

Saving swifts from their rapid decline

By Lynn Duke

COMRIE resident Martin Ridley is ahead of the game when it comes to swift conservation.

He has become quite an expert on the graceful birds after helping to provide them with suitable nest sites since moving into his home at the Ross 10 years ago.

"There was one swift nest on the house at that time," he told the Herald, "but I unblocked some holes under the eaves and got a second nest."

After that there was no stopping the professional wildlife artist. "We were planning an extension so had the idea of incorporating other nest facilities into the design."

Martin made an access way through the house wall with a tunnel leading to nest boxes in the loft, using a shampoo bottle as a mould for the entrance hole. Since creating these first few nest sites he has regularly adapted them and created more and now has many that are regularly occupied by swifts.

Martin maintains that the ideal height to place a swift nest is around four metres but they do not always have to be so high, as long as they have a clear flight path where the birds can swoop up into the nest.

"You are more likely to attract swifts where there are swifts already," he said. "There was already a loose colony here, with a few nests in some of the other houses too."

To encourage more swifts into the area Martin plays swift calls over a loud-speaker.

"They seem to learn where to nest," he said. "They don't breed until they are about four or five years old. Until then they seem to focus on areas where there are screaming swifts and by using a speaker they can be attracted to a particular nest hole. They come and bang against the entrances as if they are learning where the nests are until



YOU may not have realised that summer arrived this year because of all the rain but one sure sign it is definitely here is the sight of swifts speeding through the air, screaming their heads off and swooping into crevices in buildings.

However, fewer and fewer people are enjoying this spectacle as the swift is in serious trouble and the RSPB is appealing to Strathearn residents to be on the look-out for the agile, high-flying bird.

A spokesperson for the RSPB said: "Swift numbers have declined by 47 per cent in the last ten years and for the first time the summer migrant has been added to the amber list, meaning it is of serious conservation concern."

"A major cause of this decline is believed to be the loss of nest sites through building improvement or

demolition. They nest almost exclusively on buildings so they really need our help."

In light of this the RSPB is launching a nationwide search to identify where swifts are still seen and could be nesting.

Swifts pair for life and return to the same nest site each spring. Their nests are high up in the roof spaces, under the eaves of old buildings in particular, and renovation, repair or demolition work is leaving many of them homeless.

The spokesperson continued: "Look out for low-level screaming groups of swifts, a good sign they are breeding nearby, or where you have seen swifts nesting – perhaps entering a roof or hole in the building. Please report any sightings to us. The best time to look is around dusk on a warm, still evening."

"We will focus our conservation efforts in areas where they are commonly seen and work with the building industry to help birds in buildings."

"We're also suggesting a number of simple measures that could help the fast dwindling swift population."

- Leave any existing nest sites undisturbed. Swifts will use the same nest sites again and again.
- If you do need to carry out repair work on your roof, fascias and soffits, for example, make new nest access holes to match the old ones at exactly the same spot.
- If you are building a new house you could create some internal nest spaces at the design stage.
- If you are unable to do any of these, fit a custom-made swift box.

ON THE WING: One of Martin's paintings of swifts - a bird that is evocative of summer.

they are ready to use them."

Martin has also rigged up cameras in some of the boxes and can watch the birds' antics on his computer screen.

Swifts can lay up to three eggs, although Martin usually sees only two in his nests. He has used what he has observed on screen to modify his nests and make them safer, for example by creating a mould for the birds to nest in so eggs are less likely to fall out.

The cameras have also picked up some amusing

sights, such as the young birds preparing for their maiden flight. The fledglings exercise their wings and tone their muscles by doing what look like press-ups and the nest area becomes a mini-gym.

The first flight of a fledgling has to be perfect. They can take twice as long as other birds their size to fledge, as once they are out of the nest they have to be self-sufficient. Their parents do not feed them on the ground.

Martin is fascinated by the amazing creatures and

is a font of information on the impressive birds.

"Everything is done on the wing – even collecting nest material," he said. They sleep on the wing, although breeding birds will roost in the nest.

"It has been discovered that they will regularly fly long distances to get food and west coast birds have even been known to fly to Ireland for a meal.

"Modern building methods don't cater for swifts but we can easily share our home with them if we just think about designs for nest

boxes. They don't make a mess as the adults keep the nest chamber clean by taking the droppings away.

"If new buildings are being constructed it could be a great opportunity to incorporate swift nesting sites into the design. If anyone would like advice about encouraging swifts to nest I'd be happy to help where possible."

For more information on helping swifts see www.swift-conservation.org or www.taysidebioiversity.co.uk/Get_Involved_Project_Swifts.asp.



COSY: Young swifts huddle together in one of Martin's nests.



BIRD IN THE HAND: A baby swift rescued by Martin.