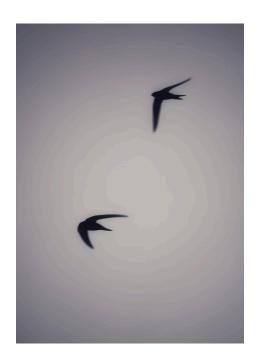
# Swift Protection Association Banstead Est 2018



## 1st Annual Swift Report 2024

Written by Anne-Marie Griffin

#### Introduction

Swift Protection Association Banstead was founded in 2018 by local residents Anne-Marie & Barry Griffin, keen birders, both with prior experience of working on a specific species project with the RSPB.

The association was founded due to the discovery of swift nest sites in open brickwork on domestic properties in and around the area and neighbouring roads of Pound Road, Banstead. Some sites showed a presence of a nest by the behaviour of swifts but the exact location was not always identifiable.

#### The Common Swift (Apus Apus)

The common swift (Apus Apus) is a red listed migratory bird at threat of extinction in the UK. Swifts arrive in the UK from Africa, a 3.5k mile trip, in late April/ early May and generally remain for 3 months, which enables them to nest and breed. Non

breeding birds also arrive, but they arrive in two further 'waves' usually 3-4 weeks apart. The 1-2 year old birds looking for nest sites for the future are called 'bangers' due to their habit of flying up to buildings and wing tipping or putting their beaks into holes then flying away. They also do this to occupied nests at times.

When a young swift leaves a nest it has to fly immediately and will not land again for 2-3 years until it builds a nest inside a structure and breeds. Swifts live their life on the wing and land only to breed at nest sites or if they are in trouble.

Swifts only eat airborne insects and will travel hundreds of miles in a day to eat adequately, so it is not unlikely that swifts fly from Banstead to France and back in a day to feed on insects if needed.

In July the swifts start to leave to return to Africa where they spend their time travelling down the west coast to the south, before slowly returning and arriving back in the UK in May to breed once again.

Swifts desperately need our help: since 1990-2020 there has been a 60% decline in their numbers. (Source: British Trust for Ornithology)



There are a few factors believed to have caused this massive decline: building methods have changed and few homes provide crevices or open eaves which swifts naturally nest in and those that did, or do, often have new soffits fitted and holes

blocked, often unknowingly blocking decades old nest sites of the swift. This can result in the loss of a whole colony of swifts in one go. The common swift does not nest in trees or outside, they naturally nest inside buildings in crevices. They are loyal to a nest site and a colony area and will return year after year, filling our skies with their iconic screaming parties on the warmest of sunny days, skimming and screaming around the buildings where nests are present.

Climate change and weather patterns, use of pesticides and falling insect numbers are also possible factors in their decline but the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) highlights loss of suitable nest sites as the greatest factor in this country.

The swift is the fastest level flying bird on earth. The iconic scythe shaped wings cutting through blue skies and screaming parties racing around buildings and across rooftops have all contributed to the affection and nostalgia that many of the general public hold for this iconic bird, that chooses to fly thousands of miles to our homes to nest in for 3 months a year. We cannot afford to lose them.

#### Swift Protection Association Banstead - Aims

The aim of the association is to conserve and protect the existing swift colony, to expand the nest sites available and to raise awareness, not only locally but nationally.

#### We do this through:

- A successful Facebook page with almost 3k followers, where we try to maintain a good level of follower engagement.
- Working with freeholders and housing providers such as Raven Housing Trust.
- Leafleting and handing out information postcards wherever we travel to in the UK.
- Marking the annual World Swift Day on 7 June with online or in person activity
- Marking the annual Swift Awareness Week with increased engagement with the general public via leafleting and/or reaching out in person, posting daily information posts throughout the week.
- Member of the Swift Local Network a group for swift conservation groups nationally where we share and exchange information.
- Attending events, such as the Restore Nature Now march in June 2024 with the RSPB Swift Lead and other swift conservation groups.
- Submit nest site and screaming swift data to the RSPB Swift Mapper
- Record data of arrival and departures and activity of the swifts whilst they are resident.

- In 2023 we invited the Mayor and Mayoress of Reigate and Banstead, along with Raven Housing Trust and Canons Farm and Banstead Woods Birds to an informal garden reception in the colony area to raise awareness of the swifts and how we are working with Raven Housing Trust.
- Submitting responses to aid swift conservation on the local government 'Local Nature Plans'.

We self fund our conservation work and do not seek to raise monies or ask for donations.

It is important to clarify that we do not rescue or rehabilitate swifts, there are lists of rescuers on Swift Conservation UK and this is also pinned to the top of the association Facebook page. We have spent two years with a swift rescue organisation in the past, learning more about swifts up close, seeing them fed and being present at release. We have around seven years of good knowledge of the birds behaviour, its nesting habits and rescue requirements. We are always happy to support and advise on grounded swifts or nest sites, placing of boxes or swift bricks in buildings, but we will mostly refer to Swift Conservation UK or Action for Swifts for specialist led online guidance on swifts.

#### Outreach in the local community:

Our first direct outreach into the local community was in 2023 when 300 leaflets were posted in the wider colony area on World Swift Day, 7 June.

In 2024 we designed an information postcard which was handed to residents when we were on surveys or sometimes in other settings. In mid July the postcards were dropped to all Raven Housing Trust blocks of flats and houses in Pound Road.



(Photo to right, Mayor and Mayoress of Reigate and Banstead and Raven Housing Trust 2023 on a visit to the swift colony.)

In addition, during Swift Awareness Week, the postcards were given out in Banstead High Street. Banstead Village Vets took an amount for their surgery and noticeboard (it is worth noting that they have treated rescued swifts in the past) and some were

left at the church. Shinner and Sudtone in Sutton High Street also took an amount, placing some on their notice board and by their entrance for customers.



The Association also attended the 'Restore Nature Now' march in Central London in June with other swift groups from around the country and the RSPB Swift Lead, as noted above.

#### The Banstead Swift Colony Area

There are a substantial amount of houses and flats that were built in the mid 1950s by the local authority, alongside a smaller amount of privately built post war semi detached and detached, Victorian and Edwardian and 1970s town houses. A very small number of homes built in the 1980s onward are also present. The local authority flats were passed to Raven Housing Trust in the 1980/90s, who remain freeholders and managers of many of them. A considerable amount have also been bought privately since. Much of the outside lawn areas, mature trees etc, some considerable, are also managed by Raven Housing Trust. The area is immediately next to the green belt, within the M25 on the North Downs, Surrey and beside Canons Farm.

The 1950s homes seem to be those most attractive to the swift colony here. We believe these would have originally had open eaves when built, up to around the 1980s. Senior residents recall the area being full of swifts and swallows until upgrade work of new soffits being fitted and hence open eaves closed (estimated in the 1980s when Reigate and Banstead Council were the then owners and managers of the local authority built properties). After that work the birds are anecdotally recalled as having declined dramatically, residents perhaps did not realise why, but noticed the absence or sparseness of numbers over the following years and decades.





It seems that the swifts may have then resorted to looking for holes in brickwork left from pipes being removed or other work. Only three of these types of holes remain in the blocks of flats to our knowledge now and all three contained active nests this year. One of those brickwork nests has been active for at least 6 years, possibly decades, the other two were new discoveries this year. More brickwork holes were filled in to make buildings carbon zero compliant in 2022 and at least one swift brickwork

nest was lost. Raven Housing Trust has since responded to our request to fit swift boxes to mitigate these works and support and help grow the swift colony. They have shown an active and committed interest in doing so since and multiple twin swift boxes were fitted in spring 2023 along with sparrow boxes (as swifts and sparrows often compete for the same nest sites). One twin swift box also has two bat plates behind it..

Swift nest boxes can be successful but can take anywhere from 2 weeks to 10 years or more to see swifts settle in them. Swift bricks that emulate the birds natural choice of going into crevices from a flush surface would appear more inviting, so should perhaps always be the first choice if possible, however nest boxes remain a viable option to support swift colonies and mitigate building upgrades as do soffit boxes.



Playing a swift call system whilst the birds are present also attracts swifts to empty boxes and is recommended until boxes are occupied if possible. The call system should be used sensitively and does not need to be very loud to attract swifts. The idea is to replicate the calling of swifts from inside a nest site, which attracts the younger swifts.

#### **Swift Surveys and Data Collection:**

Regular surveys were carried out during June, with more frequency in July. A diary was kept daily of screaming parties and other activities, even when an outdoor survey could not be fulfilled. This paid off and helped us discover new nest sites, swift colony numbers, the number of bangers looking for nest sites for next year etc. We also found that by carrying out more frequent surveys that it offered us the opportunity to talk to more residents. Some were very interested to find out more and excited and pleased that the swift colony is being conserved and helped to grow. Some were not sure of the purpose of the 'white vent boxes' (Impeckable swift nest boxes) and were really pleased to know what bird they were for. This guided us to leaflet drop the information postcards to more properties. We also gained information from residents about nest sites and bird activity which in some cases which enriched our qualitative data considerably. Overall, there was considerable positive interest in the project.

#### How is the swift colony doing in 2024?

This year saw the first swifts arrive on 6th May. This was within the normal range of arrival dates. In 2023 the swifts had their earliest arrival in 6 years on 28th April and the latest they have been seen to arrive was 11 May in 2019 (see Table 1, page 7).

Many factors influence their arrival date, weather conditions and food on their route from Africa being key. These first arrivals are the established adult breeding birds returning to existing nest sites and are referred to as the 'first wave'. They arrive and wait for their partner which can take days, or longer. The 'second wave' birds arrived 2-3 weeks later, these are young birds of 2 years old looking to nest for the first time and finally the 'third wave' birds arrived in June. These are the 1-2 year old 'bangers' who are looking for nest sites for the following year. It is when these three waves of swifts are together that the birds are at their height of screaming party displays and we can see how many birds make up the colony.

Table 1

Historical data of swifts arrival and departure at the Banstead colony:							
Arrived	Date Departed Date						
2018	3 May	2018	24 July				
2019	11 May	2019	26 July				
2020	5 May	2020	22 July				
2021	9 May	2021	26 July				
2022	11 May	2022	18 July				
2023	28 April	2023	26 July				
2024	6 May	2024	28 July				

(note: swifts can be elusive and arrival dates recorded could be up to 7-10 days later than their actual arrival).

After one of the wettest, coolest and stormiest of summers due to the jet stream position, the swifts spent a lot of time away from the colony in search of airborne insects and better weather and were rarely seen after their arrival for a few weeks.

We cannot estimate how this affected their breeding numbers, but with low temperatures, airborne insects, which are all swifts eat, were scarce locally. However, on the days where we saw warmer and better weather, the colony looked stronger than ever and the birds spent all day eating and screaming past homes in larger numbers than seen since we started recording in 2018. This was supported by residents when we spoke to them too, many had noticed more birds, more activity and screaming parties. This was seen as a positive with many saying it was 'wonderful' and that they were 'lovely to see and to hear in the summer'. There is great affection for these birds, even from those who may not regard themselves as interested in birds.

Seventeen birds were the maximum number seen in the colony. We have seen greater numbers before, but not at roof height, but in groups feeding high overhead. That the screaming party size has also grown to twelve is extremely encouraging and reflects our belief that this is the first year we have had an increase of the established colony size.

This year also offered the swifts the greatest amount of available nest sites since we began to collect records: 19 sites in all, inclusive of nest boxes and brickwork sites (see Table 2, page 8). This compares to 6 available nest sites in 2022. At least 6 nest sites were lost since 2018 between Pound Poad and Lyme Regis Road and this is why the provision of swift nest boxes etc has been our main focus.

On 25 June and 15 July 2024 we discovered two new swift brickwork nest sites whilst carrying out surveys. Nest number 12 and 19, in two of the Pound Road blocks of flats, continued to be active through to the end of the season, indicating successful breeding of chicks due to the regularity of adult birds going in and out of the sites.

Nest 1, another brickwork nest, has been consistently occupied by swifts for the past 6 years of observation. It allows greater surveillance due to its location, sometimes allowing chicks being seen to fledge in past years and sometimes 2 young chicks looking out. This nest suffered a sparrow invasion in late June when eggs or young chicks were present. Sadly this nest failed as a result, but the adult swifts continued to roost in it up till early July, with nesting material seen to be moved around at the nest entrance.

Further nests were also discovered, nest 14, nest 15 and nest 16 in Stirling Close which are all new to us. We were only made aware of them after meeting the resident of the property whilst we were on a swift survey. One or two out of three of these nests were thought to be active this year. See Appendix, Table 5 for a full list of all nest sites.

Table 2

Swift Nest Sites - How many								
Active Swift Nest Sites	Confirmed Active (	Failed swift nest but continued to be roosted by swifts.	Unused (including new nest boxes) /Abandoned sites (sometimes due to other birds taking nest)	Blocked (including confirmed blocked or suspected blocked from upgrades)				
2018	3		unknown	unknown				
2019	5		unknown	unknown				
2020	3		1	1				
2021	4		unknown	1				
2022	3		3	1				

2023	4		10	1
2024	3	1	15	2

At least 6-8 young non breeding 1-2 year old 'banger' birds were looking for nest sites to use next year for their first breeding year. These birds are also the core part of the 'screaming parties' in the height of their season here and made up the large group of 17 that were persistently present as the weather improved in the height of the swift season.

We watched 3 nests regularly which could be identified as having young chicks by the frequency of the adult birds returning to the nests to feed throughout the day. We estimate that these nests would have produced 1-2 young birds each. It is extremely lucky to see swifts fledge without a 24 hour camera feed, so we are only able to estimate successfully fledged birds. This year we estimate 3-6 young birds would have fledged successfully. No birds were found grounded and therefore all are presumed to have had a successful fledgling flight.

One nest failed (Nest 1) and one nest was unknown as swift behaviour to the rear of Stirling Close/Lyme Regis Road suggested a fifth nest site was active, but we were unable to locate it, therefore we have not estimated young from this site or counted the site as active in our records.

Table 3

Fledglings seen leaving nest sites							
Year	Day/Month Number of Fledgling seen leaving. Nest Site Num Rear						
2018							
2019	18 July	1 bird	Nest 1				
2020							
2021							
2022	11 July	1 bird	Nest 1				
2023							
2024							

Six swifts were consistently seen entering three nest sites that we were able to watch regularly until the birds migrated which indicated successful nests. Sadly we did not see fledglings leave as this would normally be most likely to be seen at nest site 1 which failed as a result of the sparrow invasion. Swifts had however continued to roost in the failed nest until the second week of July.

The colony size of seventeen this year was a reduction in the total number seen on any one day in some previous years, but these birds were present regularly in the height of the season from around mid June for around 3 weeks and at roof level and lower. These birds were also part of the screaming parties of 12 and not only high level feeding groups. Previously the highest numbers were only counted whilst feeding high up above the colony (see Table 4).

Table 4

Total Swifts Present						
Year	Max number of birds seen in the colony area on any one day (breeders and non breeders)					
2018	12					
2019	15					
2020	13					
2021	20					
2022	12					
2023	20					
2024	17					

Never before have we had such a large number of swifts consistently present for so long once the weather improved in mid June onwards. This is extremely encouraging and we feel indicates that the colony has a good chance of growing in size considerably if the swifts adopt the swift nest boxes that Raven Housing Trust have installed, and also the swift bricks that they have committed to installing in April/May 2025. We had hoped that the nest boxes may begin to be occupied this year, and although there was interest in them, no birds nested in them apart from a successful pair of blue tits in nest number 4.

Swifts adopting new nest sites can take time though, but the numbers and the behaviour of the swifts this year have been most encouraging.

The second and third wave birds had mostly left by 19th July, leaving only the breeding birds with young. The last day swifts were seen entering nests and in the colony was 28th July (see Table 1, p7). In previous years the whole colony had left between 18-26 July. This year is the latest departure date recorded for the Banstead colony.

#### Conclusion

This year the swifts first arrived on 6th May and the last were seen on the 28th July. There were three nests which successfully raised young which can be estimated to have produced three to six chicks in total for the colony. One nest failed and one nest was status uncertain. The size of the regularly present colony was seventeen, being the largest number seen at roof height in the colony since data collection began. This year we had nineteen confirmed available nest sites in total, the highest ever on record.

Overall the season started off being a very worrying one for the colony, with poor weather, poor airborne insect yields for the birds to feed on and the belief that we only had one active nest remaining.

This impression soon changed with the slight improvement in weather with a few warmer days and the arrival of the second and third wave of swifts and the obvious feeding activity at new nest sites with chicks. In all we discovered five new nest sites.

The swift screaming groups alerted us to possible new nest locations and led us to two out of the five. Spending more time surveying enabled us to meet many more fellow residents in the community and from that we were also informed of three additional brickwork nest sites which we had not been aware of previously. Ultimately we went from believing we had only one active nest left to an estimated five active nests, with one to two of those failing. The total may seem small, but it was of course a huge improvement on our initial thoughts and gave us optimism that the colony was a lot stronger than we had believed.

We end this year on a very optimistic note. Despite seeing some challenges the swift colony here looks stronger than we have seen in six years in its group size and behaviour. We expect to see an increasing number of nesting sites occupied over the coming years and look forward to seeing how the birds respond to the introduction of swift bricks.

We cannot afford to be complacent about the threat to swifts though and would encourage individuals reading this to install a swift nest box or swift brick, conserve existing nests and help save this enigmatic bird of the skies from extinction in the UK. In addition, recording nest sites and screaming swifts on the RSPB Swift Mapper is a great way to help to protect swifts and help housing providers, owners and developers to work with swifts.

### Appendix:

All photos and data tables are copyrighted to Swift Protection Association Banstead and Barry Griffin.

Table 4

	Nest Locations past, previous and current status, but not including those that have been blocked with certainty over the past 6 years.						
Nest No	Nest Location	Brickwork/ nest box?	Age	Hous e or Flats ?	RHT or PH (Private Housing)	Appr ox build date.	Status
1	Pound Road.	Brickwork	7+ years	Flats	RHT	1956	Active 2024 invaded by sparrows, nest failed. Swifts roosted till end season.
2	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 1 of 2	Installe d 2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty
3	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 2 of 2	Installe d 2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty
4	Pound Road.	Nest Box. White wooden Peak Boxes twin swift box. 1 of 2. With bat plate.	2021	Flats	RHT	1956	Occupied by blue tits 2024. Empty of swifts thereafter.
5	Pound Road.	Nest box. White wooden Peak Boxes twin swift box. 2 of 2. With bat plate.	2021	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty 2024

6	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 1 of 2.	2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty 2024
7	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 2 of 2	2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty 2024
8	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 1 of 2	2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty 2024
9	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 2 of 2	2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty 2024
10	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 1 of 2	2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty 2024
11	Pound Road.	Nest box. White Impeckable twin fibreglass swift box. 2 of 2	2023	Flats	RHT	1956	Empty 2024
12	Pound Road	New: Brickwork hole	Unknow n	Flats	RHT	1956	Active 2024

	Regis Road	Brickwork	years Uncerta in status	е	Home	1800s	still exists.
14	Stirling Close	Brickwork hole	Min 2 years Nest safe	Town house	Private Home	1970s	Uncertain if active in 2024 but was in previous years
15	Stirling Close	Brickwork hole	Min 2 years Nest safe.	Town house	Private Home	1970s	Active 2024 and previous years
16	Stirling Close	Brickwork hole.	Min 2 years, but Nest safe	Town house	Private Home	1970s	Empty 2024. Last active 2023
17	Chipstea d Road	Poss Brickwork hole	Min 5 years. Uncerta in status.	Hous e, semi detac hed.	Private Home	1950s	Uncertain if still exists.
18	Gale Crescent	Round hole in roof.	Min 6 years	Hous e, end of terrac e	RHT/Privat e Home	1950s	Uncertain if occupied by swifts in 2024. Last seen active with swifts in 2021. Starlings nested in 2022.
19	Pound Road.	New: Brickwork nest. Small masonry hole.	2024	Flats	RHT	1956	Active 2024
							4

#### **Acknowledgments:**

We would like to thank Raven Housing Trust for their commitment to swifts throughout their housing stock and for working with us on conserving the Banstead swift colony. They have committed to installing swift nest boxes or swift bricks on properties where swifts are currently/or have in the past nested across their housing stock. We are particularly grateful for being able to work with them and in part this annual report has come about as a result of that work, so that outcomes may be measured year on year.

We would also like to thank all those in the swift conservation community, from swift rescuers and rehabbers to community groups and the RSPB who have shared their knowledge with us over the years. It has been invaluable.

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Open Street Map