



Lewes Swift Supporters Annual Report for 2020

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

Mike Ramsey (Chair & Acting Treasurer)

Audrey Jarvis (Secretary and Acting Communications Officer from August 2020)

Kevin Murphy (Recorder)

Caroline Russell (Communications Officer up to August 2020)

Sharon Hall (Surveyor)

Crispin Holloway (Founder Member of LSS)

And the additional surveyors: -

Nick Jarvis, Gill and Chris Garratt

And swift sighting reported by 58 of our Facebook group members

Summary

This document summarises the key achievement of Lewes Swift Supporters (LSS) during the second year of operation, since its relaunched in May 2019. It reports the findings of the survey that was used to estimate the current numbers of swifts nesting in a larger area of Lewes than covered in 2019, now including Wallands and western Malling. The total number of 64 active swift nest entrance holes were recorded, from a total number of 1843 swift sightings. Rigorous comparison of this total number of ‘nests’ with earlier years is constrained by differences in the survey area and methodology, and by a lack systematic survey results prior to 2019. However, the number of nesting pairs reported at six swift colonies in Lewes were down in total by 52% (from 54 to 28) on the numbers reported in 2000, which is consistent with the reported national decline of 57% between 1995 and 2017¹. Lewes residents participated extensively in their contributions to the LSS survey via social media (e.g. 122 via Facebook). Supporters were kept informed of LSS activities via three LSS Newsletters², and through social media interactions, rather than in real-world meetings, due to the limitation imposed to control the Covid-19 pandemic.

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 <https://app.bto.org/birdtrends/species.jsp?year=2019&s=swift>

² <https://www.sos.org.uk/archives/category/swifts>

- 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 2020, as it did in 2019. The results of last year’s survey were reported in the 2019 LSS Annual Report. The most robust and useful indicator is the number of entrance holes in buildings seen to be used by swifts, sometimes loosely referred to as the number of ‘nests’.

2.1 Methods employed

The survey methods employed in 2020 used sighting from both systematic and casual surveys, but were modified from those used in 2019 in order to improve the accuracy of the estimated number of nests. All of the results were logged by the LSS Recorder, and are being entered into the national and international database BirdTrack, which is hosted by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

2.2. Systematic Survey

The area covered by the systematic survey of swifts was extended beyond the central region of the old part of Lewes covered in 2019, to include areas in Wallands and western Malling (Fig 1). These two new areas were identified as potentially interesting by casual sighting reported in the 2019 survey.

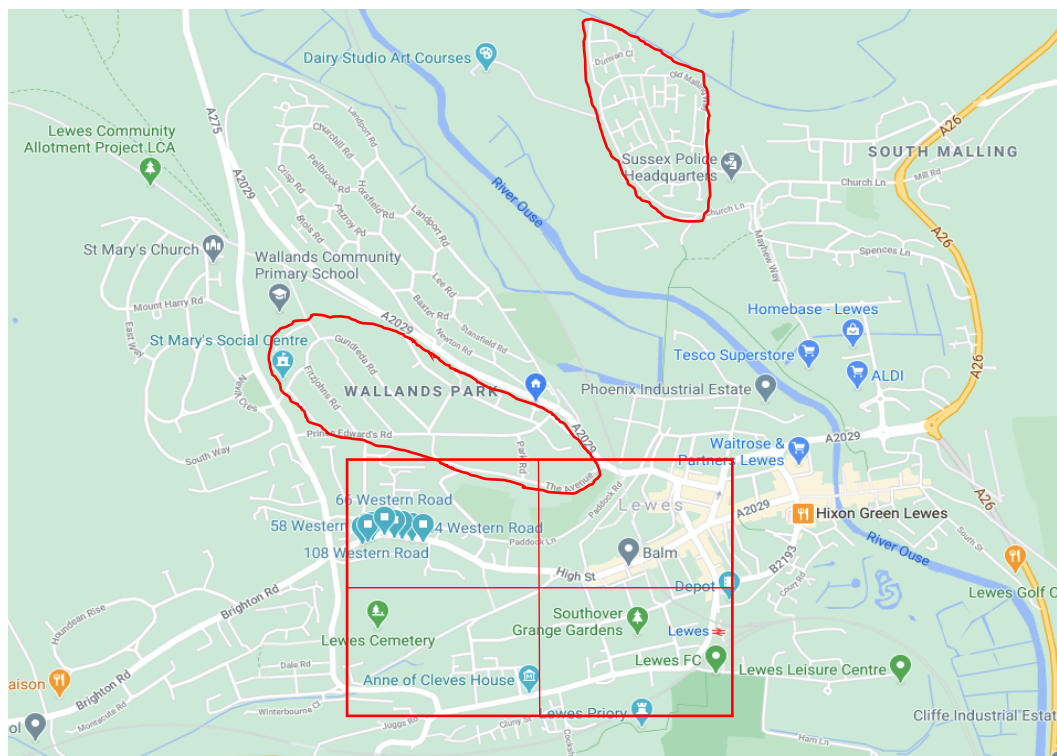


Figure 1. Design of systematic survey of swifts in Lewes used in 2020, extended from that used in 2019 by the addition of Wallands and western Malling.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the usual methodology was made slightly more flexible. For each of the six survey areas, one or two surveyors were allocated and asked to survey the area at least twice a month where 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, instructions (Appendix A), and reporting forms (Appendix B) used by each surveyor, were slightly modified from those used in 2019. 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 (e.g. high-flying swifts above 50m, or 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. Substantial numbers of further casual reports were also made by other Supporters and the general public, as part of Lewes Swift Watch project, through Facebook (122 reports), Twitter and email. LSS are very grateful to all of those people who submitted sightings, and all the reports with sufficient detail have been included in the main database (Appendix C). Credible reports of two further active swift nests (listed* in Table 1) were submitted to LSS by members of the public, and verified by LSS.

2.4. Key findings

A total number of 1843 sightings of swifts and their active nest entrances, made both in the systematic and casual observations, were reported to LSS in 2020 (Appendix C, sheet 1). A total of 64 active swift nest hole entrances were reported in 23 buildings (summarised in Table 1, with details in Appendix C, sheets 2-4).

Address	'Nests' ¹	
	2019	2020
St Anne's Church, High Street	8	19
98 Western Road	5	8
The Maltings, Castle Precincts	1	4
80b High Street	2	3
Marchand Son, 30-31 Station Street	2	3
6 St Martin's Lane*	2	3
22 King Henry's Road	2	3
Swift House, Market Lane	1	2
28 Valence Road	3	2
8 Bridgewick Close		2
169 Old Malling Way		2
52 Southover High Street (Anne of Cleves House)	2	1
59 Southover High Street*		1
144 High Street	2	1
2b Gallows Bank, Abinger Place	1	1
32 Grange Road	1	1
24 De Montford Road	1	1

5 De Montfort Road		1
51 The Avenue	1	1
59 The Avenue		1
1 Bridgewick Close		1
4 Bridgewick Close		1
6 Bridgewick Close		1
7 Bridgewick Close		1
Total	34	64

Table 1. Buildings in Lewes with active nest hole entrances, or ‘nests’¹ found in the 2020 swift survey, with the 2019 results for comparison. Nests marked * were reported by the public and verified by LSS. (¹ it was not possible to ascertain whether successful breeding took place at these locations).

The larger colonies of breeding swifts are concentrated in the older area of Lewes, around the High Street (Fig 2).

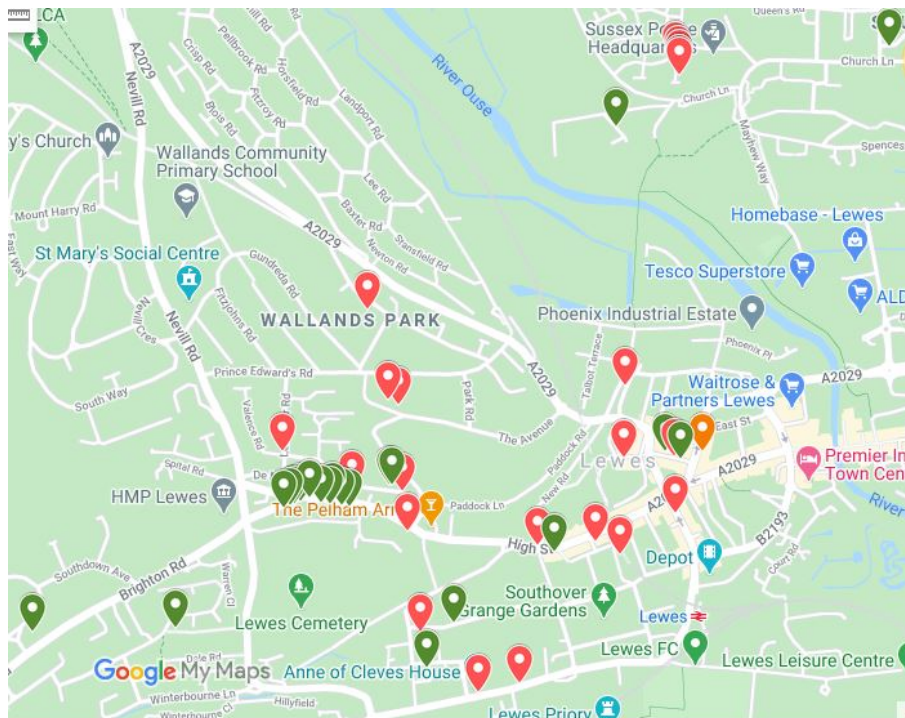


Figure 2. Locations within Lewes of: 📍 64 Active ‘nests’ at 23 locations, 📍 swifts showing interest in nesting at other sites, 📍 nest boxes installed in 2020.

Comparisons between the numbers of nests reported in different years are problematic for several reasons. The obvious comparison between the 64 nests found in 2020 with the 34 found in 2019 (Table 1), apparently suggests almost a doubling in the swift population. However, this conclusion is not reliable due to two changes in the survey methodology across these two years. Firstly, two extra areas (Wallands and western Malling) were added in 2020. The new colony discovered in Malling had 8 nests, and those in Wallands had 5 nests, but 3 of the latter nests had already been recorded in 2019. The second change was in the much-increased number of sightings recorded in 2020 (1843 compared to 150 in 2019), possibly indirectly due to the effects of the Covid-19 restrictions. For example, in 2020 there were 30

survey reports for St Anne’s Church, compared to 11 reports in 2019. Furthermore, surveying began there on 8th May in 2020, but only on 30th May in 2019, due to the relaunch of LSS just prior that date, well after the first arrival of the swifts. A consequence of these changes may have been to increase the number of nests detected at some sites. The extra information gained from the many extra survey hours in 2020 has made a very valuable contribution of our understanding of these swift colonies. 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 two years (2019 and 2020) are not sufficient to draw and reliable conclusions about any possible changes in the size of the swift population in Lewes over this period. The application of the same survey methodology over the same area for 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 swift population of Lewes. This trend, is currently 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 2020 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.

Swift colony location	Nests in 2000	Nests in 2019	Nests in 2020
St Anne’s Church	30	8	19
Old Stable in Market Lane	5	1	2
The Maltings	4	1	4
Bottom of St Martin’s Lane	3	2	3
Chapel in Market Street	10	0	0
Bottom of St Andrew’s Lane	2	0	0
Total	54	12	28
Decline since 2000		-78%	-52%

Table 2. Comparison of number of swift nests at six colonies reported for 2000 by Helps (2004)³.

One focussed survey made in 2000 by Mike Helps³ reported the number of pairs of swifts nesting in six of the colonies that existed in Lewes in that year. Four of these colonies still exist in 2020, but two have not survived. The original total of 54 nests in these six colonies has reduced to 28 nests in 2020, suggesting a 52% decline (Table 2). This compares with an apparent decline of 78% at these same colonies found in 2019. Both of these estimates of decline give a very approximate indication of the scale of the general decline in the breeding population in Lewes, and are in rough agreement with the national picture of a 57% decline between 1995 and 2017⁴. However, all of these survey values suffer from the same limitations that were discussed previously, about differences in the effectiveness and comparability of the survey techniques across the years, and how representative this small number of colonies might be.

³ Mike Helps (2004) ' Lewes Landscapes and Bird' (Private Publication, copies in Lewes Library)

⁴ <https://app.bto.org/birdtrends/species.jsp?year=2019&s=swift>

3. Other LSS activities in 2020

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

3.1 Site visits.

LSS supporters made 40 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

Twenty-Eight new swift boxes were installed around Lewes in 2020, mainly with advice from LSS (Appendix D, and shown on Fig. 1). Within this number was a focused project, to install ten swift boxes on houses around the existing swift colony at 98 Western Road (with 8 nests). LSS wish to thank and acknowledge Sussex Ornithological Society (SOS) for funding for this project, and Dave Boddington for his excellent work on the installation of these boxes in October 2020.

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:

- Publication and dissemination of three editions of LSS Newsletter ('The Supporter') in June (Summer), September and November 2020.
- Setting up of LSS Facebook page in April 2020, currently with 109 members
- Numerous posts of LSS information on FaceBook and Twitter, including reports of Swift sightings from 58 of our 109 Facebook group members within the Lewes Swift Watch project
- Distributing LSS information postcards or letters to selected houses in Western Road (February), De Montfort Road (November), and in The Avenue (October)
- Two articles in the May and September issues of Lewes News

3.4. Interactions with external bodies

LSS has been active in developing 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. A leaflet has been written on this subject by LSS⁵, adopted by LTC And submitted to L&EDC and SDNP. LSS has also contributed recommendation 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 and Swift Conservation⁶.

Funding for the purchase and installation of multiple swift boxes at strategically important locations, was applied for and secured for LSS from: Sussex Ornithological Society, Sussex Police, Friends of Lewes and the Chalk Cliff Trust.

⁵ LSS leaflet for LTC: Consideration of Swift Accommodation when Considering a Planning Application, October 2020. Available at <https://planningpublicaccess.southdowns.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=Q1DN0NTUJ2500> under CLLR MAKEPEACE - REPRESENTATION RE. SWIFT GUIDANCE

⁶ <https://www.swift-conservation.org>

4. *Recommendations for future work*

The experience and findings from the operation of LSS in 2020 are being used to plan improvements for 2021. These included:

- increase the number and training of new surveyors to cover the six existing systematic survey areas
- implement a second project to install multiple swift boxes around an existing colony, in this case in De Montfort Road
- consider extending the systematic survey to include new areas in other parts of Lewes, which have been identified from casual sightings

5. *Conclusions*

In 2020 Lewes Swift Supporters successfully conducted the second systematic survey of the swift population of Lewes, despite but in compliance with the regulations arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. From a total of 1864 reported sightings, LSS has estimated that there are 64 active 'nests' (i.e. hole entrances recorded as used by swifts). This is an apparent increase on the 33 nests located in the 2019 survey, but this is not considered to be conclusive evidence of an increase in the size of the swift population in Lewes, but at least partially due to changes in the survey methodology since 2019. Comparison with a limited survey of six swift colonies recorded in 2000, suggests around a 52 % decrease in swift nesting in Lewes since that time, which closely matched the estimated national decline over a similar period.

6. *Appendices*

Copies of the following appendices are available on request from the LSS Secretary, contacted via lewesswifts@gmail.com

- A. Survey Instructions for LSS Surveyors 2020
Lewes Swift Survey 2020– methodology (Annual Report).pdf
- B. Survey Reporting Forms for LSS Surveyors 2020
 - a. Lewes Swift Survey 2020- recording form (Annual Report).pdf
 - b. Lewes Nest Activity Log 2020 (Annual Report).pdf
- C. List of all swift sightings reported in 2020
LSS Survey 2020 (Annual Report).xlsx
- D New Swift Boxes
New Lewes Swift Boxes_2020 (Annual Report).xlsx