Good news – efforts to protect large swift colony

We were asked if we could help protect the existing nest sites of a large colony of swifts that were nesting under the tiles of a very large farmhouse (near Castle Combe) as the building required re-roofing.

The 300-year-old house is roughly 70ft by 35ft and main aspect is East to West. The tiles are made from natural Cotswold stone and range in sizes, the largest being about 30 x 20 inches. The handcrafted tiles are rough and uneven and when laid are absolutely wonderful at providing little openings on each side, which makes them perfect for swifts.

The roof has wooden rafters about 15 inches apart. The tiles are mostly laid on a bed of lime mortar in between the rafters, except for the bottom 2 layers that are laid on a loose bed of gravel and stone. It is here that small natural cavities have formed over time and where over 20 pairs of swifts have chosen to nest each year.

The owner and his wife are passionate about their swift colony and desperately want to protect all the existing nest sites if they can. So they have decided to carry out the roofing maintenance in two phases. The first phase on the West and North side will be completed by early April. The second phase on the East and South side is planned to begin in September. How it is undertaken is entirely dependent on how successful the first phase was at protecting its nests. They have been fortunate to employ a sympathetic roofer who is equally as passionate about swifts as they are. The only thing missing was somebody to offer advice and that's where we came in.

After much debate and discussion we decided that the best option was to leave the bottom 2 layers felt free. Each tile was identified so it could be replaced in exactly the same position. The emphasis was always to maintain the existing entrance hole. The majority of nests (10 in total) were immediately below the second tile, some barely 2 inches deep. So it was agreed that whilst the tiles were removed the nest chambers would be deepened slightly to create more headroom. Our aim was to create a nest chamber roughly 3-4 inches deep by 15 inches long by 6 inches wide with a gentle slope up to the entrance hole. A handful of soft hay will be added to each nest for next year.

The wonderful thing about this project is not only the effort that is going on to protect existing nest sites, but also the potential of 130 new nest sites when all the work is completed. I wanted to share this with you as I wondered whether it can be shown be achieved if everyone works together. We have been invited back in June, so will update you on the progress.