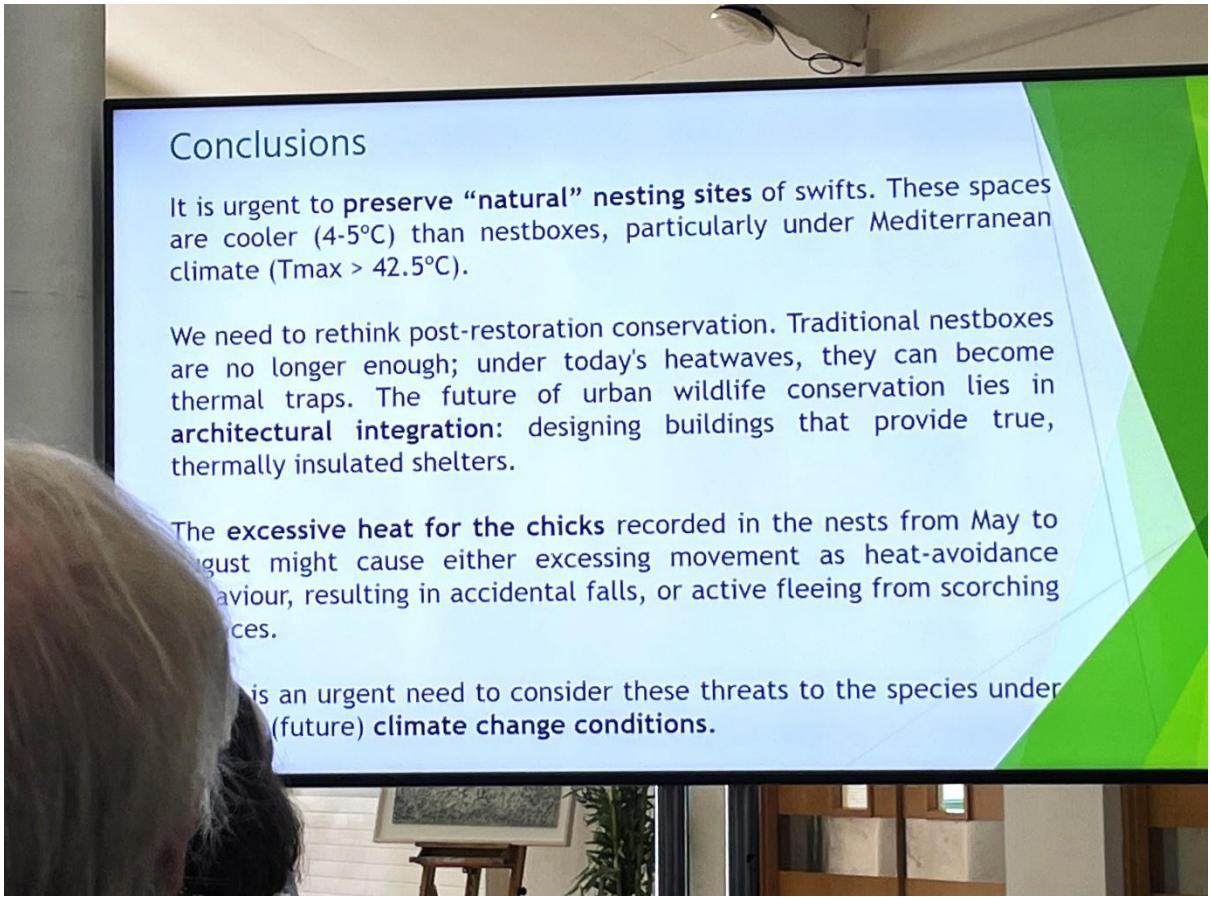
There have been some bad news stories coming in, at the same time, in relation to a few large Swift colonies built up around large numbers of Swift boxes and bricks. It seems that, where these have been put up in significant numbers, and close to each other, clever raptors such as Sparrowhawks have worked out that this configuration can offer quite easy pickings. Some colonies have been nearly wiped out, in the course of a single breeding season, by raptors; though the custodians of those colonies hope they will get rebuilt by new birds coming in, over time.

Other colonies have been hit, too, if not quite so devastatingly: the well-known and wonderful colony near Sedbergh, which two years ago housed

some 34 breeding pairs, has lost 9 birds to predators this year, on top of a similar number last year.

How the climate crisis is affecting our Swifts

With the climate now hotting up so rapidly, and with such obviously serious impacts, it is perhaps no surprise to learn that Swifts nesting in the hottest parts of Europe are being very badly affected by rising temperatures. In a heatwave, both natural and artificial colonies in southern Spain have been losing nearly all their chicks, due to severe over-heating. This is expected to have major knock-on effects on the numbers two or three years down the line, when those Swiftlets would themselves have started to breed.



Slide presented at International Swift Conference, Co. Mayo, June 2026, by Swift group from Toledo, southern Spain

It is possible that we will see more and larger cohorts of pre-breeding Swifts exploring the nest sites on offer in the UK in summers to come, if they somehow know that southern climes are becoming less hospitable. This may be good news for us – but at the same time, here too there is a growing threat that Swiftlets will overheat and die in their nests, during heatwaves. This was reported from as far north as Yorkshire, this summer.

We will keep an eye on the developing advice about where and how best to position artificial nest sites in boxes and bricks, to reduce the possibility of overheating, and will pass on what we learn.

But none of this in any way reduces the urgency of the need for as many people as possible to help Swifts. All concerned need to take the best possible care of existing "natural" nest sites in the walls and under the eaves of their property, and everyone can help by putting up Swift bricks and boxes all over Keswick and in the surrounding villages and settlements. And whenever you get the opportunity, please bend the ear of politicians at all levels, to urge them to support the requirement to incorporate Swift bricks into all new developments!

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 quite urgently needs to expand its Core Group – that is, the committee that makes things happen. The basic ask is to participate in the 4 meetings that we hold, throughout the year, to talk through what we think we should be doing; what needs to be done next and 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 on anyone to do more than they 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, writing up and formally recording 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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© Robert Folder – Swift having a look at an F35!