

Church Buildings Guidance Notes

Swift Nest Boxes

These notes cover:

- Brief background - Why swift nest boxes are needed
- Guidance - Where and how they should be installed
- Maintenance – The care and upkeep of swift nest boxes
- Types of nest box and suppliers

Whilst permission to install bird boxes is usually covered in a List B 1(19) these notes aim to inform the church members as to the specifics of an installation of swift nest boxes on our churches. The Archdeacon will need to be consulted on your application, and will decide if your proposals are suitable for a List B permission or whether it will need to be increased to a full faculty (i.e. for installations on a particularly significant building, or if the installation proposed is for a number of large nest cabinets).

As well as use by incumbents and church wardens, these notes are intended as a guide for members of a church eco group or similar who may want their incumbent or church warden to apply for permission to install swift boxes, but who aren't normally involved in the Faculty or List B submission process. The eco group members can help the person normally responsible for making the applications by collating the information required, ready for submission on the Online Faculty System.

N.B. We recommend that these guidance notes are read in conjunction with the advice published by the Church of England:

[ChurchCare Biodiversity Advice](#)

[Church of England - Land and Nature](#)

Background - Why Swift Nest boxes are needed

Swifts are fascinating insectivore birds that migrate to the UK each summer, to rear their young here before heading south to Africa for the winter. They eat, drink and sleep on the wing, only landing to nest. They are a widespread visitor to the UK and often fly and nest in groups. Unfortunately, their numbers are in decline due to increasing loss in their suitable UK nesting sites, poor summer weather, and a decline in their insect food source. They are currently classified in the UK as Red under the Birds of Conservation Concern 5: The Red List for Birds (2021) which means they are one of the species most at risk globally.

Specially designed swift nest boxes can be installed under the eaves of buildings, or behind the louvres of churches, as they mimic natural sites such as ancient trees. Swifts pair for life and often return to the same nest site each year. But, as our old buildings are renovated and 'improved' these sites are being closed-up. Nest boxes have been designed specifically for swifts which mimic the spaces they would naturally inhabit, and these boxes have proved successful for providing a home in or on our church buildings.



Guidance – Where and how they should be installed

Swifts love nesting in holes, so by providing the right type of nest boxes in a suitable position, we can help improve their chances of survival. Nest sites can include an individual external nest box, or an internal larger cabinet with individual nest box spaces. Please note that there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach for nest boxes as the size and height of church buildings, setting, geographical location, and proximity to a food source all affect their potential use. It can also take a little time for the boxes to be used, so if no birds nest in the first year, don't be disappointed or take them down, as it could take several seasons for them to be discovered.

Direction

If your nest boxes are going in a church tower such as behind louvres, then the geographical direction they face is less critical. However, if you are installing a box externally such as under the eaves, installing them on a north, northeast, or east facing wall is ideal. West or northwest is acceptable, but avoid south, southwest, or southeast as the birds can easily overheat in the boxes if they are exposed to direct sun.

Height

The boxes need to be a minimum of 5 metres off the ground, and with a clear flight path for the birds to see the entrance hole of the nest and to easily access the box. Avoid fitting the box close to other trees, cables, or other obstructions that may cause a problem for birds as they access or leave a nest box.

Season to install

Depending on the weather, swifts can arrive in the UK from the end of April ready to raise their chicks over the summer. Whilst it is good practice to get the boxes installed and ready for their use by this time, it is not necessarily critical when in the year you install them. Some nest sites can take two or more years to be discovered and inhabited, so don't give up after year one if no family arrives!

Quantity

Swifts are very social birds and breed in colonies. For this reason, a single nest box is far less likely to be used by a family unless there are also others in the local vicinity. These can be on the same building or on neighbouring properties, but nest sites in close proximity in a locality are important. Installing one nest box is better than not installing any, but installing several is much better. For this reason, many swift nest box manufacturers make boxes with multiple spaces. Please bear this in mind when considering the installation of nest boxes on your building or around your site. Do you have the space to provide several boxes? Do you have several buildings that you could fix a box to?

Swift Caller

These are a small electronic system which includes a speaker, speaker cable, mini amp, and memory stick with recordings of the swift calls on it.



They are used to play the sound of swifts calling to each other, to encourage birds to your new nest box. Swifts are sociable birds so like to nest close to each other. By using a caller, you are broadcasting the sound that a colony would make, so birds will come and investigate potential nest sites where they think other birds already are. You will need to consider whether there is an electrical supply anywhere near to your proposed swift boxes to power the callers each summer. An inexpensive plug socket timer might also be useful to limit the calls to be played at the best time to attract the birds. The optimum time for playing the swift calls is from dawn to approx. 8am, and then again for approx. an hour before dusk. Whilst the sound of the callers can be heard by humans, they do merge with the sounds of other street noise, so they don't generally cause a problem for any neighbouring properties.

Fixings

The way in which your swift nest box will be installed will need careful consideration. This not only includes the location and height, but the surface a box will be attached to. If your building is made from stone or brick blockwork, fixings will need to be in the mortar joints between the blocks to prevent damage to any block itself. Wall plugs and non-ferrous (stainless steel) screws will also need to be used, to prevent any rust and staining on the blocks in the future. Screwing into mortar joints will also mean that any installation is reversible without any lasting damage to the fabric of the building. If you are proposing to install swift nest boxes behind louvres in a church tower, the installation can be more difficult due to the nature of the spaces involved. The Caring for God's Acre website has information from Action for Swifts which has good examples of installations behind louvres:

[Caring for God's Acre - Swift nest box guidelines](#)

Maintenance – The care and upkeep of swift nest boxes

Once a pair of swifts have made a home in a particular place, they usually come back year after year. For this reason, the material your box is made from and its location for maintenance, need to be considered. The materials used need to withstand wind, rain, damp, and heat, and will need to last for many years. Whilst you can expect some evidence that the nest box has been used, swifts are very clean nesters so there would be little mess around the nesting sites.

Types of nest box and suppliers

As we have mentioned earlier in these notes, installing several nest boxes is by far the best way for them to be a success. Swift nest boxes come in a variety of shapes and sizes, to accommodate several building design features. Some are nest 'bricks' which can replace a single course of traditional size house bricks. Others can be made from wood or plywood, or even offcuts of PV and piping. Various designs can be found on the internet if you are looking to make one as a DIY project. The following links have some details which may be of use:

Action for Swifts:

- The S Box: [S Brick \(actionforswifts.com\)](http://actionforswifts.com)
- DIY swift box designs [Action for Swifts: DIY swift box designs](#)
- Church belfry guidelines [Action for Swifts: Church belfry guidelines](#)

For nest boxes that are made ready for installation:

- RSPB Solid wood nest box: [RSPB Swift nest box - Garden bird nest boxes](#)
- Impeckable online shopping page: [Impeckable Nest Boxes - product category](#)
- Peak Boxes – based in the Hope Valley: <https://www.peakboxes.co.uk/>

Some Swift nest boxes can also be used by bats, or can incorporate space for bats to roost behind them when they are installed. This way you may be supporting more than one species in one go! See here for details of a small nest box with Pipistrelle roosting slot:

[Swift Conservation: Swift and Pipistrelle box](#)

Other information can be found by doing an internet search for 'swift and bat nest box'.

Further information

For further information and guidance, have a look at the following web pages – for advice and details of other installations in churches, and for information on Swifts in general.

Caring for God's Acre case study of St Martin's church, Bladon, Oxfordshire:

[CFGa St Martins case study](#)

Action for Swifts Guidelines for installing Swift nest boxes in church belfries:

[CFGa Swift boxes in belfries](#)

Sheffield Swift Network: <https://sheffieldswiftnetwork.org/>

RSPB: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/>

On the top bar click 'search' then type in 'swifts' for various articles and advice notes.

Wildlife Trusts: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/>

On the top black bar click on the magnifying glass logo and type 'swift' in the text box that appears.

To find your local Wildlife Trust, in the top black bar click on 'Find a Wildlife Trust' and enter your details as prompted.

Jan Bullett – local Swift box installer. Details can be found by doing an internet search for 'Networks Sheffield'.

For further help with any information on a List B application to install nest boxes at your church, please contact the Church Buildings Officers or the DAC:

cbo@sheffield.anglican.org

dac@sheffield.anglican.org

For details on the information required to make a List B application, please see the following website:

[Diocese of Sheffield Technical Guides](#)

The guidance note can be found at the bottom of the webpage, 'Documents Required for List B and Faculty'.