



Encouraging Roof Nesting Birds

There is a biodiversity crisis as well as a climate crisis, and our wildlife is already in decline. Several centuries of industrialisation and modernisation have left the UK as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

- 41 per cent of UK species are less abundant than in 1970¹.
- There are 38 million fewer birds in the UK than in the 1970s².



Figure 1: House sparrow nesting in roof eaves

Renovation and repair work to the roofs of our homes and buildings are severely affecting the birds that need small cavities in the eaves to build nests and raise their young. Without somewhere to breed, numbers of these birds will continue to decline.

Many formerly common species such as house sparrows, starlings, house martins and swifts are now red listed, as the number of breeding birds has declined by over 50 per cent in the last 20 years. They are now **Birds of Conservation Concern**³, as they are in critical decline.

NFRC is working proactively with conservation groups, roofing contractors and the supply chain to:

- Raise awareness and provide guidance for the roofing industry to understand the importance of protecting all of these nesting sites when roof refurbishment or repair work is planned.
- Encourage the installation of nest boxes.

The legal position with nesting birds

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 protects nesting birds, stating that:

'All birds, their nest and eggs are protected by law and it is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take a wild bird or to intentionally take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use or being built.'

So, although the presence of nesting birds can delay a roof refurbishment or repair, it cannot prevent it. However, the breeding season for these birds coincides with some of the best weather for large-scale roof refurbishment projects, so it is essential to check for breeding birds before and whilst working. The birds' access to any nests must not be blocked and this may mean, for example, careful siting of scaffolding.

Swifts in particular are unlikely to be able to access their nests if scaffolding is located in close vicinity of their nest sites or access routes. In such situations, we recommend that a breeding bird survey takes place to determine how works can best be programmed to prevent disturbance. You must not do anything that prevents the parents accessing the nest to incubate eggs or feed chicks or prevent the chicks fledging from the nest.

What to check for

- Check if there are birds nesting where you are working. Are there birds flying up to the building? If so, they could be building a nest (*which is likely to be out of sight*) or feeding young. House martin nests are often visible as an external mud nest.
- If you do discover an active bird nest on the site, you must discuss with your client how to legally work around the nest or delay the project until young have fledged.
- Outside of the nesting season, if you discover a bird's nest, try to protect this as they tend to return to the same nest sites year on year. If this is not possible then consider installing nest bricks or boxes, as the birds do not easily find alternative roofs to use as a new home.

There are case studies within this guidance that showcase where, with careful design, roofing work has taken place whilst maintaining entrance points for nesting birds.

Creating new nesting sites

Whilst there is a moral aspect for creating nesting sites for our bird species that are in decline, from November 2023 onwards, it will be a legal obligation within the Environment Act 2021 for developers to consider the environmental impact of their development and ensure the biodiversity is improved compared to before.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is the term used to describe the process of increasing the overall biodiversity value. The change in biodiversity is measured using a metric tool. These metrics are only concerned with habitats and do not take protected species like nesting birds, into consideration. However, **BS 8683:2021 Process for designing and implementing Biodiversity Net Gain—Specification** states that biodiversity enhancement measures that supplement the project's BNG targets, and are outside the scope of a metric, should be described and where possible quantified. One example would be installing swift nest boxes within a housing development.

Therefore, it's important to consider installing nest boxes as an additional service for your clients. There is a wide range of bespoke nest boxes available that fit within the eaves or directly under the eaves or gable, or even in the wall.

With developers, architects and specifiers facing greater pressure to improve sustainability and biodiversity measures, Wienerberger have launched a specialist report exploring the role of eco-habitats in the drive for Biodiversity Net Gain, entitled ***The Changing Shape of Biodiversity in the Built Environment***⁴.



Figure 2: Swift entering brick nest box below roof eaves.

Installing nest boxes

Correct placement of bird box products is fundamental to the successful uptake by nesting birds. Things to consider include:

- Making sure that the birds have a clear flight path to the nest.
- Avoiding placement close to windows and doors. A position near the eaves or the highest point of the gable of the property is preferable.
- Multiple boxes can be used for colonial nesting species such as the swift and house sparrow.
- Bird boxes often support a wider range of small bird species, not just the target species.



Figure 3: Entry point to nests built into bespoke roof tiles.

Case Study: Battle's Special Swift Project⁵

NFRC Member **Clarke Roofing Southern Limited, Hastings and Rother Swift Conservation Group, Swift Conservation** and **Action for Swifts** all worked together to drive forward an ambitious plan to have swifts nesting in the clock tower of the public library in Battle, East Sussex.



Figure 4: Installing nest box

Clarke Roofing Southern Limited completed their work at the end of 2021 and during the course of the contract they were asked to fit S Brick swift boxes. S Bricks are a type of swift box supplied by Action for Swifts which are the size of a standard brick, just slightly deeper, so very convenient to integrate into both new-build and retrofit projects.



Figure 5: Finished nest boxes.

Operatives drilled out brickwork and fitted nest bricks, incorporating clear perspex screens to the rear. An internal platform was constructed within the tower in order to house cameras focusing on the birds' nesting and feeding habits through a breeding season. Once swifts were nesting in the clock tower bricks, live streamed video footage of occupied nests could then be shown in the library.

This is not the first time Clarke Roofing has worked with local conservation groups. During the renovation of St Peter & St Paul's Church, Lingfield, a significant number of swift nest sites were found. The location of each of these nesting sites was added to a roof plan, and, as each nest was carefully removed, it was set aside to be reinstated once the Horsham stone slates had been installed.

During the re-roofing works each nest was replaced in the exact location from where it was removed, with bespoke access installed under the Horsham stone allowing the swifts to return to the nest positions.

Today the colony still flourishes and is a testament to Clarke Roofing working with conservation groups and the local community.



Figure 6: Reinstated Bespoke Swift nest behind stone slate.

If you require any further information, advice or guidance regarding creating nesting sites when undertaking roof work, or you wish to work with a regional conservation group in your area, then please contact Helpdesk@nfrc.co.uk



Further information

¹ State of Nature full report 2019:

<https://bit.ly/3l5fcqu>

² RSPB–A birds' eye view on Queen's reign:

<https://bit.ly/3jZrBoa>

³ Birds of Concern 5:

<https://bit.ly/3S0GZNY>

⁴ Wienerberger–The Changing Shape of Biodiversity in the Built Environment:

<https://bit.ly/3RXK1SN>

⁵ Battle's Special Swift Project:

<https://bit.ly/3YPeBjv>

RSPB–Protecting nest sites in roofs:

<https://bit.ly/40W9q3e>

Action for Swifts:

<https://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/>

Wienerberger bird nest roof tiles:

<https://bit.ly/3K5ZGgX>

SwiftMapper:

<https://www.swiftmapper.org.uk/>

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