



Lewes Swift Supporters Annual Report for 2023

Based upon contributions from members of the LSS Committee and surveyors: -

Mike Ramsey (Chair, and Surveyor)
Audrey Jarvis (Secretary, Communications Officer and Surveyor)
Kevin Murphy (Recorder and Surveyor)
Sharon Hall (Treasurer)
Crispin Holloway (Founder Member of LSS)
Emma Allen (Surveyor)

And the additional surveyors:-

Mary Hempshall, Nick Jarvis, Lubna Zaidi, Susie O'Hare, Sue Govus, Wendy Muriel,
Rebecca Harris, Harry Smith

And 125 swift sightings reported by our members via social media

Summary

This report summarises the key achievements of Lewes Swift Supporters (LSS) during the fifth year of operation, since our relaunch in May 2019. It reports the results of the survey that were primarily used to estimate the current number of swifts nesting in Lewes, and to try to detect changes over these years. The total number of 83 active swift nest entrance holes were recorded, from a total number of 2454 reported swift sightings. Rigorous comparison of this total number of 'nests' with earlier years is constrained by differences in the survey area and the methodology, and by a lack of systematic survey results prior to 2019. However, for the six swift colonies where we do have results from 2000, the average number of nesting pairs was down in total by 49% (from 54 to 27 pairs) on the numbers reported in 2000. This decline is broadly similar to, but maybe slightly less than, the reported UK national decline of 59% between 2000 and 2022¹, and 74% decline in Sussex over this same period¹. Lewes residents participated extensively in their contributions to the LSS survey via our website² and social media (e.g., 125 contributions, mainly via our Facebook group). Supporters were also kept informed of LSS activities via four LSS Newsletters³, and through social media interactions. Other activities have including five swift walks in July, and a well-attended AGM in September 2023. LSS have continued to advise on, or implement, the installation of 144 new swift boxes since 2020, with 16 new boxes this year.

¹ <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/breeding-bird-survey/latest-results/population-trend-graphs> (accessed 17/10/2023)

² <https://e-voice.org.uk/lewesswiftsupporters/>

³ <https://e-voice.org.uk/lewesswiftsupporters/newsletters/>

1. Brief introduction to LSS

The Lewes Swift Supporters (LSS) is an organisation of volunteers that was formed in 2015 with support from Sussex Ornithological Society (SOS) and Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT). It was relaunched in May 2019, with the following aims and objectives:

- 1.1 To increase the number of Swifts nesting in Lewes and the surrounding area through providing and encouraging more swift nesting.
- 1.2 To increase people's awareness and knowledge of swifts through education and engagement.
- 1.3 To provide opportunities for local people to get actively involved in, appreciate and be educated about their local swifts.

2. Annual Swift Survey

In order to pursue our first objective, LSS has conducted a survey of the swift population in Lewes in 2023, as it did in the four previous years. The results of these earlier years' surveys were reported in previous LSS Annual Reports¹. The most robust and useful indicator is the number of entrance holes in buildings seen to be used repeatedly by swifts, generally and loosely referred to here as the number of 'nests'.

2.1 Methods employed

The survey methods employed in 2023 used sightings from both systematic and casual surveys and were the same as those used in 2022 to detect changes in the estimated total number of nests. All of the results were logged by the LSS Recorder and have now been entered into the national and international database BirdTrack, which is hosted by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

2.2. Systematic Survey

The six areas in Lewes covered by the systematic survey of swifts were the same as those used in 2022 (Fig 1), which focused on where breeding had previously been detected. The numbering of the areas did change, for simplicity, with Wallands becoming Area 5 (was 8) and Eastern Malling becoming Area 6 (was 9).

¹ <https://e-voice.org.uk/lewesswiftsupporters/lss-annual-reports/>



Figure 1. Design of systematic survey of swifts organised into six areas of Lewes used in 2023, which is the same as that used in 2022 with two areas renumbered.

Implementation of the new survey design was enabled by the welcome addition of 4 new surveyors. All surveyors were each allocated to an area and asked to survey that area at least twice a month when possible, for the three-month period from May to July, while the swifts are in Lewes. The timing of each survey was still for a period between approximately 7.30pm and 9.30pm or dusk. The general survey design, surveyor instructions (Appendix A) and reporting forms (Appendix B) used by each surveyor, were all the same as those used in 2022. The instructions contain a description of the types of swift activity that were to be reported (e.g., low-flying party or banging), and those to be excluded (i.e., high-flying swifts above twice house height, as these are not necessarily local birds).

2.3. Casual sightings

Casual sightings of swifts were made across with whole of Lewes, including extra visits to the areas covered by the systematic survey, and to other areas. These reports were partially made by the surveyors, using LSS Reporting forms. A substantial number of 125 further casual reports were also made by other Supporters and the general public, as part of Lewes Swift Watch project, through Facebook, our LSS webpage, Twitter and email. LSS are very grateful to all of those people who submitted sighting, and all the reports with sufficient detail have been included in the main database (Appendix C).

Address	Nests*					
	Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
St Anne's Church, High Street		8	19	12	6	8
Western Road		5	8	6	9	7
The Maltings, Castle Precincts		1	4	8	8	11
Flea Market, Market Street				7	7	10
High Street		2	3	5	4	5
Station Street		2	3	5	8	8
St Martin's Lane		2	3	3	6	5
King Henry's Road		2	3	3	1	3
Market Lane		1	2	4	1	1
Valence Road		3	2	4	3	2
Old Malling Way			2		1	
(next to) Potters Lane				2	2	
Southover High Street (Anne of Cleves House)		2	1	2	1	1
Southover High Street				1	2	2
Southover High Street			1	1	1	2
House, Western Road				1	1	1
High Street				1	1	
High Street		2	1	1	1	1
Gallows Bank, Abinger Place		1	1	1	3	2
Grange Road		1	1	1	1	
De Montford Road		1	1	1	1	1
De Montford Road			1	1	1	1
The Avenue				1	2	1
The Avenue					1	
The Avenue		1	1			1
The Avenue				1	1	1
The Avenue			1	1	1	1
Bridgewick Close			1			
Bridgewick Close			1			
Bridgewick Close			1	1		2
Bridgewick Close			1	1		
Bridgewick Close			2	1	1	1
Lambert Place					1	
Prince Edwards Rd					1	
Potters Lane					2	2
Weston Road						1
De Montfort Rd						1
? Old Malling Way (flats)						1
Total number of 'nests'		34	64	76	79	83
Total number of buildings with nests		15	24	27	30	28
Average number of nests per building		2.3	2.7	2.8	2.6	3.0

Table 1. Buildings in Lewes where the specified number of active nest hole entrances, or 'nests', were found in the 2023 swift survey, with the 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 results for comparison. The apparent increase in total numbers of nests and buildings detected is not evidence of an increase in swift population, as discussed below (* it was not possible to ascertain whether successful breeding took place at these locations).

2.4. Key findings

A total number of 2454 sightings of swifts and their active nest entrances, made both in the systematic and casual observations, were reported to LSS in 2022 (Appendix C, sheet 1), up from 2031 in 2022. A total of 83 active swift nest hole entrances was reported in 38 buildings (summarised in Table 1, with details and photos of key sites in Appendix C, sheets 2-4).

The distribution of breeding swifts, especially the larger colonies, is concentrated in the older areas of Lewes (Fig 2).

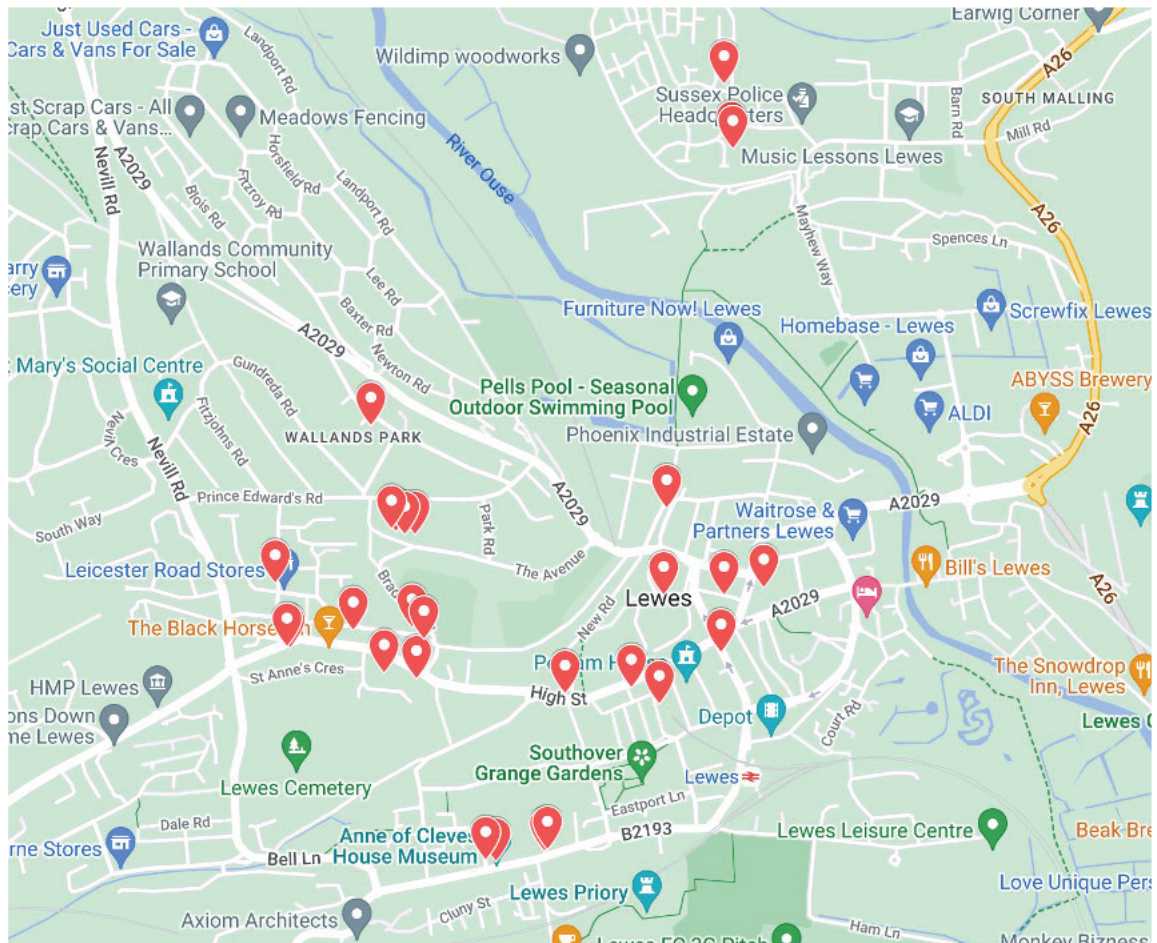


Figure 2. Distribution within Lewes of the 38 locations (📍) that were estimated to have the 83 active swift ‘nests’ in 2023.

Comparisons between the numbers of nests reported in different years are problematic for several reasons. The obvious comparison between the 83 nests found in 2023 against the 34, 64 and 76 and 79 found in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 respectively (Table 1), apparently suggests more than a doubling in the swift population. However, this conclusion is not reliable due to two changes in the survey methodology across these years. Firstly, number of surveyed areas changed between years, either added (2 in 2020, a further 4 in 2021) or removed (3 in 2022). The ‘new’ colony discovered at the Flea Market in 2021 had 10 nests in 2023, but was detected only as the result of setting up a new survey area in 2021 (Area 3 on Fig 1). It is possible that this colony existed in 2019 and 2020 but remained undetected. The second change was in the variable and generally increasing number of sightings recorded in 2023 (2454, compared to 2031 in 2022, 2038 in 2021, 1843 in 2020 and 150 in 2019). A consequence of these changes has undoubtedly led to an increase in the number of sites

identified, and the number of nests detected at some of these sites. The extra information gained from the increased survey effort in 2021 made a very valuable contribution to our understanding of these swift colonies, largely confirmed in 2022 and 2023. However, it has had the unintended consequence of making the detection of changes in population size more challenging.

Overall, therefore, the results of the systematic surveys made over just five years (2019 to 2023) are not sufficiently comparable to draw and reliable conclusions about any possible changes in the size of the swift population in Lewes over this period. The application of a consistent survey methodology over the same area for the whole breeding season, for a much longer period (e.g., in excess of ten years) will be required to clarify the longer-term trend in the swift population of Lewes. This trend is currently also obscured by the year-to-year variations that are common in such small populations, and partially caused by uncertainty arising from the inevitable limitations in the survey methodology.

Comparison of the 2023 results against a survey that was recorded prior to 2019 are also problematic. This is because the few earlier surveys did not aim to survey the whole of Lewes, but only focussed on a small number of colonies. However, a comparison for a limited number of locations can be attempted. One focussed and a non-systematic survey of swifts in Lewes that was made in 2000 by Mike Helps¹.

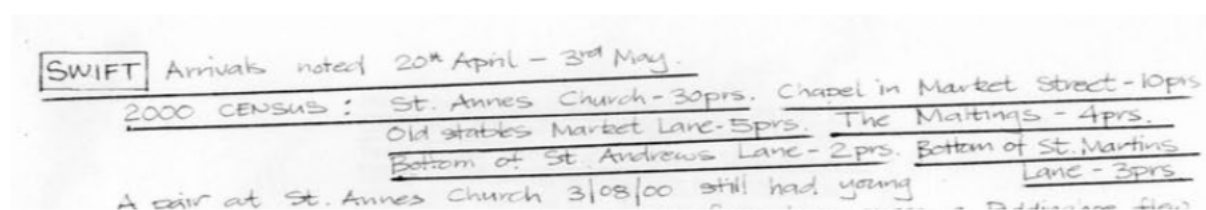


Figure 3. Extract from the publication by Mike Helps in 2004¹ showing the handwritten results of his survey of the arrivals of swifts at key sites in Lewes from 20th April to 3rd May 2000, used as the source for the comparison in Table 2.

'Nests' found in years:	2000	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Swift colony location						
St Anne's Church	30	8	19	12	6	8
██████ in Market Lane	5	1	2	4	1	1
The Maltings	4	1	4	8	8	11
Bottom of St Martin's Lane	3	2	3	3	6	5
Chapel (Flea Market) in Market Street	10	0	0	7	7	10
Bottom of St Andrew's Lane	2	0	0	0	0	0
Total	54	12	28	34	28	35
% Decline since 2000		-78	-48	-37	-48	-35

Table 2. Comparison of number of swift nests at six colonies reported in the five LSS surveys (2019-2023) against those reported by Helps (2004)¹ for the year 2000. ('0' indicates not detected)

Helps reported the number of pairs of swifts nesting in six of the colonies that existed in Lewes in the year 2000 (Figure 3 and Table 2). The discovery by LSS in 2021 of the colony in the Flea Market, was partially enabled by this report by Helps in 2000 of 10 pairs nesting

¹ Mike Helps (2004) 'Lewes Landscapes and Bird' (Private Publication, copies in Lewes Library)

in the then Chapel in Market Street. The comparison, (Table 2), shows that five of these six colonies reported by Helps still exist in 2023, but the one at the bottom of St Andrew's Lane has apparently not survived. The original total of 54 nests in these six colonies has reduced to 35 nests in 2022, suggesting a 35% decline (Table 2). This compares with an apparent decline of 78% at these same colonies found in 2019, 48% in 2020, 37% in 2021 and 48% in 2022. The average of all five of these estimates of decline is 49% (equal to 27 pairs) and this gives a very approximate but more robust indication of the scale of the general decline in the breeding population in Lewes. The UK national picture on swift population is of a 59% decline between 2000 and 2022¹ (Fig 3), (and a 65% decline from 1994 to 2022). The more local situation in Sussex of approximately a 74% decline 2000 to 2022, (and 90% decline 1994 - 2022) (Fig 4). The 49% decline estimated in Lewes by LSS, is therefore of the same general order of the situation in Sussex generally and the UK, but possibly less severe. However, this conclusion is very tentative, as all of the LSS survey values suffer from the limitations that were discussed above, about differences in the effectiveness and comparability of the survey techniques across the years, and how representative this small number of colonies might be.

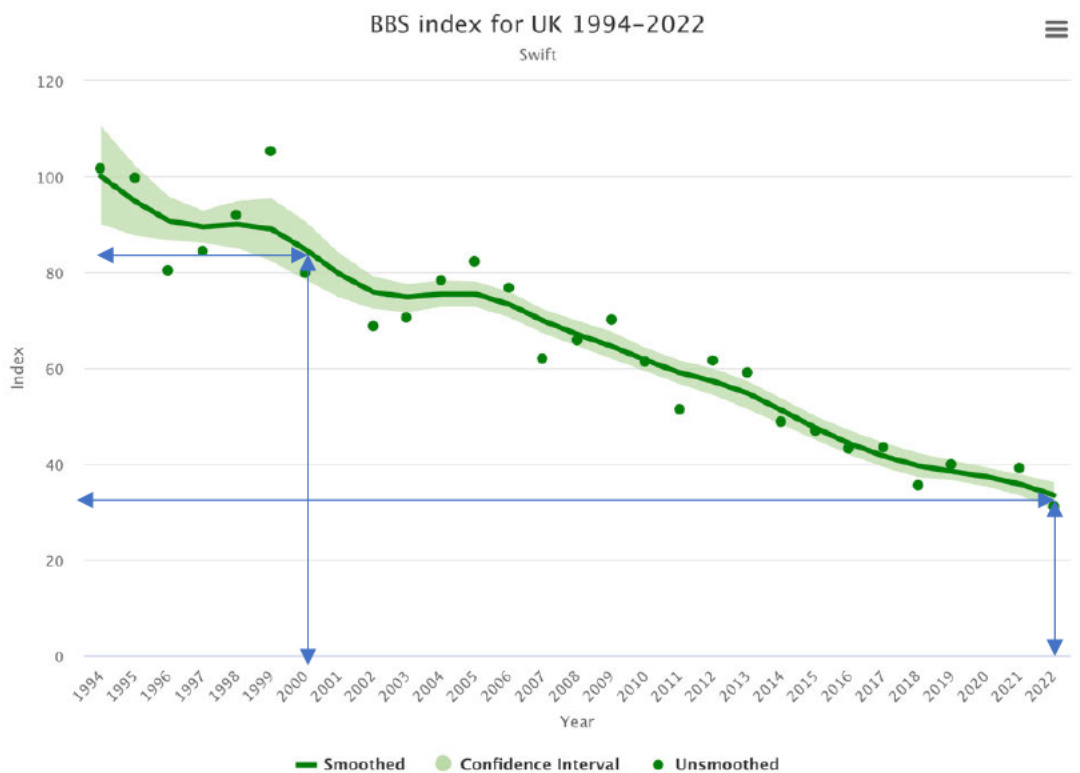


Figure 3. National UK fall in **Swift** population¹, model showing 59% decline between 2000 and 2022 (Index 85 to 35)

¹ <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/breeding-bird-survey/latest-results/population-trend-graphs> (accessed 17/10/2023)

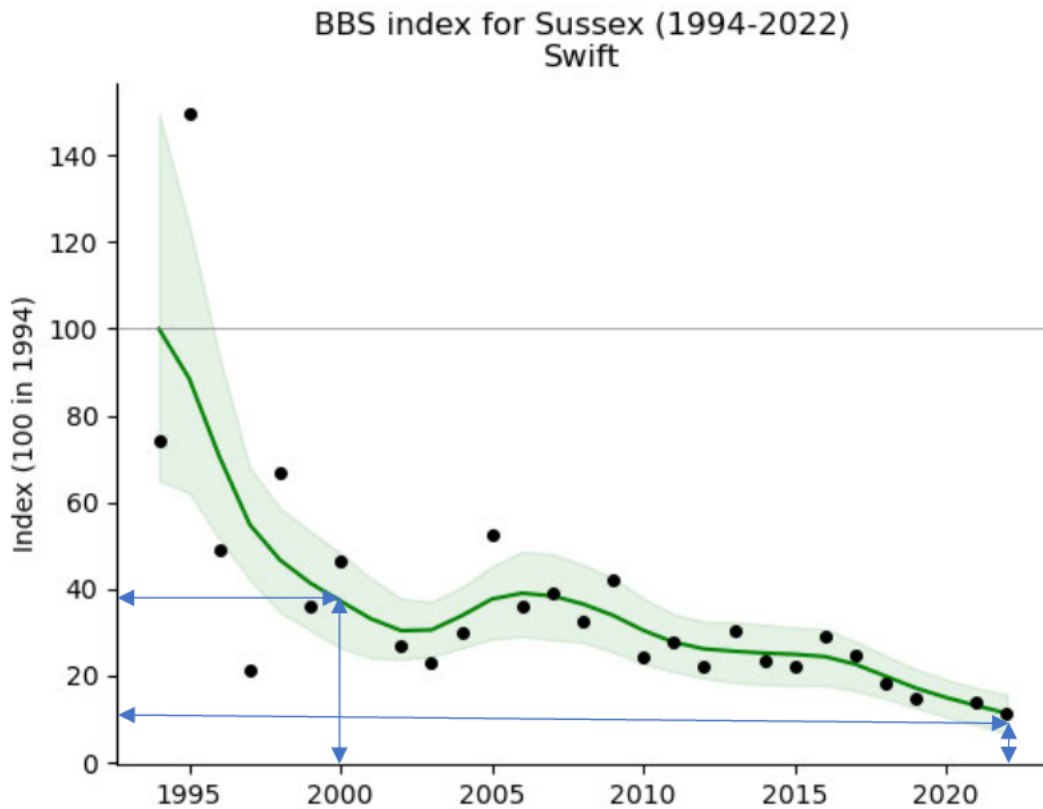


Figure 4. BBS Survey results for **Swifts** in Sussex¹ from which the model shows a 74% decline 2000 to 2022 (Index 38 to 10), which not dissimilar to, but possibly even larger than the average estimate decline in Lewes of around 49% in 2000 to 2023.

2.4.1 Swallows and House Martins in Sussex and Lewes

Other UK visitors which also gather insects on the wing, in a similar way to swifts, are swallows and house martins. BBS Survey data for these two birds in Sussex also show steep declines over the period 2000 - 2022, but to different extents.

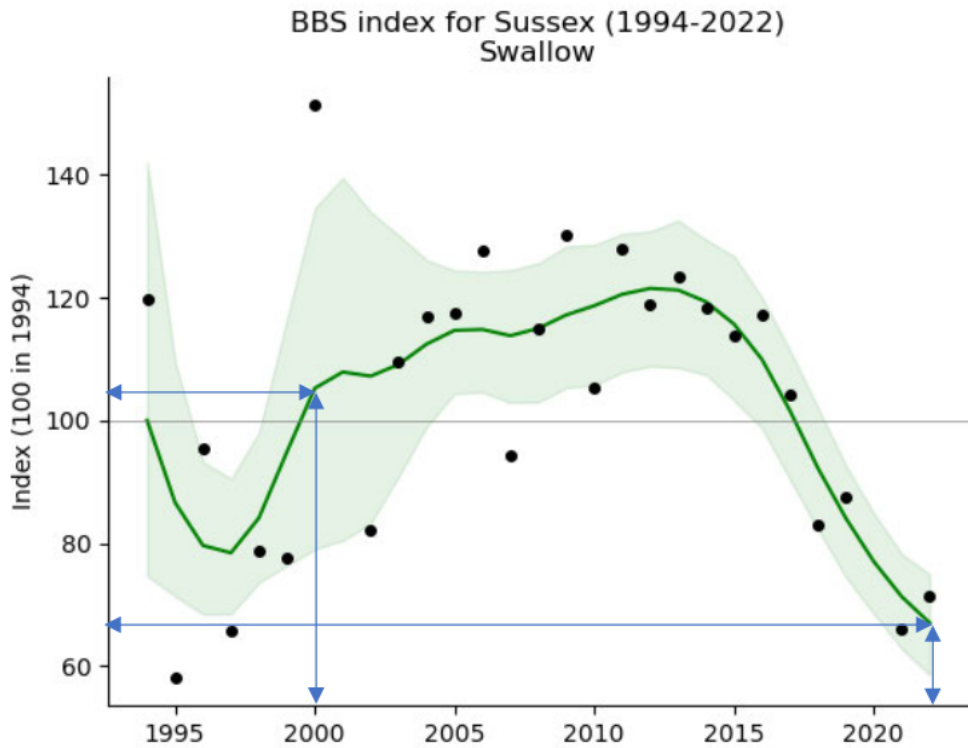


Figure 5. BBS Survey results for **Swallows** in Sussex¹ from which the model shows a 36% decline 2000 to 2022 (Index 104 to 67).

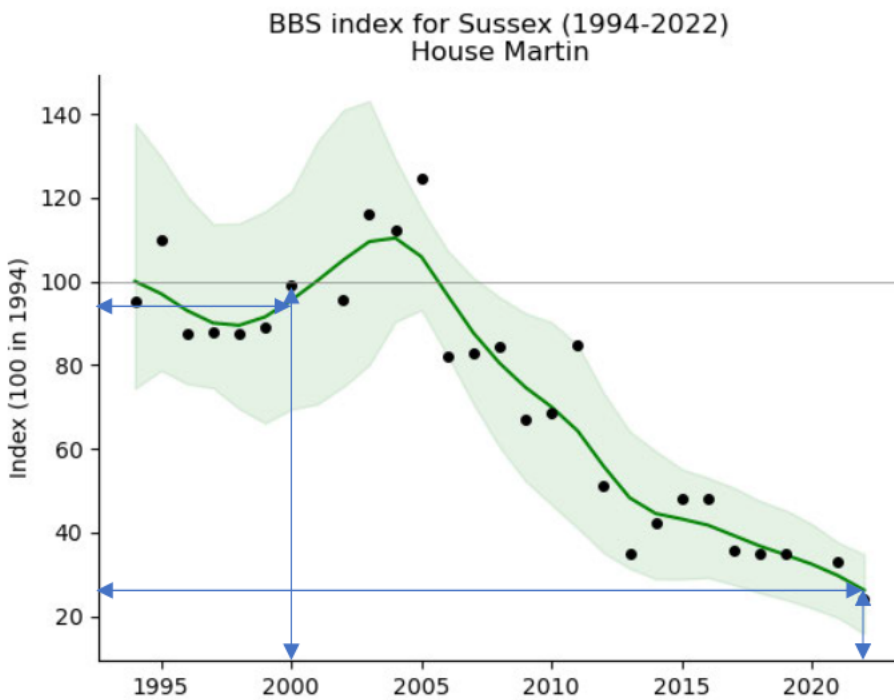


Figure 6. BBS Survey results for **House Martins** in Sussex¹ from which the model shows a 72% decline 2000 to 2022 (Index 95 to 27). The uncertainty in the fitted model is large (shown as green band), due to low numbers of observation, and should be interpreted with caution.

For Swallows, the equivalent decline in population in Sussex is estimated to be 36% (Fig. 5), but much worse for House Martins at 72%.

LSS therefore decided in 2022 to start recording the locations of the nests of Swallows and House Martins in Lewes, from 2022. Verbal reports have been received by LSS members of historic colonies of house martin nests in several areas of Lewes. However, very few current house martin nests were reported, but these include St. John's Terrace and Garden Street. Two natural house martin nests were found under the end gables of two buildings in a relatively recent housing development, outside our normal survey areas, off Kingston Road near the former Spring Barn Farm. Interestingly in this same development two swallow nest were also found in out-buildings. Casual reporting by LSS members and the public (but not a systematic survey) will be continued to try to establish whether there are any more house martin and swallow nests in the LTC area.

2.5. Review of the survey designs used in 2023

The decision to keep the survey design areas used in 2022 constant for 2023 has been beneficial in enabling improved comparability between observations from those years. However, the LSS Committee will discuss other possible options for further improving the reliability in detecting any temporal trends in the swift population of Lewes. This will help us decide whether swift numbers in Lewes are increasing, as would be required to meet LSS's first objective (i.e. 'To increase the number of Swifts nesting in Lewes..')

2.5.1 Role of Casual Survey.

It is probable that undiscovered swift nests do still exist in Lewes, for example at the rear of buildings, where systematic surveyors cannot detect them. It is therefore important to continue with the Swift Watch where Supporters and members of the public can report sightings that may reveal these previously undetected nests, as happened in 2021 at ■ High Street and at ■ Prince Edwards Road in 2022. It is helpful, therefore, in addition to the fixed survey design option, to retain and encourage casual survey reports (e.g. via Swift Watch) to establish whether previously unknown breeding sites are present.

3. Other LSS activities in 2022

LSS conducted a number of other activities in support of our objectives.

3.1 Site visits.

Members of LSS made 49 visits to sites where occupiers or developers requested advice on the feasibility and optimal location for installing swift accommodation. This included fitting swift boxes to existing buildings and planning to locate swift bricks within new buildings or extensions.

3.2 Swift boxes and swift bricks

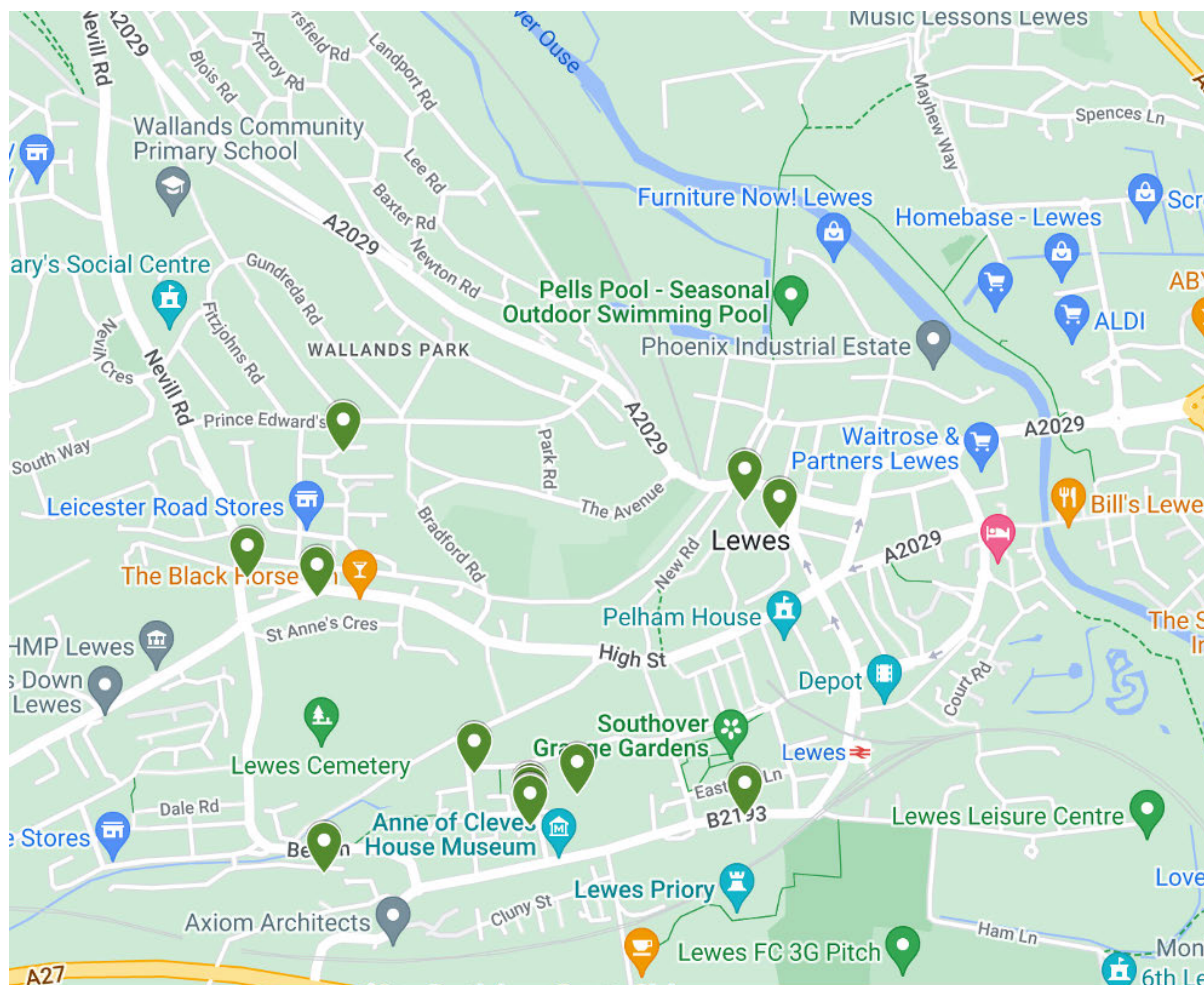



Figure 5. Map of Lewes showing (as dark green markers ) the locations of 16 new swift boxes installed in 2023.

Sixteen new swift boxes (with 21 breeding spaces) were installed around Lewes in 2023 (Fig. 5), mainly with advice from LSS (Appendix D, with 144 boxes installed since 2020, 49 LSS funded). The LSS Committee identified sites in Malling, (Bridgewick Close, Harvard Close and Lambert Place), as the most promising focus for new swift boxes in 2023, after considering a short list of 6 such potential areas¹.

This year 3 pairs of swifts nested in 2 different swift boxes in Lewes, as opposed to the more traditional location within buildings, usually entering under the eaves. Experience in other towns suggests that it often takes several years from the installation of a swift box or brick for it to be used for breeding by swifts. However, there was one nest box that was installed last year that was occupied by swifts after only one month. Swift-callers are played at many of the swift boxes in Lewes, or order to draw the attention of prospecting swifts to these locations and thereby increase the rate at which the boxes are likely to be occupied.

¹ Six potential locations for the new swift-box project in 2022 [Number of Nests in 2023]: High Street & St Martin's Lane [10], The Maltings [11], Flea Market [10], Southover High Street & Potter's Lane [7], The Avenue [4], Malling, (Bridgewick Close, Harvard Close, Lambert Place) [3]

LSS wish to thank and acknowledge Dave Boddington for his excellent work on the installation of many of the swift boxes in Lewes in 2023.

3.3 Interaction with Supporters and General Public

Wider interaction between LSS, supporters and the general public were enabled by organisation of activities such as:

- Frequent updates to LSS website¹, that was set up in 2021
- LSS-AGM that was held in person at the Linklater Pavilion on 5th September 2023
- Five swift walks for Supporters , mainly in July (with 51 participants)
- LSS membership expanded to 282 people who have now given their contact details and asked to receive LSS communications (e.g., newsletters, reports)
- Published and disseminated four editions of LSS Newsletter in April, May, June and July².
- Updated LSS social media outlets:
 - o Facebook page, currently with 315 followers
 - o X-Twitter, with 1028 followers
- Numerous posts of LSS information on Facebook and Twitter, including 125 reports of Swift sightings from our Facebook group members within the Lewes Swift Watch project.
- Sales of second batch of LSS badges to raise funds to buy and install more nest boxes.
- LSS information postcards or letters distributed to 26 selected houses

3.4. Interactions with external bodies

LSS has been maintaining active links with Lewes Town Council (LTC), Lewes and Eastbourne District Council (L&EDC), and the South Downs National Park (SDNP) in order to embed advice on providing swift accommodation into the consideration of suitable Planning Applications. The leaflet written by LSS on this subject by LSS³, and adopted by LTC and submitted to L&EDC and SDNP, continues to be used. LSS has also contributed recommendations for the inclusion of swift accommodation on individual planning applications. LSS maintains its interactions with related external bodies such as Sussex Ornithological Society, Sussex Wildlife Trust, British Trust for Ornithology, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Ouse Valley Climate Action, Lewes Nature Mosaic, Ouse Wild Network and Swift Conservation⁴.

Funding for the purchase and installation of multiple swift boxes at strategically important locations, was secured through kind donations made by Supporters and members of the public, badge sales and a successful grant application to the National Lottery Community Fund through Ouse Valley Climate Action

Other LSS activities include:-

- Talks to: Members of Friends of Lewes, St. Pancras School assembly, and Seaford Natural History Society
- Lewes Climate Hub Opening Day

¹ <https://e-voice.org.uk/lewesswiftsupporters/>

² <https://e-voice.org.uk/lewesswiftsupporters/newsletters/>

³ LSS leaflet for LTC: Consideration of Swift Accommodation when Considering a Planning Application. Available from LSS by emailing lewesswifts@gmail.com

⁴ <https://www.swift-conservation.org>

- Swift week at Lewes Climate Hub
- Blog on how to help Swifts for Sussex Wildlife Trust to celebrate Swift Awareness Week
- Swift Walk and interview with Jonathan Guthrie, Financial Times nature column
- Partnership meetings with Ouse Wild Network, Lewes Nature Mosaic, Ouse Valley Climate Action, Lewes Climate Hub
- Displays, activities and information stalls at Lewes Societies Fair, Nevill “Sustainable Front Gardens” event, and the STEM Festival

4. Recommendations for future work

The experience and findings from the operation of LSS in 2023 are being used to plan improvements for 2024. These included:

- Review the optimal design for the Swift Survey for 2024, and long-term surveying strategy (as discussed in Section 2.5). Decide whether to adopt any additional features to try and improve the detection of temporal trends in the local breeding swift population.
- Continue the casual recording of the locations of the nests of Swallows and House Martins in Lewes (LTC area) and fund artificial House Martin cups on or near buildings where recent nests have been recorded.
- Review the number and training of any new surveyors required to cover the systematic survey areas.
- Implement a further project to install multiple swift boxes around a different existing colony in Lewes (i.e. Malling, around Bridgewick Close, Harvard Close and Lambert Place).
- Continue to encourage and support the planting of wildflowers and trees, and the installation of ponds, to help to reverse the decline in populations of the insects and invertebrates on which Swifts depend for their food (in collaboration with other local community organisations).

5. Conclusions

In 2023 Lewes Swift Supporters successfully conducted the fifth systematic survey of the swift population of Lewes. From a total of 2454 reported sightings, LSS has estimated that there are 83 active ‘nests’ (i.e., hole entrances recorded as being used repeatedly by swifts). This is an apparent increase of 19 on the 64 nests located in the 2020 survey (and on the 76 in 2021, and 79 in 2022), but this is not considered to be conclusive evidence of an increase in the size of the swift population in Lewes, but is probably due to changes in the survey methodology since 2020. Comparison with a limited survey of six swift colonies recorded in 2000, suggests an average of around a 49 % decrease in swifts nesting in Lewes since that time, which is broadly similar to (but maybe slightly less than) the estimated decline of 59% in the UK (and 74% in Sussex) over a similar period.

6. Appendices

Copies of this report, and the LSS Annual Reports for 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, are available on the LSS Website¹. The following appendices are available by request from the LSS Secretary, contacted via lewesswifts@gmail.com

A. Survey Instructions for LSS Surveyors 2023

Lewes Swift Survey 2023– methodology (Annual Report).pdf

¹ <https://e-voice.org.uk/lewesswiftsupporters/lss-annual-reports/>

- B. Survey Reporting Forms for LSS Surveyors 2023
 - a. Lewes Swift Survey 2023- recording form (Annual Report).pdf
 - b. Lewes Nest Activity Log 2023 (Annual Report).pdf
- C. List of all swift sightings reported in 2023
 - LSS Survey 2023-locked +pictures (Annual Report).xlsx
- D. New Swift Boxes
 - New Lewes Swift Boxes_2023 (Annual Report).xlsx