

Swift fostering guidelines

These guidelines are intended for people with experience of swift nest boxes and who are familiar with swift behaviour. Fostering should only be undertaken by people who feel competent to do so. It is also recommended that only nest boxes with cameras should be used.

Swift fostering is the process of using a pair of swifts with a nest to foster chicks or eggs.

There are a number of situations, for example:

- Placing an abandoned egg in a nest with no more than 2 eggs of a similar laying date
- Moving an abandoned chick to a nest with no more than 2 chicks of a similar age. This could include moving 2 chicks to a nest with 1 chick of a similar age.
- Moving a chick from a brood of 3 chicks when a parent goes missing
- Placing a grounded Swift chick, that has fallen out of a nest, in a nest with no more than 2 chicks of the same or similar age

The advantages compared to rehabilitating Swifts is that it takes a lot less time and cost, as well as the undoubted fact that swifts themselves make the best parents.

The target nest

First ensure that there are 2 parents visiting the target nest.

It is better to choose a nest that can be monitored, ideally with a nest box camera. If not a camera, then occasional inspection in the hours following the introduction.

Successful fostering has been achieved without the ability to monitor.

Nests with a single chick are preferred, but 2 chicks is also acceptable

Relative chick size

The size of the chicks should be as close as possible, but does not have to be identical.

Fostered chicks both smaller or larger than the existing chicks can be successful, but the difference should be small. Visually compare lengths of emerging wing feathers and tail feathers.

Missing parent

This is usually discovered when only one parent comes in at night. In such cases, the parent may return early in the morning. If it does not appear during the following day, then the time should be spent searching for a foster nest for the second day of absence.

When 1 parent goes missing, the remaining parent should be able to cope with raising 1 chick, and most times with 2 chicks. This can be weather dependent.

When a parent goes missing from a nest with 3 chicks, 1 or more chicks need removing for fostering (or for rehab).

When both parents go missing, then all chicks need rehabbing or fostering.

Fostering should be done as soon as possible after a parent goes missing.

Small chicks

Sometimes one chick hatches later than its siblings and is very much smaller. Such chicks cannot compete and they have a lower chance of survival. They may benefit by being

transferred to a nest with similar-sized chicks. Alternatively the larger chick(s) may be transferred if a better size-match can be obtained.

Grounded Swift

The only way forward for a grounded adult Swift, or a fully fledged swift that has had an accident, that cannot fly is rehabilitation by someone who knows how to do this. It is a specialist skill. To test whether a Swift can fly, hold it high on the palm of our hand, do not throw it into the air. If it can fly, it will eventually do so.

Unlike chicks transferred from an active nest, with a grounded Swift chick, one has little idea of how long it has been there. Thus the condition of the swift needs to be assessed, it may be dehydrated and under nourished. If possible, get a qualified or experienced person to assess its condition.

A Swift in good condition should have bright eyes

The sternum should not project

It should move symmetrically

It should be able to raise its head

Its weight should be appropriate for its size

It should not be dehydrated - sometimes indicated by paleness of the gape.

If there is any doubt and there is no ability to monitor, then the Swift needs to go to an experienced rehab person. In the meantime, it is important to keep the bird hydrated while a foster nest or rehabber can be found.

Ageing a Swift

A juvenile Swift has white fringes on the wing feathers, on the throat and on the forehead, they look scaly. An adult Swift only has white on the chin.

Sensible ratios

A single chick can be added to a nest already containing a single chick - this is the best situation.

Adding a single chick to 2 chicks is also acceptable - swifts often raise 3 chicks.

Adding 2 chicks to a single chick can also work.

There are cases of successful fostering by adding a 4th chick to 3 chicks. It is rare for Swifts to have a brood of 4 chicks, so this should only be done as a last resort, and only in upcoming good weather.

Weather considerations

Swifts struggle in poor weather, so decisions whether to leave 2 chicks with a single parent may be governed by the upcoming weather. Likewise adding 1 chick to 2 chicks in poor weather should be avoided if there is the option of adding 1 chick to a single chick.

Adding the chick

It is preferable when no adults are present when adding a chick. After a certain age, parents are out most of the time anyway. When the chicks are small this may not be the case, in which case try to introduce the chick beneath a sitting adult. If the adult flees out of the box, it is unlikely to desert at this stage in the cycle.

Monitoring

A nestbox camera is the best way of doing this, but failing this, inspect the box to see if everything is in order in the hours following the introduction.

Jumpers

A small number of Swift chicks will insist on jumping out of a nest box soon after being introduced. It is not such a widespread problem to invalidate the approach, but should a fostered chick go missing soon after introduction, and if it can be found below the nest, then its only option for survival is rehab.

Fostering Eggs

Sometimes adults will desert their eggs. Eggs can survive for up to 8 hours without being incubated. If one knows the dates on which the eggs were laid, and one also has a potential foster nest where the eggs were laid within 1 day of the abandoned nest, then it may be worth transferring 1 egg to a foster nest with 1 or 2 eggs. Check the fertility of the egg by shining a narrow beam of light through it.

If you have no idea of the dates, then do not attempt this.

Rehab

For guidance on what to do with a grounded Swift, that cannot fly then start here and follow the links. This includes notes on rehydration:

actionforswifts.co.uk/p/grounded-swift.html

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