

Jonathan Pomroy

Wildlife and Landscape Artist

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Attracting Swifts



Swift prospecting our nestbox 20th July 2004

Swifts



I have always loved swifts. My memories of these mysterious birds stem back at least to primary school where they used to squeeze themselves into the roof of the main building and compete with our own shrill screams at break time as they ripped through the air above our playground. One of the joys of natural history observation is that creatures are with you year in year out, and I continued to enjoy swifts as a student in Bristol, balmy summer evenings, yes with the odd drink, these crescent shaped screamers continued to captivate me from May until August. It was at this time that I made a pledge to myself that when I had my own house I would do everything possible to attract swifts to nest.

Waxwings

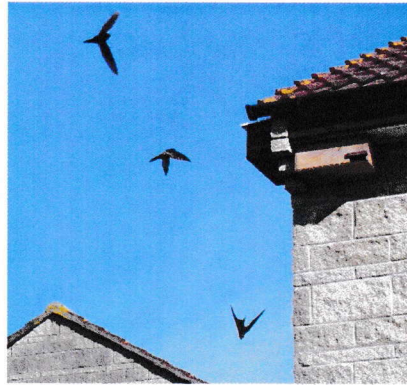


Well in 2001 my wife and I bought our first house in Bobbin Lane in Westwood. I will be honest- the swift potential did not look great, though the remains of a house martin's nest on one wall was a major selling point! We moved in at the end of May 2001. Small numbers of swifts nest in Westwood, but nothing to compare to the swift Mecca that is Bradford on Avon. Our house is about twenty years old and had few gaps for swifts to gain access to the loft, not only that, it is only about fifteen feet to eaves level, rather low for swifts. Nevertheless one afternoon in June 2002 the noise of the house sparrows was drowned out by a piercing scream. Three swifts passed our eaves at high speed, turned a full tight circuit and came back for another fast run. My reaction could be considered extreme! My wife was at work, so I could not ask her whether or not to hack a swift roof access hole in the eaves. Without delay I got out the ladder and made a hole in the soffit, 30cm wide and 60cm long. She is not unused to me going to great lengths to attract wildlife and fortunately knew this before we were married!

Anyway it worked. The screaming party of three swifts continued to fly past the eaves frequently. For a whole season they screamed at us from 5.15am to 9.30pm. Just having them so close was a great thrill and I realised that the following year we may be lucky and entice a pair to nest. In July 2002 they started flying up to the new access hole and on July 15th one bird entered it and stayed for two hours. Their efforts at prospecting were sometimes spectacular as they played follow my leader, piling into the eaves near the hole, screaming wildly even by swift standards! Come 2nd August the swifts had departed, leaving me to prepare for the next season.

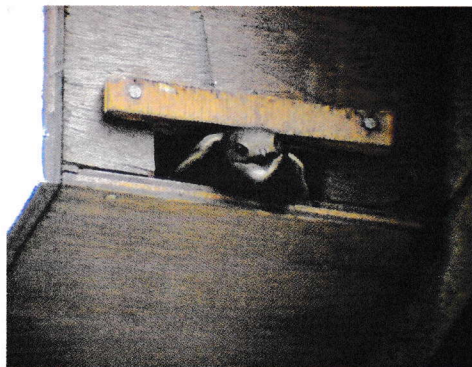
April 2003 and my first swift sighting came on the 23rd. A pair moved in at another house in Bobbin Lane. I began to wonder whether ours would return. I had added a

swift nest box next to the hole in the eaves as an extra incentive. On 20th May the first swifts began prospecting. I realised that they would have to get a move on if they were to breed in the usual swift nesting period. Most swifts lay at the end of May or the beginning of June and ours had not even started their nest. The prospecting continued with the pair flying up to, but never entering, both the potential nest sites. Many times I witnessed a beautiful slow flight on quivering wings which seemed to be a prelude to flying up to the nest hole and some wonderful roller coaster chasing flights over a much wider area and at great speed. So often swifts seem to fly at their absolute limit, very fast passes by the eaves millimetres from collision with brick walls or each other. The speed at which they enter the roof at roost time has to be seen to be believed, and the noise of the air over their wings on approach can be startling if you are not expecting it.



Swifts prospecting the nestboxes, July 2004

Prospecting continued but I had given up hope of any nesting attempt, when suddenly on June 14th a swift entered the hole in the eaves. It stayed for about ten minutes. It returned soon afterwards with a mate and entered the new nest box. Later in the afternoon its mate joined it and the pair roosted there overnight. On June 23rd a swift arrived at the box with a bundle of thistle down. Their descent to roost at dusk was always worth looking for.



Adult swift screaming from nestbox, June 2003

Most of the rest of the season was spent guessing whether they had eggs or not. I did not want to risk disturbing them by looking in the box. By mid July I could see the pair was incubating. One bird would enter and soon afterwards the other would leave. It was clear we had a very late clutch of eggs in the box. Their behaviour changed about the time all the other swifts in the area were departing. Visits to the box increased and close watching revealed the adults puffed up faces- they were carrying food balls. With the long fledging period of six weeks or so we could be seeing our swifts well into September

Around the 1st September the young swifts started to look out of the entrance hole. I watched them performing press ups on their wings, probably a way of strengthening their wing muscles. They could frequently be heard flapping quickly in the box, another form of exercise. One left sometime late on the evening of September 9th with one of the adults. I was fortunate to see the other youngster fly- it was looking

rather anxious on the morning of September 10th, when suddenly at 8.15am it dropped out of the box. Unlike the adults which drop to gain flying speed the young bird flapped quite frantically from the outset and quickly gained height, followed by the remaining adult which had just brought it food. One adult roosted on the night of September 10th; all were gone on the 11th



9th September 2003 - very late swift nestlings

The summer of 2003 was very warm and this may have played a part in this late breeding attempt. As for 2004, they arrived at the box on the same date of 20th May but commenced breeding immediately laying two eggs and fledging two young before August 1st. I watched one young swift leave at 9.29pm on August 1st when it was almost dark, presumably to roost on the wing before migrating south. Remarkable swifts!

I hope my efforts may encourage other people to provide for this amazing species. It probably helps if there are already swifts in your area. Some people use a lure tape to help the birds discover the nest boxes to begin with. I have had no problem with house sparrows or starlings trying to take over despite both nesting nearby. My nest box design is about 450mm x 200mm and 200mm high, and based on other successful swift box designs. It is a big box for a relatively small bird but their wingspans are a foot or more and the young birds benefit from being able to exercise their flight muscles for that crucial first take off. I placed the entrance hole on the side of one end piece at floor level and made it 30mm high and 60mm wide. Swifts need a clear approach and room to drop down a few feet when they leave to gain flying speed. I painted the box white to deflect sunlight and reduce heat build up in the box- crucial if the box catches the afternoon sun. This worked a treat in the hot summer of 2003.

Be warned- you too might become a swift addict!

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jonathanpomroy@supanet.com

Tel: 01225 864726

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