

Swifts at Stonesfield

There is an old stone barn at Prospect Villa near the Black Head public house in Stonesfield. For many years this has been a nesting site for swifts. In 2003 local observers say that there were possibly as many as 9 breeding pairs using the site. During the winter of 2003/4 work began to convert the barn to a dwelling-house. Richard and Dale Morris, who had regularly watched the swifts, realised that the barn conversion would involve re-pointing the walls where the swifts nested. Friends in the village asked me whether I could make any suggestions.

I consulted Royston Scroggs, who is a member of the Banbury Ornithological Society, and he, Clive Hill who has successfully attracted swifts to nest at his home in Ledwell and I, visited Stonesfield in October 2003. Royston subsequently spoke to the Building Control Department of the West Oxford District Council about the proposed work and the possibility of requesting the builders to make some provision for the swifts in the converted barn. He also met with John Lannagan, the site foreman working for Drew Warren, Builders and Roofing Contractors, who were converting the barn they had bought for development. The builders agreed that when the wall was re-pointed, they would leave a number of openings at places marked on the wall. Royston and Clive later made chalk marks on the wall where they could see swifts' claw marks below the holes the birds had used.

By May 2004 when the swifts returned, work on the wall had not been finished. There was still scaffolding against the wall. Nevertheless some swifts did use the site but it is not known whether any young birds fledged successfully. Some young birds were certainly reared but were found on the scaffolding planks, having been unable to launch themselves from the nest. Unfortunately the builders who found the young birds put them back into the nest, thinking that they had fallen out. We had omitted to tell them that the best hope for fledglings found stranded like this, is to encourage them to fly by holding them up on your hand, above your head, in an open and safe place.

In February 2005, Richard Morris blocked the holes, which had been left for the swifts in the marked places, with stone. This was done to deter house sparrows and starlings. At the end of April he removed the stone and almost immediately the swifts started using the holes. The house sparrows attempted to use them as well, but without success. This year Richard and Dale have reported that 4 pairs of swifts used the holes, which had been left and successfully reared young at the site.

Swifts are constantly losing traditional nest sites because of building repairs, improvements and conversions. I have written this brief report to show what is possible if prompt action is taken and local authorities and builders co-operate.

Thanks to Richard and Dale Morris of Stonesfield for their concern, Clive Hill and Royston Scroggs for their interest and to Royston in particular for making several visits to the site, for his technical advice, for talking to the local authority and the builders, and for convincing them of the importance of protecting the site. Thanks also to the West Oxford District Council, and to Drew Warren, for their cooperation in leaving access for the swifts.

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