



Norfolk Biodiversity Action Plan

Swift (*Apus apus*)

Introduction

Swifts are plain sooty brown in colour and have a pale chin, which is more pronounced in young birds. In flight, the species can be distinguished from similar looking species by its long, scythe-like wings and short, forked tail. Unlike swallows, house martins and sand martins, swifts are all dark, they never perch on wires and their exuberant screaming is also highly distinctive

Swifts arrive in the UK from their African wintering grounds in late April/early May. By late July, after only three months in the UK, they head back to Africa, a distance of about 7,000 miles. For most of the year, swifts are permanently airborne during which time it is considered that they may fly 500 miles a day, over 200,000 miles a year and two million miles in a lifetime.

For its size, a swift is relatively long-lived. The BTO records the oldest known individual as 17 years 11 months and 5 days, although there are reports of an individual reaching 21 years old. The typical life span, however, is 7 years. Most birds do not start breeding until they are at least 3 or 4 years old. Pair bonds may be formed when birds are one year old. Once a pair bond has been established this will last for the life of the birds.

Swifts can nest alone or in loose colonies, depending upon the availability of nest sites. Swifts are very nest-site faithful, returning to use the same nest year after year. Nests are built in crevices in buildings, under the eaves of buildings, under windowsills and under roof tiles, with very little mess created around the nest site. The nest consists of a small cup formed from material such as feathers, paper, straw, hay and seeds, which is collected on the wing and fixed together by saliva. Due to the short time that swifts visit the UK only one brood is raised, with two to three eggs a typical clutch size. After 19-25 days' incubation the eggs hatch, with chicks fledging 37-56 days later. Once fledged, the next time birds land is to nest, as they are able to eat, sleep and mate on the wing.

Swifts eat a wide range of invertebrates (312 different species have been recorded) and a single bolus (food ball) brought to the chicks may contain between 300-1,000 individual insects and spiders. Insect prey includes beetles, gnats, aphids, flies, hoverflies, craneflies, moths, butterflies, thrips, leafhoppers, ants and lacewings. During bad

weather eggs may be abandoned and chicks have to survive without warmth or food for several days. They achieve this by slowing their rate of development and becoming semi-torpid.

Whilst the species remains a common sight across the UK during the summer colonies have disappeared from many traditional breeding areas; declines of up to 45% have been recorded in some UK regions.

| | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Plan Author: | RSPB |
| Plan Co-ordinator: | Communities and Nature Topic Group |
| Plan Leader: | RSPB |
| Date: April 2012 | Stage: Finalised |



Swift in flight by Flickr user [Langham Birder](http://flic.kr/p/bUgr4U)
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Contents

1. Current Status
2. Current Factors Causing Loss of Decline in Norfolk
3. Current Action in Norfolk
4. Action Plan Objectives and Proposed Targets
5. Management Guidance
6. Key Contacts
7. References

1. Current Status

National Status

- The European swift population is 4.4 - 12 million pairs, with the UK population standing at 85,000 breeding pairs (N.B. figure from 1988-1991). Between 1994 and 2006, the UK population declined by 29%
- The swift is not currently considered a species of concern in Europe
- The swift is not a national UK BAP species
- The swift is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). It is an offence to intentionally take, damage or destroy the eggs, young or nest of a swift whilst it is being built or in use. The Act allows for fines or prison sentences for every bird, egg or nest destroyed. There is no such legal protection for swift nest-sites in the non-breeding season, despite the bird being highly nest-site faithful
- The swift is on the amber list of Birds of Conservation Concern because its population has declined by more than 25% in 25 years

Local Status

- According to the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey, the swift population appears to be stable in the east of England; however, it declined by 44% in the south-east between 1995 and 2008^{1,2}.
- The BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey has recorded swift in 44 1km squares (five-year mean) across Norfolk³.
- Total counts of individuals in flight or calling have fluctuated but the current five-year mean is 455 individuals⁴. (N.B. this only provides a relative indication of abundance, as BBS does not detect all birds in a 1km square).

¹ <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs/latest-results/trend-graphs/south-east-england-graphs>

² <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs/latest-results/trend-graphs/south-east-england-graphs>

³ http://blx1.bto.org/bbs-results/results/county_lists/bbscountylist-GBNK.html

⁴ http://blx1.bto.org/bbs-results/results/county_lists/bbscountydens-GBNK.html

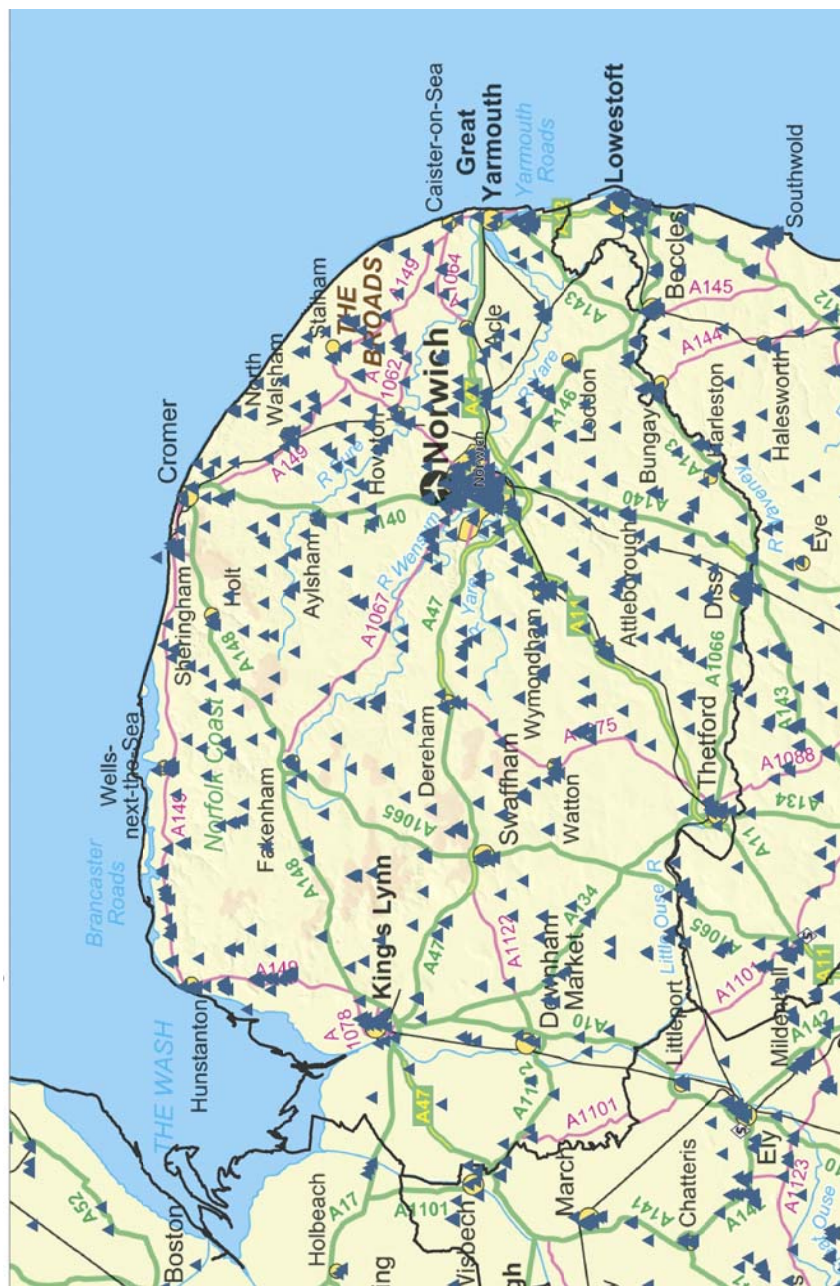


Fig. 1: Map showing records of swift nest sites and screaming parties in Norfolk from the national Swift Inventory

2. Current Factors Influencing Breeding Success and Survival

Loss of nest sites

Over time, building regulations, particularly those governing efficiency, have meant that there are fewer spaces, if any, for swifts to nest in buildings. Even older buildings that may traditionally have supported nesting swifts may not be suitable any longer due to renovations or roof insulation adhering to modern building regulations, and the retro-fitting of insulation. If traditional sites are no longer available swifts may not breed at all.

Survival during migration and at African wintering grounds

Little is known at present about all the factors contributing to the decline in UK breeding swifts. It is possible that fewer birds are surviving to return to the UK each year. This issue is being researched. New information from swifts carrying geo-locators will help reveal where they go in winter.

3. Current Action in Norfolk

Due to a lack of formal protection, there is currently limited protection afforded through the planning system. For larger developments, swift is being highlighted as a species that could benefit through the provision of nesting opportunities in new buildings. This has been most evident in the discussions regarding biodiversity guidance for the Rackheath Eco-town, where it has been recommended that swift bricks or nest boxes be incorporated in new dwellings.

Members of the public are currently contributing to the RSPB's National Swift Inventory database⁵, which identifies breeding sites for swifts. The data collected can then be used to inform planners and local authorities to protect existing nest sites and target the provision of new nests.

Starting in 2011, the South Yare Wildlife Group has also been carrying out its own survey of nesting swifts (covering the area of Norfolk immediately to the south-east of Norwich, bounded by the river Yare to the north and east, the River Chet to the south, and the River Tas to the west).

⁵ <http://www.rspb.org.uk/applications/swiftsurvey/>

4. Action Plan Objectives and Targets

National Targets

- No national targets.

Norfolk

Objectives

- To maintain 100% of the current distribution of swifts in Norfolk (no net loss of area occupied).
- To increase the distribution of swifts across Norfolk. Particular emphasis should be placed on areas of new development, derelict sites that are being redeveloped, or where retrofitting of existing properties is being carried out.

Targets

| Target Type | Target Text | Target Value | Units | Target Date |
|------------------|--|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Range (maintain) | To maintain the current distribution of swifts in Norfolk (no net loss of area occupied) | 44 ⁶ | 1km squares | Annually from 2012 |
| Range (increase) | To achieve an increase in range by 15 1km squares by 2017. | 15 ⁷ | 1km squares | 2017 |

Abbreviations and Acronyms (Organisations) used in the following tables

CNTG - Communities and Nature Topic Group; **LA** - Local Authority (King's Lynn and West Norfolk, North Norfolk, Great Yarmouth, Broads Authority, Broadland, Norwich City, South Norfolk, Breckland); **NBIS** - Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service; **NBP** - Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership; **NE** - Natural England; **NWT** - Norfolk Wildlife Trust; **RSPB** - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; **SBP** - Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership; **SC** - Swift Conservation.

N.B. Where achieve by dates are 2012-2017 this means they need to be achieved or worked towards by 2012 and annually reviewed until 2017. All actions will be reviewed in 2016 in preparation for a revised Action Plan for the period March 2017 – February 2022.

⁶ Based on a five-year mean of Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data.

⁷ Based on BBS showing that 55 1 km squares were recorded in 2007, which indicates that an increase in distribution of this scale is possible. This increase could be generated by increasing recorder effort, as well as protection of existing nest sites and provision of new nesting opportunities. Target based on a five-year mean

5.1 Policy and Legislation

| ACTION TO BE TAKEN (High priority actions in bold) | | | |
|---|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | LEAD PARTNER(S) | PARTNERS: | DATE BY: |
| 5.1.1 | NBP | RPSB, NE, NWT | 2012 |
| Develop guidance on swifts for inclusion within the Norfolk Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Guidance. | | | |

5.2 Site Safeguard and Management

| ACTION TO BE TAKEN (High priority actions in bold) | | | |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| | LEAD PARTNER(S) | PARTNERS: | DATE BY: |
| 5.2.2 | NBIS | RPSB, NE, NWT, NBP | Autumn 2012 |
| Use data collected through Actions 5.4.1 and 5.4.2 to map known nest sites to ensure these are protected from development that is not compatible with swifts. | | | |
| 5.2.3 | LAS | RPSB, NE, NWT, NBP | 2012 onwards |
| Ensure repairs and renovations to historic buildings continue to provide swift nesting opportunities. | | | |

5.3 Species Management and Protection

| ACTION TO BE TAKEN (High priority actions in bold) | | LEAD PARTNER(S) | PARTNERS: | DATE BY: |
|---|--|------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| 5.3.1 | Ensure that all new development incorporates two to three swift bricks/boxes per dwelling. Larger developments should provide at least double this provision. | Developers/ LAs | RPSB, NE, NWT, NBP, NBIS | 2012 onwards |
| 5.3.2 | Fit and maintain custom-made swift boxes if no alternative, especially if retro-fitting existing buildings. | Developers/ LAs | RPSB, NE, NWT, NBP | 2012 onwards |
| 5.3.3 | Investigate the potential for maintaining and improving swift nest sites in buildings owned by organisations within the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership | NBP | LAs, NBIS, NE, NWT, RSPB | 2012 onwards |
| 5.3.4 | Construct a minimum of one swift tower by the end of the plan period. | CNTG | RPSB, NWT, SC | 2016 |

5.4 Research and Monitoring

| ACTION TO BE TAKEN (High priority actions in bold) | | LEAD PARTNER(S) | PARTNERS: | DATE BY: |
|---|---|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| 5.4.1 | Encourage people to record swift nest sites and sightings of parties of screaming swifts onto the National Swift Inventory database at: http://www.rspb.org.uk/applications/swiftsurvey/ | RSPB | NE, NWT, NBIS, NBP, | 2012— 2016 |
| 5.4.2 | Encourage Local Authorities and developers to pass data to NBIS and ensure data available through the NBN Gateway. | NBIS | RPSB, NE, NWT, NBP | 2012— 2016 |

5.5 Advisory

| ACTION TO BE TAKEN (High priority actions in bold) | | LEAD PARTNER(S) | PARTNERS: | DATE BY: |
|---|--|------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 5.5.1 | Organise a workshop for developers and planners on ways of incorporating swift-friendly features into development. | NBP | RPSB, SC, NBIS | 2012/ 2013 |
| 5.5.2 | Organise a presentation on swifts as part of the Norfolk and Suffolk Annual Planning and Biodiversity Seminar . | RSPB | NBP, SBP, SC | 2012 |
| 5.5.3 | Deliver a presentation on swifts and development at a meeting of the NBP's Planning and Biodiversity Topic Group. | NBP | NBP, NBIS | 2012 onwards |
| 5.3.4 | Provide guidance and information sheets on how to safeguard existing nesting opportunities and on creating new nest sites for swifts. | RSPB/SC | NE, NWT, NBIS, NBP | 2016 |
| 5.5.5 | Produce information leaflet to send to owners of buildings known to contain nests to highlight their importance, with the aim to preserve nest sites during refurbishment/repair work. | NBIS | RPSB, NWT, LAS | 2012 |

5.6 Communications and Publicity

| ACTION TO BE TAKEN (High priority actions in bold) | | | | LEAD PARTNER(S) | PARTNERS: | DATE BY: |
|---|---|------|---------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 5.6.1 | Raise awareness and guidance with local communities and developers: address two user groups each year, and write a minimum of one article for a user group publication each year. | RSPB | NE, NWT | 2012-2016 | | |
| 5.6.2 | Raise general levels of awareness through local press and generate two press releases each year . | RSPB | NE, NWT | 2012—2016 | | |

5.7 Links with other Action Plans

| ACTION TO BE TAKEN (High priority actions in bold) | | | | LEAD PARTNER(S) | PARTNERS: | DATE BY: |
|---|---|--|-----|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 5.7.1 | <u>Species Action Plans:</u> Brown Long-eared Bat (Plecotus auritus), Noctule bat (Nyctalus noctula), Soprano Pipestrelle (Pipistrellus pygmaeus) – Species Action Plan . | Communities and Nature BAP Topic Group | NBP | 2012-2016 | | |

5. Management and Monitoring Guidance

(This guidance is a general summary; for more detailed information or advice, please consult the references or contacts below.)

1. Building work during the breeding season (May – August)

Swift nests are protected whilst in use during the breeding season, and an offence will be committed if any active nests are destroyed.

Building work should therefore be undertaken outside the bird breeding season. However, where it is absolutely necessary to undertake works during the bird breeding season the building should be assessed for active nests and appropriate working distances employed, as any disturbance too close to an active nest can cause birds to desert. Access to the nest site should not be obstructed. The contractor should ensure such working practices are adopted, and the contracting authority or organisation made aware of the situation. Where damaging work is not going to stop, the case should be reported to the local police Wildlife Crime Officer (call Norfolk Constabulary on 0845 456 4567 and ask for PC 756 Jon Hopes or another Wildlife Crime Officer). They can talk to the contractor and the supervising authority or organisation to safeguard the birds for the nesting season.

2. Ensure nesting opportunities are created where possible

New buildings of any kind, even steel warehouses, can be designed to provide swift nesting sites. Local Authorities have obligations to protect and promote biodiversity in the built environment. Some local authorities and individuals are already doing a great deal for swifts. Many examples of this can be found on the Swift Conservation and Concern for Swifts (Scotland) websites. The right kind of dialogue will encourage many more to champion their cause.

Where buildings must be demolished, the local authority should be encouraged to mitigate by providing a new site nearby. If this is in place before the buildings are demolished, it may be possible to lure birds to investigate the new site before the old one is lost.

3. Types of nesting opportunities

Both internal and external nesting spaces can be designed into new development, or through retro-fitting. The best option is to provide a nest space either in the roof or walls. There are a range of products

available that are highlighted on the Swift Conservation and RSPB websites. External nestboxes are the next best option if it is not possible to provide internal nesting opportunities. Internal features are seen as preferable because they will last longer and require less maintenance. However, provision of any nesting opportunities will be beneficial. Other species that are also closely associated with the built environment, such as starlings, house sparrows and bats could also take advantage of these features for breeding and roosting spaces. Entrance holes can, however, be designed to limit access by other species should this be desirable (e.g. whilst swifts keep their nests relatively clean and are relatively quiet at the nest, this is not the case for species such as starlings, which is the reason for advising that nest boxes are sited away from windows, doors and bedrooms). To prevent other species using the nest space before the swifts return entrance holes could be blocked until swifts return.

The following provides guidance about factors to consider regarding types of nest space provision:

(a) Creating access to internal nesting areas

Prior to 2001, bitumen-based roofing felts were used and required eaves to remain open to allow air to circulate through the roof space. Since 2001, however, 'breather' membranes have replaced the old felt, with eaves being sealed by soffit boards. Consequently, many traditional nesting spaces are no longer accessible, but this need not be the case. By cutting small holes in the soffit board where swifts have nested birds can still access the roof space. The dimensions of the hole can be used to dictate which species can access the roof space. For swifts, a 'letterbox' entrance of a minimum of 65 mm x 30-35 mm should be used, although more novel shapes are being investigated. More information is available on the Swift Conservation's website⁸.

Where properties have pantile roofs, swifts may access cavities for nesting under ill-fitting tiles. If improvements are made to the roof that result in such cavities being lost, replacement nesting opportunities should be provided wherever possible.

(b) Internal boxes

Where access to roof spaces is possible swifts will only nest at

⁸ <http://www.swift-conservation.org/>

the edge of the roof. To ensure birds do not move further into the space, and to prevent disturbance to the birds if the area is accessed during the breeding season, the nest area can be partitioned off using a piece of ply-wood positioned between the joists and resting on the ceiling plasterboard. Nests will usually be located on un-insulated areas, so nest locations may be manipulated through provision of suitable surfaces for nest construction within the roof space.

Alternatively, nest boxes could be positioned on top of the brick wall. Visit the Swift Conservation website for more details about these boxes.

(c) External boxes

External concrete or wooden nest boxes should be positioned under the eaves and protected from direct sun, wind and rain. It is also advisable to position nest boxes away from any windows. See Swift Conservation⁵ and Swift nestboxes⁹ for more information about types of external nestboxes for swifts. Information regarding positioning and fixing nest boxes to buildings can be found on the same websites or through London Swifts.

4. Encouraging swifts to use new nest sites

Attracting swifts to new breeding sites is not easy. To encourage swifts to investigate new nesting opportunities it is necessary to play swift calls to attract birds to new sites. Calls should be played from mid-April through to early August when swifts depart for their wintering grounds. Playing calls will attract young birds exploring potential nest sites for future years, as well as adult birds that may have been displaced from former breeding sites. CDs of swift calls are readily available, but some consideration of provision of audio equipment will be required when providing nesting opportunities. Nests may not be occupied in the first year and it will likely be necessary for calls to be played for several years if new nest sites are to be colonised.

Getting swifts to breed in new locations clearly has challenges and gives weight to the need to protect existing breeding sites, or providing new nesting opportunities close to such sites if their loss is unavoidable.

⁹ http://www.magikbirds.com/image.asp?title_id=1117&show_thumbnails=True

5. The National Swift Inventory

The RSPB is encouraging people to submit records to an online database to find out where swifts are seen and where they're nesting. The records indicate if low-level screaming groups of swifts have been recorded (that means they're breeding nearby) or if nesting has been confirmed through observing birds entering a roof or hole in a building. The best time to look is around dusk on a warm, still evening, or early morning.

Sightings of swifts that are either very high in the sky, feeding over water bodies or away from villages, towns and cities are not recorded. These birds could have travelled some distance and may not be local breeding birds.

Sightings can be submitted at:

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/thingstodo/surveys/swifts/>.

The National Swift Inventory will only work if information is kept up to date. It is therefore important to know if birds are still returning to the same areas and using the nests recorded in previous years. This helps indicate if the birds are returning, if the colony is stable and if the site still in use.

6. Key Contacts

For further information please contact the organisations listed below:

The RSPB

Eastern England Regional Office
65 Thorpe Road
Norwich
NR1 1UD
Tel: 01603 661662
Website: www.rspb.org.uk

Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership

C/o Environment, Transport and Development
Norfolk County Council
County Hall
Martineau Lane
Norwich
NR1 2DH
Tel: 01603 222112
Website: www.norfolkbiodiversity.org

Natural England (Norfolk & Suffolk Team)

Dragonfly House
2 Gilders Way
Norwich
NR3 1UB
Tel: 01603 674920
Website: www.naturalengland.org.uk

Norfolk Wildlife Trust

Bewick House
22 Thorpe Road
Norwich
NR1 1RY
Tel: 01603 625540
Website: www.norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk

Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service

Environment, Transport and Development

Norfolk County Council

County Hall

Martineau Lane

Norwich

NR1 2SG

Tel: 01603 224458

Website: <http://www.nbis.org.uk/index.html>

Swift Conservation

28 Yale Court

Honeybourne Road

London

NW6 1JG

Tel: 020 7794 2098

Website: www.swift-conservation.org

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actionforswifts.blogspot.com

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