Title

Like many other bird species which migrate between Europe and Africa, Common Swift *Apus apus* numbers have been falling rapidly. Among the problems Swifts face are the property boom of the post-1945 era –and the more recent passion for home makeovers and renovation. While very occasionally Swifts will nest in natural sites such as crevices in cliffs or old trees, they have become almost entirely dependent on buildings for their nest sites. But they need access to the flat surface at the top of the wall under the eaves, or to the roof space, and these tend to be features of older houses, particularly those built before 1919.

Modern building practices and building regulations (such as loft conversions, and insulation standards which result in gaps being sealed) almost always deny access for Swifts. The BirdLife International Secretariat occupies a modern two-storey office block in Girton, on the outskirts of Cambridge, in the UK, which was until recently, a building with no opportunities for breeding Swifts. But with the help of local Swift enthusiasts, Swifts have been encouraged to prospect for sites in a custom-built nesting facility.Eight chambers in two cabinets were erected under the edge of the roof in May 2010. Although Swifts are not known to nest anywhere within the near vicinity of the BirdLife offices, the birds were soon attracted by playing their shrill contact calls through speakers mounted beneath the boxes. “Interest in the boxes was shown almost immediately but on inspection at the end of the season there was no evidence of nesting in 2010 but there were attempts to construct two nests.

In 2011, birds were seen entering one of the chambers regularly and it appeared that a pair might have bred. But we couldn’t be 100% sure”, said BirdLife’s office manager, Trish Aspinall. After migration in August the nest boxes were opened to reveal evidence of a successful nest.

Our thoughts turned to how we could observe nesting Swifts in the future. Luckily, BirdLife Species Champion Gardenature, Europe’s No 1 manufacturer and supplier of high quality products designed specifically for watching wildlife, came to the rescue and donated a nestbox video camera that was installed prior to the Swift’s return this year.

Right on cue, the first bird arrived back on May 15th in showery weather and then spent the afternoon peacefully recovering from its long journey unaware of the considerable attention it was receiving. Now able to monitor proceedings we were delighted when it was soon joined by a mate on May 23rd.

The pair’s first egg was laid on Tues 29th May, followed by a second over the bank holiday, shortly after. “All this has been watched on a television in the BirdLife office kitchen, and we are eagerly awaiting the hatching of the chicks”, said Trish. “So watch this space” For the decline in Swifts to be arrested and even reversed it is essential that:

- Existing nesting places are preserved wherever possible
- If re-roofing, make new nest access holes to match the old ones exactly
- In new buildings provide internal nest spaces
- As a last resort fit external nest boxes

Swift enthusiast and BirdLife Rare Bird Club member, Dick Newell, said: “making a place for Swifts costs little. Swifts will use DIY or commercially-available nest boxes which can be installed in old or new buildings. Playing the Swift CD is key to success”.

There is a growing network of Swift enthusiasts in the UK and Europe, working with parish, local and city councils and with church authorities and other managers of historic buildings likely to provide the last refuges for Swifts. For more details, see www.swift-conservation.org/, where you will also find advice for homeowners, architects and developers and local authorities on making room and building homes for Swifts.

You can also get involved in surveys, see www.rspb.org.uk/helpswifts