



# KESWICK SWIFTS

*Promoting & supporting the conservation of Swifts in the Keswick area*

## KESWICK SWIFTS' NEST SITE SURVEY 2024

8<sup>th</sup> November 2024

### BACKGROUND

Keswick Swifts carried out its second annual Swift nest site survey in 2024. Our principal aim was to locate as many as possible of the buildings housing Swift nests in the town of Keswick. As in 2023, one member of the group also put in many hours observing Swift nests in a number of outlying villages and settlements.

The persistently wet and chilly weather experienced throughout the nesting season meant there were in general fewer observers on site, and far fewer birds on the wing, during poor weather. This will have led to a smaller proportion of nest sites being located.

However, we also had more observers than last year, including some very helpful notifications of ad-hoc sightings by three experienced birders; so that might have led to a larger proportion of nest sites being observed.

And anyway, actually spotting birds entering or leaving any given nest site cannot be guaranteed, even with a number of hours of observation.

So given all these factors, comparisons with the results obtained last year need to be made with some caution – particularly in relation to outlying nest sites, not located within a colony, a loose cluster of nests, or artificial Swift bricks or boxes (the latter being more easily and more closely observed).

### DEFINITIONS

We count **occupied nest sites**: holes in walls, under the eaves, and purpose-made bricks and boxes, into which one or more adult Swift is seen to enter (and not immediately exit), at least once. Particularly later in the season, the birds may have been prospecting for somewhere to return to, to breed in

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subsequent years; and not all nest sites observed as occupied earlier in the season were successful in raising any young to fledging.

We consider a **colony** to describe a number of pairs of Swifts nesting in quite close proximity, and sometimes seen to be acting together, eg in rapid rooftop-level fly-pasts. These may all or largely be located in a single building, or in more than one building in close proximity to each other. Some are unequivocally definable; but in other cases it can be hard to define the boundaries, or even the existence of a colony or cluster, as distinct from a number of individual nest sites located fairly close to others but where the birds are not seen to be interacting.

The large majority of systematic survey work was carried out within the boundaries of the town of Keswick. Here, the whole area is divided between observers, with a view to gaining a reasonable picture of nest sites across the town.



One member of Keswick Swifts focuses his attentions on the outer villages, notably Braithwaite, Portinscale, Thornthwaite, Threlkeld, Bassenthwaite and Castle Inn, but his resources are too few to carry out comprehensive survey work at all these sites, apart from the significant colony in the staff quarters at Castle Inn (*pictured left*).

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Observations of these settlements therefore provide a good idea of where there are colonies of Swifts in these places, along with counts (providing a lower bound for numbers of nests), but are not able to give estimates of total numbers of Swifts using nest sites in most settlements in 2024.

## RESULTS FOR KESWICK TOWN

### Overview

There were 61 occupied Swift nest sites, in 28 properties, observed in summer 2024, in Keswick. Although this count is an increase on the 2023 results (49 nest sites), we do not think this should be considered significant, for the reasons outlined above. We'll need quite a few more years' survey work before we could be confident of any possible trend in overall numbers, though the increase in use of Swift bricks and boxes is probably significant, reflecting the increasing availability of these across the town (see below), and may indicate their attractiveness to Swifts.

In general, however, the large majority of Swifts were nesting in “natural” nest sites in holes in the walls of buildings made of unpointed Lakeland stone, or under the eaves of a smaller number of newer, larger buildings.



*Back walls of numbers 13 (to left; pointed) and 12 (to right; unpointed) Ambleside Road – no. 12 has several nest sites in holes in the walls; no. 13 was investigated by a banging party but no potential nest spaces were to be found*



*Back of Mountain Warehouse; at least two pairs of Swifts nest under the eaves*

### Tentative definitions of colonies and loose clusters

We recognise the existence of four well-established **colonies** in the town, typified by all or a large majority of nest sites being located either in a single building, or in a few buildings, all very close neighbours:

#### 1 Blencathra Street, Keswick



Approx. 20 nest sites, in the walls (east-facing mainly). Several additional nest sites were observed in nearby buildings in 2023. None of these were re-recorded in 2024 - probably due to fewer hours of observations being made.

#### Back of Lakehead Court, Keswick



> 7 nest sites, under the eaves.

There will be 10 Swift bricks (5 pictured, left) incorporated into the new Rugby Club building, under construction now; at their nearest, these will be just 20m from Lakehead Court.

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### Eskin Street, Keswick



6 occupied nest sites (1 of which was later abandoned), in the walls of 1 & 2 Eskin Street, and the back wall of 12 Ambleside Road (facing the side wall of 1 Eskin Street).

Possible locations of a number of previously-used nest sites in these and adjacent walls were suggested by the repeated attentions of “screamers and bangers”, over several weeks in June - early July.

### The Headlands



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2 “natural” sites under the eaves of a house, plus 4 occupied boxes on two houses opposite.

One new box has a webcam inside – *see left*.

The availability and occupancy of the boxes has increased steadily over 4 years.

Sixty percent (37) of the total nest sites observed in Keswick were located in these four principal colonies, in a total of 8 buildings.

Blencathra Street and Lakehead Court have probably retained their population numbers from last year, even though the numbers actually observed were slightly down for Blencathra Street. The Headlands colony has increased by 1, owing to a new nest box being installed; and we have this year discovered the principal locations and numbers of the nests in the Eskin Street colony. (We knew previously of the existence of this colony, through many observations of low fly-pasts by up to 6 birds, but had only identified the locations of two nest sites, at the back of 2 Eskin Street. One of those was not in use this year; the other was visited spasmodically, but didn’t have birds breeding successfully in it).

We also more tentatively recognise two or three **loose clusters** of nest sites in the town, where Swifts are nesting in several adjacent streets, but significantly more spaced out than in the colonies:

#### Central Keswick area

5 nest sites, in Mountain Warehouse (rear of), the old Barclays Bank and Lake Road; with 2 additional sites recorded in 2022 in Treeby & Bolton

#### The Heads area

Nest sites identified in Lakeside House and

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HillCrest, and Appletrees, in 2023 and/or 2024.

### The High Hill area



*One of the occupied bricks at the Premier Inn*

3 bricks occupied in the Premier Inn, 2 boxes at Brantfell (Crosthwaite Road), in 2024.

Other sites recorded in previous years, on High Hill, the Rawnsley Centre and St Herberts Social Centre.

Other newly-identified sites at Heads Lane and Skiddaw Skies, and one in Myrtle Villas, may also be part of this loose cluster.

One nest site observed in 2024 in Stanger Street may be the remnant of a previously-thriving colony, or could be part of the High Hill cluster.

Note: it has been widely reported that a significant colony previously nested in the bell tower of the Catholic Church, but was lost to renovations around 10 years ago.

It is likely that there are more nest sites in the vicinity of these loose clusters, and also the Blencathra Street colony, than we have so far observed. The definition of these loose clusters remains questionable, however.

### Outlier nest sites

In addition to the colonies and loose clusters, there are also a number of **outlier** nest sites – appearing too distant from any colony or loose cluster to be considered as “belonging” to any of them.

Given the imprecision of the definition of outliers, not much can be said about their numbers, or the re-occupancy rates in 2024 of nest sites observed in 2023.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that several sites observed in 2024 had not been spotted in 2023, but had been noted in one or more previous years. It’s impossible to say to what extent their occupancy was missed in 2023, and to what extent these were new birds re-occupying old nest sites.

It is perhaps worth noting that, with a mortality rate for adult Swifts of 20% per annum, it would be expected statistically that around 36% of nest sites would lose one or both of their occupants, from one season to the next. Often enough, however, a surviving adult may pair up with another solo bird, and they will in some cases re-occupy that nest site.

It also seems to be the case that young birds, prospecting for a future nest site, somehow recognise where Swifts have nested in the past, and can re-occupy sites that haven't been used for years.

### **Availability and use of Swift bricks and boxes**

There has been a rapid rise over the last 3 years in the number of Swift bricks and boxes installed in the town.

These numbered 23 pre-2023; 23 more were installed in 2023. A total of 55 were available by the start of the 2024 breeding season; a significant number more will have been installed by the start of the 2025 season.



*3 boxes at the Keswick Mountain Rescue Centre*



*Entrances to soffit boxes, Keswick Rugby Club  
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A total of 10 bricks and boxes were occupied by Swifts in the 2024 season, installed on/in four houses and a hotel – an occupancy rate of 55% for those buildings. Fifteen other premises with Swift boxes have had no occupants as yet, but all but 3 of them are no more than 18 months old.

While there are too few occupied boxes and bricks to draw any strong conclusions, it is interesting to note:

- Of 7 Swift bricks installed in 2022, 4 were occupied by Swifts in 2024. Three of these were incorporated into the fabric of the Premier Inn, where there was no attempt to attract the attention of Swifts via callers. The other premises, a house on Lonsties, used a call system in 2023 and very quickly gained the attention of Swifts, despite being located a considerable distance from the nearest known nest site. One of their two bricks was occupied by returning birds in 2024, though they did not apparently breed successfully

- One Swift box (wood; in a small existing colony) was occupied shortly after being erected in early 2024.
- The other 5 boxes had all been occupied in 2023. All boxes occupied in 2023 had Swifts return to them in 2024.
- Of 6 woodcrete boxes, all installed prior to 2022, none have been occupied. Woodcrete boxes are nevertheless known to have attracted breeding Swifts in other parts of the country.
- The occupied boxes in The Headlands colony attracted considerable attention from young adult birds ("screamers and bangers"), as (to our knowledge) did other nest sites (some currently occupied, others probably previously occupied) in Southey Street and Eskin Street. The largest screaming / banging party observed was of 15 young birds.  
It is to be hoped that if / when these young birds return in subsequent years, they will have learnt how to recognise and enter boxes and may choose to take up residence in some of the vacant ones on offer in other parts of the town!

## **OUTLYING VILLAGES AND SETTLEMENTS**

A very significant colony in the staff quarters at the **Castle Inn** hotel and spa complex was again observed to have 17 nest sites, under the eaves of the front wall. These observations were crucial to our being able to engage with a planning application, lodged by the new owners of the Inn, to upgrade most of the other buildings on the site. The owners were able to assure us that the building works, which at closest are just a few yards from the Swift colony, will be completed before the Swifts return in 2025. They have also agreed to instal some Swift boxes on the buildings being renovated.

Smaller colonies are known to be located at Crosby House, Ireby (6 nest sites observed in both 2023 and 2024), Fell Side, Threlkeld, and Glenderamackin Terrace, Threlkeld (6 occupied nest sites each in 2023, but not surveyed by us in 2024).

A relatively small colony is suspected at the Portinscale Derwent Manor holiday complex, where only 2 nest sites were recorded in 2024, but where a low fly-past group of 5 birds was observed that might indicate one or more additional nests there.

***Our grateful thanks go to all who contributed records to our 2024 nest site survey, both regular team members and others.***

***So, many thanks, Clare, Dave, Emma, Jane, Jean, Kathy, Kevin, Laurence & Clare, Liz, Moira, Robert, Rosie, Simon, Sue, Terry, Tim, Tony and Val! This survey couldn't have taken place without all your patient observations!***