

Swifts

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Inspired by the Open Deanery Synod Meeting at St. Andrew's Church on 4th February, when Andy Lester, Conservation Director of A Rocha, talked about the protection and restoration of the natural world, climate change, and what we could do to mitigate some of the disasters, it occurred to me we might be able to help swifts in Hertford.

More buildings in Hertford are being, or have recently been, demolished, so it is likely that some swift nesting sites have disappeared since last summer. We could install nest boxes on the north side of All Saints Church – that side because they need to be in shade, not sun. They also need to be a minimum 4 – 5 metres above the ground, partly for safety from cats etc., and partly because swifts need a clear flight path to swoop up to and land at the nest hole.

Swifts don't walk! Their legs are very rudimentary, weak and short, although their claws are strong. They live on the wing as adults, feeding, mating and sleeping/resting in the air. Their young stay in the nest until they are fully fledged with all their flight feathers, then one day the parent birds may find them gone from the nest. The youngster will learn to feed itself, to find some way of sleeping/resting, and may possibly never set foot on land for two years, when they are mature enough to breed. They migrate to Africa, and may fly up to 300,000 miles non-stop before returning to breed two years later.

There has been a drop of 51% in Common Swift numbers since the early 1990s – we have lost half their numbers in 20 years. They usually lay 2-3 eggs, and these hatch at staggered intervals, so if conditions are poor, wet, windy, and not enough insects, at least one may be raised. The insect population has crashed, so they are under threat from that, as well as losing nesting sites to modern methods of building.

In poor, wet weather, the parent bird may have to make long flights, maybe a hundred miles, to find food, and uniquely, the baby swifts can go into a state of torpor and so survive up to 10 – 15 days of starvation. Amazing and fascinating birds – I think they deserve a helping hand from us!



Hopefully, by the end of April, we will start to hear that sound of summer – the high-pitched thin screaming sound of adult swifts as they return to Hertford and circle above us. They normally return to the nests where they were born, so I would like to see replacement sites, nest boxes, in situ by then. We can also install 'calls' on a CD. These calls are recordings from nest sites, which should alert the birds to the fact there are suitable nest sites there, and 'call them in' to investigate, and hopefully to set up home on the church.

Maybe we could install one box with a camera inside, to watch progress. The young swifts will be in the nest for roughly five to six weeks after hatching. The fledged young will start their migration when they leave the nest, and the mature birds will leave by the end of August.

The week of 16-23 June is Swift Awareness Week. Perhaps by then we could have our own small colony of Common Swifts establishing itself.

Accompanying the boxes I wonder if we could insert a small 'In Memoriam', for instance for Peter Stubbs, Derek Westwood, and Denise Dille (in the camera box, remembering her bluetits).